9

Researching Educational (Under)Achievement and Learning Outcomes

Isabella Quadrelli, Jenni Tikkanen, Cristina Cavallo and Luca Raffini

Introduction

As argued and illustrated throughout the chapters of this volume, there are severe limitations and blind spots in the currently prevailing, and often mutually intertwined, research and policy approaches to educational (under)achievement and learning outcomes. These approaches see learning outcomes as metrics of ability and products of the learning process. Learning outcomes are regarded as quantifiable and observable within the individual and influenced, most importantly, by the activities of educators. Viewing learning outcomes as absolute, result-oriented, stable and measurable, and, worryingly, as a means for identifying underachieving learners and schools displaying poor learning outcomes (e.g. Prøitz, 2015), ignores the complexity of the construction of learning outcomes, and that achievement results from an interplay of manifold intersecting factors and actors. Such an approach also pays scant heed to performance being a socially and educationally produced construct which produces and legitimizes social inequality (see Chapter 1 in this volume). Fundamentally, it can be argued that not only is the simplistic use of learning outcomes not connected to individuals' actual potential to achieve goals which are meaningful to them but also that it can have harmful consequences for young people (Mertala, 2024). In this chapter, we draw from the work of the CLEAR research project[1] and propose a unique theoretical combination of life course research, intersectionality and spatial justice, complemented by elements of participatory research. This theoretical platform enables conceptualization of the multi-layered research objectives of learning outcomes and educational (under)achievement. Additionally, it facilitates us in addressing

the complex methodological issues in a dynamic and interdisciplinary manner, the necessity for which is illustrated in this chapter.

There are several factors contributing to the dominant, narrow understandings of achievement and learning outcomes. Consequently, the focus moves away from holistic, context-sensitive perspectives on how learning outcomes are constructed, thus intensifying the problems arising from the dominant stance. One key factor is that policymakers tend to eagerly embrace a quantifiable and measurable understanding of learning outcomes (Prøitz, 2015; see also Locke & Lloyd-Sherlock, 2011) and have a strong tendency to seek simple answers to the complex problems related to learning and its outcomes (Zhao, 2018). The subsequent, and prevailing, evidence-based policy paradigm induces, through quantification, a dramatic simplification of the available perceptions: evidence-based policy may turn into policy-based evidence (Saltelli & Giampietro, 2017). It is important to note that policy interests, needs and goals are often linked to how learning outcomes are conceptualized and researched. For instance, as Aagaard and colleagues (2021) point out, the ways and means of allocating research funding are highly influential in governing contemporary public science. They can signal what governments, industries and societies perceive as the challenges funded research is expected to address (Veletanlić & Sá, 2020). Thus, funding not only has the potential to affect which research topics get addressed but, also, the scope, content, direction and outputs of research (Aagaard et al., 2021). For example, behind the European Union's research policy lies 'a strong and widely shared belief in research as an engine for economic growth' (Mitzner, 2020, p. 2), which is reflected in its keen interest in governing education and its outcomes.

Large-scale studies, often promoted and favoured by policymakers, contribute to the prevailing understanding of underachievement and learning outcomes. In addition to international assessment programmes, such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and PIAAC (Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies), a prime example of large-scale, highly quantitative research on learning outcomes is John Hattie's work on what he calls 'visible learning'. Hattie (2023) is dubbed by some as the 'Messiah' of educational research (Evans, 2012). From his meta-meta analyses, which are currently informed by more than 2,100 meta-analyses drawing from more than 130,000 studies involving more than 400 million students, Hattie lists over 200 factors related to student achievement and ranks them by their effect sizes. Advocates of Hattie's work argue that his visible learning approach has an unparalleled evidence-based nature and that he simply presents undeniable facts (see Nielsen & Klitmøller, 2021). Despite

influencing educational practitioners, administrators, research communities and policymakers across the world, Hattie's work has also been vehemently opposed. It has been criticized for ignoring educational theory and practice to the point where education is defined by evaluation as such (Rømer, 2019); propagating a teacher-centred, directive form of teaching characterized by constant performance assessments of students and teachers; promoting a technocratic and economically motivated, neoliberal strategy for increasing the efficiency of schools and teachers; neglecting social backgrounds, inequality, racism and other structural issues of schooling (Terhart, 2011); marginalizing questions of human agency (Nielsen & Klitmøller, 2021); narrowing the potential meanings of success while ignoring understandings of learning and teaching as relational, contextual and impossible to fully define (McKnight & Whitburn, 2020); as well as invoking serious methodological challenges and validity problems (Nielsen & Klitmøller, 2021). In particular, there is a growing awareness of the risk that an uncritical use of quantitative data will fuel the dangers of 'methodological fetishism' (Berger, 2002) – the dominance of methods over contents leading to a tendency to use increasingly sophisticated methods to study banal topics – with the risk of ending up promoting reductionism (to find simple answers to complex questions). Also, on a more general level of policy and research, the prevailing approach to learning outcomes has faced criticisms highlighting many similar issues and detrimental effects (see the introduction, Chapters 3 and 4 in this volume).

There is an ongoing debate in education studies and social sciences about the limitations of traditional methods of inquiry and the need to experiment with innovative and participatory approaches to research (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019; Williams & Vogt, 2011). A youth participatory approach (Cammarota & Fine, 2008) can enhance the diversity of perspectives and representations, particularly of those typically excluded or silenced in scholarly and policy discussions on learning outcomes and educational (under)achievement (see Chapter 7 in this volume). Participatory approaches 'can reach marginalised young people to ensure that they are the drivers of solutions to the societal exclusion they experience' (Rowland, Wills & Ott, 2024, p. 12).

Participatory approaches can turn subjects of research into collaborators who engage in dialogue with professional researchers and provide lived expertise (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). Expertise generated through experience is valued. Those who have been marginalized or harmed by current social relations undoubtedly have valuable experiential insights into the systems that perpetuate these issues and so are highly beneficial to consider. Thus, it

would be advantageous for these individuals to assume a significant role in initiatives which aim to bring about change (Cornish et al., 2023). Creative methods can promote a dialogue between participants and researchers integrating sensory and everyday elements into research practice (Giorgi, Pizzolati & Vacchelli, 2021).

The debate continues to be relevant for two reasons. First, for social scientists, reflecting on how they construct knowledge about society means reflectively questioning their own role in, and relationship with, society itself. The second reason is because society changes and the social sciences are themselves objects of change.

The manner of conducting research is, inevitably, affected by the social context in which it takes place (Knorr-Cetina, 1999). Serious concerns have been raised on the 'asymmetry between the sociologist enlightened by the light of his [*sic*!] science and ordinary people sunk in illusion' (Boltanski, 2011, p. 23). Also, in the traditional methods of knowledge production, behind the claimed objectivity and neutrality, there has typically existed an assertion of a particular perspective and the marginalization of the perspectives of subaltern categories (such as women, ethnic minorities and lower classes). However, a shift has taken place, influenced by the 'cultural turn' which characterized social research in the final quarter of the last century.

A commitment to reflexivity now substitutes for the commitment to objectivity (Ellis, 1997). Standardized procedures which aim to guarantee objectivity and minimize errors deriving from subjectivity are being replaced by methodologies which actively include subjectivities plus intersubjective dialogue and cooperation between researcher and participants (Ranci, 1995; Williams & Vogt, 2011).

The relationship between researcher and research object is being redefined, with individuals increasingly made the subject rather than the object of research (Ranci, 1995). This correlates to an increasing methodological pluralism (Payne & Payne, 2004) and the uptake of mixed methods (Hitchcock & Onwuegbuzie, 2022; Taherdoost, 2022), that is, a research methodology which integrates qualitative and quantitative methods and different research perspectives and approaches (Dawadi, Shrestha & Giri, 2021). The positivist paradigm, wherein the idea is that there is an objective reality and that knowledge can be generated only through a gathering of objectively verifiable facts using quantitative methods, is challenged by interpretivism and constructivism. Interpretivism is a view that there are multiple realities which can be interpreted by exploring the subjective meanings of actions, as provided by the actors. Constructivism is where reality is seen as a product of human interaction with the real

world and knowledge is built up socially. Qualitative research tools such as interviews, focus groups and participant observation are often considered the most appropriate methodologies for this purpose (Dawadi, Shrestha & Giri, 2021, p. 26).

Building on the discussion above and in the previous chapters of this volume, we too argue for the need to steer away from an over-simplified, narrow understanding of educational achievement and learning outcomes and towards a more comprehensive research approach. This comprises solid theoretical foundations and balances quantitative data with input from, and about, the life-worlds of young people. To this end, we highlight the ways in which the theoretical perspectives of life course research, intersectionality and spatial justice, and their dynamic and relational concepts and methods, can help us explore individual, institutional, structural, relational and spatial dimensions. We hold these to be intrinsically relevant to the construction of learning outcomes and to reconstructing the links between educational achievement and educational inequality.

The life course approach

Education is one of the prominent social institutions pertaining to life course construction. Hence, the movement of individuals through the education system is a central object of study in sociological life course research. Individual lives are sites in which all learning takes place. They consist of trajectories and transitions constructed in a reciprocal process of political, social, economic and spatial conditions, welfare state regulations and provisions, and individual decisions and investments. Life course research (e.g. Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson & Crosnoe, 2003) aims to understand and explain these movements, pathways and patterns of action, over time, within certain historical temporal and cultural settings (Liefbroer, 2019). Human lives are understood as multi-level, multi-dimensional, linked and unfolding over time (Mayer, 2004). Past experiences, connections between life domains and the interdependence of individuals, as well as socio-economic, historical and cultural contexts, are considered central for life course research (Le Roux et al., 2023). These aspects are similarly central to studying learning outcomes and educational (under)achievement in such a way that can, potentially, overcome the shortcomings and detrimental effects of the dominant approaches. The above-mentioned contexts are comprised of structures of opportunities and constraints (Dale & Parreira do Amaral,

2015; Parreira do Amaral & Tikkanen, 2022). These structures form a complex mix of socio-economic conditions, distinct youth transition regimes and the diverse practices of various actors, such as educators, policy professionals and employers (Roberts, 2018) at national, regional and local levels. However, it needs to be emphasized that individuals do not accept their social and historical circumstances passively. Rather, they actively exercise agency and construct their own life courses through the choices and actions they take, albeit within the opportunities and constraints of these circumstances (Evans, 2007).

Thus, we argue that learning and its outcomes cannot be decontextualized from their surrounding institutional arrangements and spatial determinants nor from the individual life courses within which they occur. Therefore, as learning outcomes and the consequent educational (under)achievement are inseparable from individuals' life progression, applying the perspective of life course research enables researchers to consider the embeddedness of outcomes and achievement in their surrounding contexts and in the individual's life course itself. Regarding the latter, it is important to recognize that the life course is a self-referential process wherein some outcomes are shaped by experiences and resources acquired at earlier life course stages which can affect individuals' agentic capabilities (Mayer, 2004). Thus, advantages and disadvantages – including those related to education and learning – do not occur randomly in one's life. Instead, they happen according to a logic of path dependence which usually starts with early advantages or disadvantages brought about by people's social origins (Levy & Bühlmann, 2016). This is one reason many important life course outcomes, such as learning outcomes, cannot be described by a single instantaneous event: they should be conceptualized as part of a process that unfolds over time (Riccarreta & Studer, 2019).

While the concept of life course refers to the institutionalized construction of culturally defined, age-graded patterns of the sequences and the combinations of transitions between positions and stages through which individuals pass along their lives (Elder, Shanahan & Jennings, 2015), a holistic understanding requires also grasping 'lives as told' or 'lives as perceived' (Kovacheva, 2016; Liefbroer, 2019). This refers to individual representations of the biography. People's experiences and trajectories, relating to different social domains and the stories or narratives people tell about themselves and their past life, are shaped by the interplay of structure and agency involving subjective meaning-making regarding the individual life course (Brannen, 2020; Kovacheva, 2016). Thus, through a life course approach, the experiences, expectations, visions and perceptions of young people, as well as their ability to create subjective

meanings and continuity along the different phases of their life courses while considering their diverse socio-economic and spatial contexts (Benasso, Cefalo & Tikkanen, 2022; Biesta, 2008), can be studied. Young people – even those in very vulnerable and disadvantaged situations – attribute diverse subjective meanings to learning opportunities and outcomes (Kovacheva et al., 2020). That is, learning along the life course is not meaningful unless learners link education and training with their own life plans (Biesta, 2006; Jarvis, 2009). This leads to high-quality learning outcomes being those which enhance young people's abilities to develop personally meaningful life projects and make successful life transitions.

The increasing individualization, de-standardization, differentiation and pluralization of young people's life courses and biographies herald a need for new research approaches (Levy & Bühlmann, 2016; Zimmermann, 2019). Within these shifting imperatives, individual and subjective perspectives become increasingly relevant. Such perspectives recognize, and emphasize, everyday life as where individuals give meaning to their actions and experience their limits and opportunities for action (Russo-Netzer & Hicks, 2023; Wood, 2012). Thus, understanding the biographies as well as the life-worlds of young people – that is, their everyday, lived experience which encompasses their perceptions, beliefs and social interactions within their cultural context – is of high importance. In formal educational settings, learners' life-worlds are comprised of their lived experiences which have shaped their identity and subjectivity. These include influences from their family, local community, their peers and the culture within which they identify (Tzirides, Cope & Kalantzis, 2023).

Twenty years ago, John Law (2004) questioned the capacity of what he called 'standard' research methods to handle the complexities of the world. Young people's de-standardized biographies require the integration of innovative and creative methods of research if it is to gain a meaningful understanding of the complex interconnection between contextual and individual variables and between structure and agency; for example, in influencing youths' educational outcomes as part of their life projects. Such research methods must allow for capturing the complex and multi-faceted lives of young people, with the understanding that non-standard transitions and life projects require experimentation with non-standard, interactive and reflexive approaches to enable participants to articulate their own meanings and experiences (Wyn & Dwyer, 1999). The aim is to promote youth empowerment and social justice (Cammarota & Fine, 2008) alongside improved outcomes (Valdez, Valdez & Garcia, 2021).

However, the multi-dimensionality, increasing complexity and de-standardization of life courses and biographies, along with the fact that institutional regulations as well as individual strategies and representations are equally relevant for understanding life course construction, pose real methodological challenges for life course research (Le Roux et al., 2023). To meet these challenges, there have been significant developments in life course research. These have resulted mainly from increasing interdisciplinary cooperation, theoretical advances and quantitative and qualitative methodological innovations (e.g. Brüderl, Kratz & Bauer, 2019; Hollstein, 2019). While qualitative and quantitative methods are mostly used separately, these two approaches are highly complementary in life course research (Le Roux et al., 2023). Furthermore, qualitative methods, particularly narrative approaches (Carpentieri, Carter & Jeppesen, 2023), have considerable potential to serve as a powerful means of addressing challenges in researching life courses, pathways and patterns of actions, including those related to the construction of learning outcomes. They open avenues for exploring and understanding biographical experiences, decision-making and multi-dimensional behavioural processes of agency as driving forces of individuals' life courses (Hollstein, 2019).

Intersectionality and spatial justice approaches

In contemporary theoretical and methodological debates in social sciences, intersectionality and spatial justice pursue the common goal of introducing complexity and critical thinking into social inquiry. They foster interdisciplinary methodological approaches and reflexivity in research. In researching the intersectional and spatial dimensions of the construction of learning outcomes and, thus, educational achievement (see Chapters 2 and 3, this volume), the intersectional approach is found to help connect different analytical perspectives. As identity categories are always contextually constrained and facilitated by intersectional identity locations (Wilkins, 2014), a multi-dimensional understanding of the phenomena under research and a context-sensitive approach to the research can be gained via an intersectionality approach. With a spatial justice approach, learning outcomes and achievement are conceptualized as spatially conditioned phenomena. In relation to education, spatial (in)justice can refer to the uneven distribution of resources and opportunities among regions, cities, neighbourhoods and schools as well as across different divides (e.g. rural-urban, class and minority concentration areas) and factors (e.g.

housing and labour market, educational policies on zoning and school choice) (Beach et al., 2018).

The concept of intersectionality, originally introduced by Black feminist and activist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 1991), is used to highlight and understand those discriminatory processes which occur because of the conjunction of various disadvantaged social positions, such as gender, race and class. The central idea is that, when multiple sources of disadvantage intersect, they interact to produce 'a new, peculiar, discriminating process which can have completely different and unexpected consequences on the subject' (Angelucci, 2017, p. 5). The connection between theory and practice is at the heart of this approach. Crenshaw's (1991) work fostered a political project to resist structural forms of domination (mainly but not solely racism, sexism and classism) which cause Unequal life chances of marginalized groups. Becoming central in gender studies over the last thirty years, intersectionality has developed into a research paradigm (Hancock, 2007) where multiple perspectives on the analysis of inequalities coexist (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Walby, Armstrong & Strid, 2012). It presents as a 'nodal point' (Cho et al., 2013, Williams Crenshaw & McCall, 2013, p. 787), rather than a bounded system, where many theoretical and methodological issues are confronted and debated. In social inquiry, intersectionality can provide theoretical tools for the inclusion of the voices of marginalized groups made visible by the consideration of the multiple sites of oppression. At the same time, it offers an analytical lens through which to gain understanding of the way processes such as sexism or racism are transformed by their mutual interaction in a specific context, as well as the structural forces which organize power relations within such processes (Choo & Ferree, 2010). Spatial justice, in turn, is a viewpoint putting emphasis on the mutually influential and formative relationship between the social and spatial dimensions of human life: spaces not only shape social interactions but are also defined by institutional and interactional practices. Soja (2010) argues that the spatial dimension should be added to the social and historical dimensions if we are to understand the complexity of human experience and to pursue the search for justice.

Both intersectionality and spatial justice perspectives contribute to the construction of multi-faceted knowledge of social phenomena, bringing together contributions from many different disciplines (Decataldo & Russo, 2022). They also share a focus on the interplay between macro-level determinants and micro-level dimensions as well as the idea of a mutually constitutive interaction among several (social and spatial) categories in the making of social inequality. Furthermore, in both perspectives, justice and injustice (spatial or otherwise)

require attention to the multiple forms of oppression and domination experienced by groups as well as to how self-development and self-determination are constrained by institutions (Przybylinski, 2023).

Intersectionality and spatial justice raise particular methodological questions. Firstly, which methodological stances and methods are best suited to revealing hierarchies of power which (re)produce multiple social and spatial discriminations? And, secondly, how can these methodologies and methods account for complexity?

An acknowledgement of the structures and power relations which shape categories and spatial dimensions affecting social relations and individual trajectories relies on an epistemology accounting for multi-faceted realities. At the same time, such an epistemology must account for the tangible consequences, for individuals, of the operating of such positionings and spatializations. Some scholars pursue an intersectional analysis from a critical realist epistemology, considering social categories as reflecting social positions and identities (Walby, Amstrong & Strid, 2012). Others employ a deconstructive approach to the analysis of the processes which constitute the categories, seeking to expose the ways in which subjectivities emerge within specific enabling and constraining contexts (Hancock, 2007).

McCall (2005) has highlighted methodological issues of intersectionality which concern the way researchers use categories and other labels. She considers different stances on intersectionality, defined by her as anti-categorial, intra-categorial and inter-categorial approaches to complexity. The first two approaches are rooted in the critique of positivism and objectivity. Their premise is that gender and other categories are socially constructed and that the wide range of different identities, experiences and positions do not fit neatly into any single principal category 'except as a result of imposing a stable and homogenizing order on a more unstable and heterogeneous social reality' (McCall, 2005, p. 1777). While anti-categorial approaches adopt somewhat radical deconstruction of methodologies leading to the rejection of any form of categorization, intra-categorial approaches, such as those adopted by feminists of colour, have pursued a middle path, turning to the theoretical and empirical study of fine intersections of categories. While the intra-categorial approach allows previously invisible marginalized groups to have voice, it carries the risk of essentializing differences by positing stable identities (McCall, 2005). Moreover, by focusing on marginalized groups only, it overlooks the operations of the 'un-named categories' (such as white or middle-class men), thereby 'obscuring the norm-constructing operations of power' (Choo & Ferree, 2010, p.

137). MacKinnon, (2013) argues that, rather than focusing merely on categories, researchers should consider the processes which produce the power hierarchies through which categories are made and operate, and how they are experienced, reproduced and resisted by subjects. A third approach, named inter-categorial, points to the analysis of relationships of inequality among existing social groups. This approach 'focuses on the complexity of relationships among multiple social groups within and across analytical categories and not on complexities within single social groups, single categories, or both. The subject is multi-group, and the method is systematically comparative' (McCall, 2005, p. 1786). Here, categories are the departure point for analysis. Complexity is made apparent by analysis of the relations among the multiple groups which are produced by the designation of categories (e.g. Black vs. White women, Black women vs. Black men). However, these categorizations are not considered fixed and essentialized entities. Rather, they are processes through which meanings, roles and social identities are defined and negotiated. The inter-categorial approach enhances the study of social complexity by considering how processes such as genderization, racialization and class making mutually shape each other, producing the institutional environments and the social hierarchies which foster inequality. Analysis of these interconnected assignations across multiple interactions requires a methodology that does not separate the macrostructures of inequalities from the microstructures of social construction of meaning (Choo & Ferree, 2010).

From a methodological viewpoint, the focus on space in social inquiry provided by spatial justice (e.g. Annamma, 2018; Jones et al., 2016) shows many similarities with intersectionality. Consequential geographies, a construct elaborated by Soja (2010), are the geographical outcomes of social and political processes and, at the same time, the dynamic forces affecting these processes. This concept provides a theoretical framework for analysing social phenomena, such as educational policies and politics and learning environments, by stressing the dialectical nature, and the entangled power dynamics, of the process. Spatial categories (e.g. regional, national and global) are considered discursive devices requiring critical analysis in their concrete operation. Moreover, as in intersectionality studies, spatial dimensions are critically examined to highlight further spatial differentiation of phenomena and new aspects of inequality.

The impact of structural, contextual and institutional factors on learning outcomes and skills production, as well as their use in the transition from education to employment, can be investigated at a macro-level with the method of systematic comparison of different groups identified as arising from the

intersection of several categories and spatialities. Such analysis can provide a fine-grain description of the conditions and the persistence, increase or decrease of inequalities among subgroups within and across categories. Policies informed by these studies can, therefore, be oriented towards interventions targeting the specific needs of individuals, groups and territories.

At a micro-level, placing young people within the net of relationships which define their specific positions can assist consideration of their perceptions, meaning-making and practices in relation to structural, contextual and institutional factors in the process of learning. Ethnographies, qualitative interviews and focus groups may reveal the specific needs of 'invisible groups' emerging from the intersections of different social positions and how (in)formal learning spaces affect the construction of different learners' subjectivities (Jones et al., 2016). The consequences of spatial rationalization produced by education reforms aimed at increasing efficiency in the school system can also be analysed by examining the way institutional arrangements, as they interact with other processes which construct social boundaries, produce forms of inclusion and exclusion (Kettunen & Prokkola, 2022). Methods to deal with this complexity range from quantitative, exploratory data analysis and multi-level analysis to qualitative, multi-site ethnographies and multi-level coding. Mixed-methods designs can also be drawn on to facilitate the analysis of different levels of social organization (Choo & Ferree, 2010).

Creative methods and participatory research

When researching educational (under)achievement and learning outcomes, we suggest that participatory approaches and creative methods can bring added value. We illustrate this by using an example of the collective experiences gained through the work of Codici, an Italian third-sector organization,[2] which has carried out several participatory research projects with young people and their educational communities in the last two decades. Young people included in these projects have been mainly Italian and students with migratory background, from nine to eighteen years old, enrolled in public schools and/or involved in youth centres' activities, as well as unaccompanied minors, care-leavers or NEETs. Codici's work is always tailored to the peculiarity of each context, and its approach contains few or no fixed criteria on how to work with young people in research. Thus, as Wulf-Andersen, Follesø and Olsen, (2021, p. 5) suggest, it is 'always carefully and critically reflect[ing] on young people's participation

in relation to the purpose'. Codici's significant experience shows that utilizing a participatory framework in research can serve several goals and purposes. These should be taken into consideration for each decision made throughout the research process; from formulating research questions to dissemination of results. Here, attention will be paid to how the different goals and purposes may guide participatory research on education and how they can make a positive difference.

First, participatory approaches aim at multiplying standpoints and representations around the topic or issue at stake (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). For instance, participatory-action research seeks to produce new knowledge on a specific issue, generating data through the active involvement of groups of individuals who have experience of the issue under study. Particular attention is paid to those who are typically excluded, undermined or silenced due to societal power relation dynamics. While participatory action research carried out in local projects has a strong potential to strengthen existing data or hypotheses, especially when working on issues such as educational inequalities, it does not necessarily bring unexpected or groundbreaking new insights on the issue. Nevertheless, this should not be seen as a weakness. Instead, using a participatory approach opens research to a slightly different challenge. In recognizing the significance of increasing the number of ways in which something can be told, it acknowledges the complexity and sometimes disharmony of different viewpoints (Torbjørnsen Halås, 2021). Therefore, its second aim is to create spaces for new narratives, new words and vocabularies to describe, explore and understand phenomena such as young people's educational experiences. What follows is that, because young people's own experiences are considered valuable in research to understand their life worlds, they may find a space devoted to and designed for them where they can relate their part of the story. Given this space, young people may find their own way to talk about their learning experiences and bring to the stage unseen or underestimated nuances of these learning experiences. This may, for instance, bring to the forefront the prominent place comfort – happiness, tranquillity and easiness in staying at school – occupies in influencing individuals' connection to learning processes, ability to interact and intervene in class, and capacity to work with others. Third, less traditional research methods and techniques are introduced with an aim to strengthen the skills young people need in educational settings. By bringing participants together, participatory methods expedite youngsters' work with groups of people by creating favourable conditions for individuals to share their experiences and generate (new) information in dialogue with others. This is done through

activities based more on *doing* things (Giorgi, Pizzolati & Vacchelli, 2021) than *saying* ('the right') things.

The range of participatory methods used in research may vary depending on their purpose, on the characteristics of the involved group and on how much time is available, but also on researchers' attitudes. In Codici's work, traditional research methods, such as interviews and focus groups, are not abandoned but combined with more creative methods (such as drawing, mapping, photographing, role-playing or using music or films), which can be used in different ways for different purposes. For instance, they can be designed to be ice-breakers or conversation starters in more conventional settings, thus providing 'a pause for reflection, a break from the interview interaction, and an opportunity for participants to give shape to and explore the unsaid' (Bagnoli, 2019, p. 71). Regardless of their specific form, they are always inclusive approaches which stimulate and create the necessary conditions for the engagement of a diverse range of people across, for example, age and background. Indeed, expanding narratives and fostering engagement can provide chances to discuss and challenge pre-existing knowledge and power relations – preconditions for societal change. Participatory research, as a critical approach to social research (Kara, 2018, as cited in Giorgi, Pizzolati & Vacchelli, 2021, p. 51), leans towards an active improvement of current societal situations for certain groups of individuals and invests much effort in building trusting relations between researchers and participants. This does not mean that participatory research aims to be life-changing per se. Rather, it advocates thinking in terms of the potential for change at the individual and contextual levels.

This potential for change may be realized in several ways. For example, including different viewpoints in the understanding of a phenomenon contributes to richer, broader and more complex representations and knowledge of the topic. This may enhance the efficacy of interventions when designing public and social programmes or specific actions at the local level, especially in terms of coherency with and relevance to the life experiences of the target group. Furthermore, the aspiration for change inherent in participatory methods means considering young people to have the right to be heard within research, decisions and social intervention processes which affect them. Such an approach, which recognizes young people as active agents and competent decision-makers with respect to their own lives, can foster change at the micro-level. Creative and collaborative research approaches present as tools for developing young people's competencies, self-awareness, critical thinking and agency. Involving young people in less traditional activities and allowing each of them to express

themselves in ways they feel comfortable constitutes important work on their (soft) skills and their exploration of their underlying preferences. Participating in research activities can improve one's capability to gain access to or manage new resources, including practical and theoretical tools by which to express oneself. In addition to being pivotal in terms of facilitating growing into self-aware, responsible, satisfied and happy adults, this process of research participation has been observed to have positive impacts on everyday school activities, teacher and peer interactions and school results.

Thus, participatory and creative research approaches provide a chance to include young people's voices by paying particular attention to creating the proper conditions – spaces, audience and influence (Lundy, 2007) – for them to be heard. For instance, participatory research involving students, which aims to create devices for them to express their views on their school experience, may be the starting point for understanding which actions are suitable and adequate when intervening in educational inequalities, with respect to those dimensions in which schools have any say. It is important to acknowledge that this type of approach can only be effective if adults in the school system, such as teachers, educators and principals, are also involved in the research. This necessity reflects the importance of including the many different experts and stakeholders in the participatory process. When the participatory dimensions of a research project are seriously committed to by the project leaders, the activation that comes with the participatory process can have a powerful effect in terms of change: it can create a new sense of community as it brings together individuals or groups who are more frequently apart due to their different power positions, ages, expectations and roles. This community can then share an engagement in the overcoming of problems, shortcuts and difficulties within the school environment which, in turn, carries potential for a practical, positive impact on individuals' trajectories.

Concluding remarks

In this chapter, we have highlighted some of the key problems and limitations of the prevailing ways of conceptualizing and researching learning outcomes and educational (under)achievement. We have also discussed three theoretical approaches which can help research move towards a more multi-dimensional and context-sensitive understanding of the true complexity of these phenomena. Drawing on the interdisciplinary, mixed-methods, CLEAR research project,

we argue that, when brought together and complemented with key elements of participatory research methods, the theoretical perspectives, concepts and methodological tools of life course research, intersectionality and spatial justice offer a new and innovative theoretical-methodological framework for researching learning outcomes and educational achievement.

Applying this framework enables research to address a gap in scientific knowledge by observing and modelling the interactions between actors, institutions and contexts involved in the construction of learning outcomes while also acknowledging the high importance of individuals' perceptions, needs and experiences. Intersectional and spatial stances offer the opportunity to delve into complexity by exploring individuals' experiences at the crossroads of different social and spatial positioning, thereby illuminating how intertwining processes of inclusion and exclusion shape life courses.

The inclusion and participation of both young people and experts working at various levels in the fields of education, labour market and youth policies support reconstruction of how different levels of learning outcomes emerge in different settings and how the assessment of achievement and underachievement intermingles with multiple factors. It also facilitates in-depth knowledge of how young people exercise their agency when interpreting and dealing with educational success and failure along their life courses. Understanding how policies and local opportunity structures open and close young people's life course opportunities for learning and beyond can also be gained. The proposed, multi-dimensional framework of the CLEAR research project has the potential to both actively stimulate informed decision-making to support policy and form the necessary basis for innovative and effective policy approaches. In other words, the framework makes it possible to address educational inequalities and promote the participation of youth in the design and implementation of educational policies so that they can meet the actual needs of young people, particularly in times of unpredictable changes and challenges.

Notes

1 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.

2 Codici is a non-profit organization based in Milan that has developed social-action projects since 2005.

References

Aagaard, K., Mongeon, P., Ramos-Vielba, I., & Thomas, D. (2021). Getting to the bottom of research funding: Acknowledging the complexity of funding dynamics. *PLoS ONE*, *16*(5), e0251488.

Angelucci, A. (2017). *From theory to practice. The intersectionality theory as a research strategy*. IfS Working papers 2/2017. https://www.soz.univie.ac.at/ueber-uns/rising-scholars/ifs-working-papers/.

Annamma, S. (2018). Mapping consequential geographies in the carceral state: Education journey mapping as a qualitative method with girls of color with dis/abilities. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *24*(1), 20–34.

Bagnoli, A. (2019). Self-portraits and maps as a window on participants' worlds. In P. Liamputtong (Ed.), *Handbook of research methods in health social sciences* (pp. 1255–67). Springer.

Beach, D., From, T., Johansson, M., & Öhrn, E. (2018). Educational and spatial justice in rural and urban areas in three Nordic countries: A meta-ethnographic analysis. *Education Inquiry*, *9*(1), 4–21.

Benasso, S., Cefalo, R., & Tikkanen, J. (2022). Landscapes of lifelong learning policies across Europe. Conceptual lenses. In S. Benasso, D. Bouillet, T. Neves, & M. Parreira do Amaral (Eds.), *Landscapes of lifelong learning policies in Europe – comparative case studies* (pp. 33–44). Palgrave Macmillan.

Berger, P. (2002). Whatever happened to sociology? *First Things*, *126*, 27–9.

Biesta, G. (2006). What's the point of lifelong learning if lifelong learning has no point? On the democratic deficit of policies for lifelong learning. *European Educational Research Journal*, *5*(3), 169–80.

Biesta, G. (2008). *Learning lives: Learning, identity and agency in the life-course: Full research report ESRC end of award report, RES-139-25-0111*. ESRC.

Boltanski, L. (2011). *On critique: A sociology of emancipation*. Polity.

Brannen, J. (2020). Life story and narrative approaches in the study of family lives. In J. Parsons, & A. Chappell (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of auto/biography* (pp. 97–118). Palgrave Macmillan.

Brüderl, J., Kratz, F., & Bauer, G. (2019). Life course research with panel data: An analysis of the reproduction of social inequality. *Advances in Life Course Research*, *41*, 100247.

Cammarota, J., & Fine, M. (Eds.) (2008). *Revolutionizing education: Youth participatory action research in motion*. Routledge.

Carpentieri, J., Carter, L., & Jeppesen, C. (2023). Between life course research and social history: New approaches to qualitative data in the British birth cohort studies. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *27*(5), 517–44.

Chevalier, J., & Buckles, D. (2019*). Participatory action research: Theory and methods for engaged inquiry*. Taylor & Francis.

Cho, S., Williams Crenshaw, K., & McCall, L. (2013). Toward a field of intersectionality studies: Theory, applications, and praxis. *Signs*, *38*(4), 785–810.

Choo, H., & Ferree, M. (2010). Practicing intersectionality in sociological research: A critical analysis of inclusions, interactions, and institutions in the study of inequalities. *Sociological Theory*, *28*(2), 129–49.

Cornish, F., Breton, N., Moreno-Tabarez, U., Delgado, J., Rua, M., de-Graft Aikins, A., & Hodgetts, D. (2023). Participatory action research. *Nature Reviews Methods Primers*, *3*, 34.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demariginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, *140*, 139–67.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, *43*(6), 1241–99.

Dale, R., & Parreira do Amaral, M. (2015). Discursive and institutional opportunity structures in the governance of educational trajectories. In M. Parreira do Amaral, R. Dale, & P. Loncle (Eds.), *Shaping the futures of young Europeans: Education governance in eight European countries* (pp. 23–41). Symposium Books.

Dawadi, S., Shrestha, S., & Giri, R. (2021). Mixed-methods research: A discussion on its types, challenges, and criticisms. *Journal of Practical Studies in Education*, *2*(2), 25–36.

Decataldo, A., & Russo, C. (2022). *Metodologia e tecniche partecipative. La ricerca sociologica nel tempo della complessità*. Pearson.

Elder, G., Kirkpatrick Johnson, M., & Crosnoe, R. (2003). The emergence and development of life course theory. In J. Mortimer & M. Shanahan (Eds.), *Handbook of the life course* (pp. 3–19). Kluwer Academic/Plenum.

Elder, G., Shanahan, M., & Jennings, J. (2015). Human development in time and place. In M. Bornstein & T. Leventhal (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology and developmental science* (pp. 6–54). Wiley.

Ellis, C. (1997). Evocative ethnography: Writing emotionally about our lives. In W. Tierney & Y. Lincoln (Eds), *Representation and the text: Reframing the narrative voice* (pp. 115–42). State University of New York Press.

Evans, D. (2012). He is not the messiah. *Times Education Supplement*, 14 September. https://www.tes.com/magazine/archive/hes-not-messiah.

Evans, K. (2007). Concepts of bounded agency in education, work and the personal lives of young adults. *International Journal of Psychology*, *42*(2), 85–93.

Giorgi, A., Pizzolati, M., & Vacchelli, E. (Eds.) (2021). *Metodi creativi per la ricerca sociale. Contesto, pratiche, strumenti*. Il Mulino.

Hancock, A-M. (2007). When multiplication doesn't equal quick addition. *Perspectives on Politics*, *5*(1), 63–79.

Hattie, J. (2023). *Visible learning: The sequel a synthesis of over 2,100 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. Routledge.

Hitchcock, J., & Onwuegbuzie, A. (2022). *The Routledge handbook for advancing integration in mixed methods research*. Routledge.

Hollstein, B. (2019). What autobiographical narratives tell us about the life course. Contributions of qualitative sequential analytical methods. *Advances in Life Course Research*, *41*, 100248.

Jarvis, P. (2009). *Learning to be a person in society*. Routledge.

Jones, S., Thiel, J., Dávila, D., Pittard, E., Woglom, J., Zhou, X., Brown, T., & Snow, M. (2016). Childhood geographies and spatial justice making sense of place and space-making as political acts in education. *American Educational Research Journal*, *53*(4), 1126–58.

Kettunen, M., & Prokkola, E-K. (2022). Differential inclusion through education: Reforms and spatial justice in Finnish education policy. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, *40*(1), 50–68.

Knorr-Cetina, K. (1999). *Epistemic cultures: How the sciences make knowledge*. Harvard University Press.

Kovacheva, S. (2016). *Biography*. Young AduLLLt Glossary. https://www.young-adulllt.eu/glossary/detail.php?we_objectID=188.

Kovacheva, S., Jacovkis, J., Startari, S., & Siri, A. (2020). Are lifelong learning policies working for youth? Young people's voices. In M. Parreira do Amaral, S. Kovacheva & X. Rambla (Eds.), *Lifelong learning policies for young adults in Europe. Navigating between knowledge and economy* (pp. 149–70). Policy Press.

Law, J. (2004). *After method. Mess in social science research*. Routledge.

Le Roux, G., Studer, M., Bringé, A., & Bonvalet, C. (2023). Selecting qualitative cases using sequence analysis: A mixed-method for in-depth understanding of life course trajectories. *Advances in Life Course Research*, *56*, 100530.

Levy, R., & Bühlmann, F. (2016). Towards a socio-structural framework for life course analysis. *Advances in Life Course Research*, *30*, 30–42.

Liefbroer, A. (2019). Methodological diversity in life course research: Blessing or curse? *Advances in Life Course Research*, *41*, 100276.

Locke, C., & Lloyd-Sherlock, P. (2011). Qualitative life course methodologies: Critical reflections from development studies. *Development and Change*, *42*(5), 1131–52.

Lundy, L. (2007). 'Voice' is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*, *33*(6), 927–42.

MacKinnon, C. (2013). Intersectionality as method: A note. *Signs*, *38*(4), 1019–30.

Mayer, K. (2004). Whose lives? How history, societies, and institutions define and shape life courses. *Research in Human Development*, *1*(3), 161–187.

McCall, L. (2005). The complexity of intersectionality, *Signs*, *30*(3), 1771–800.

McKnight, L., & Whitburn, B. (2020). Seven reasons to question the hegemony of visible learning. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, *41*(1), 32–44.

Mertala, P. (2024). Datafixation of education. In M. Schiefner-Rohs, S. Hofhues, & A. Breiter (Eds.), *Datafizierung (in) der bildung: kritische perspektiven auf digitale vermessung in pädagogischen kontexten* (pp. 31–42). Transcript.

Mitzner, V. (2020). *European Union research policy: Contested origins*. Springer.

Nielsen, K., & Klitmøller, J. (2021). Blind spots in visible learning: A critique of John Hattie as an educational theorist. *Nordic Psychology*, *73*(3), 268–83.

Parreira do Amaral, M., & Tikkanen, J. (2022). Governing the life course through lifelong learning: A multilevel and multidimensional view. *Societies, 12*(3), 84.

Payne, J., & Payne, G. (2004). *Key concepts in social research*. Sage.

Prøitz, T. (2015). Learning outcomes as a key concept in policy documents throughout policy changes. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, *59*(3), 275–96.

Przybylinski, S. (2023). Spatial justice. In J. Ohlsson & S. Przybylinski (Eds.), *Theorizing justice – a primer for social scientists* (pp. 191–204). Bristol University Press.

Ranci, C. (1995). Relazioni difficili. L'interazione tra ricercatore e attore sociale. In A. Melucci (Ed.), *Verso una sociologia riflessiva. Ricerca qualitative e cultura* (pp. 33–54). Il Mulino.

Riccarreta, R., & Studer, M. (2019). Holistic analysis of the life course: Methodological challenges and new perspectives. *Advances in Life Course Research*, *41*, 100251.

Roberts, K. (2018). Explaining education-to-work transitions: Thinking backwards, situating agency and comparing countries. *Review of European Studies*, *10*(1), 72–83.

Rømer, T. (2019). A critique of John Hattie's theory of visible learning. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *51*(6), 587–98.

Rowland, J., Wills, E., & Ott, E. (2024). *Youth participatory research: A review of reviews and practice guidance*. Centre for Evidence and Implementation.

Russo-Netzer, P., & Hicks, J. (2023). Editorial: Meaning in everyday life: Working, playing, consuming, and more. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *14*, 1221799.

Saltelli, A., & Giampietro, M. (2017). What is wrong with evidence based policy, and how can it be improved? *Futures*, *91*, 62–71.

Soja, E. (2010). *Seeking spatial justice*. University of Minnesota Press.

Taherdoost, T. (2022). What are different research approaches? Comprehensive review of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method research, their applications, types, and limitations. *Journal of Management Science & Engineering*, *5*(1), 53–63.

Terhart, E. (2011). Has John Hattie really found the holy grail of research on teaching? An extended review of visible learning. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, *43*(3), 425–38.

Torbjørnsen Halås, C. (2021). The dialogue café as a participatory method in research - Potentials and challenges. In T. Wulf-Andersen, R. Follesø, & T. Olsen (Eds.), *Involving methods in youth research: Refections on participation and power* (pp. 155–84). Palgrave Macmillan.

Tzirides, A., Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (2023). Inclusive pedagogies, new learning, new times. In R. J. Tierney, F. Rizvi, & K. Ercikan (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of education* (Fourth Edition) (pp. 68–75). Elsevier.

Valdez, E., Valdez, L., & Garcia, D. (2021). Using participatory methods to enhance youth engagement in substance use research. *Health Promotion Practice*, *22*(6), 747–9.

Vaughn, L., & Jacquez, F. (2020). Participatory research methods – choice points in the research process. *Journal of Participatory Research Methods*, *1*(1).

Veletanlić, E., & Sá, C. (2020). Implementing the innovation agenda: A study of change at a research funding agency. *Minerva, 58*, 261–83.

Walby, S., Armstrong, J., & Strid, S. (2012). Intersectionality: Thinking inequalities in social theory. *Sociology*, *46*(2), 224–40.

Wilkins, A. (2014). Race, age, and identity transformations in the transition from high school to college for black and first-generation white men. *Sociology of Education*, *87*(3), 171–87.

Williams, M., & Vogt, W. (2011). *The SAGE handbook of innovation in social research methods*. Sage.

Wood, B. (2012). Researching the everyday: Young people's experiences and expressions of citizenship. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *27*(2), 214–32.

Wyn, J., & Dwyer, P. (1999). New directions in research on youth in transition. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *29*(1), 5–21.

Zhao, Y. (2018). *What works may hurt – Side effects in education*. Teachers College Press.

Zimmermann, O. (2019). Destandardization in later age spans in Western Germany. Evidence from sequence analysis of family life courses. *Advances in Life Course Research*, *43*, 100287.