

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>>.

Accessed from: www.bloomsburycollections.com

Accessed on: Mon Nov 24 2025 16:16:02 Eastern European Standard Time

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Epilogue

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Motivated by our will and ambition to improve educational equality and social inclusion for young people across Europe and beyond, we embarked on the project of this edited volume. Through it, we sought to develop novel conceptual and methodological tools with potential to stimulate innovative and effective policy and research approaches to tackling the challenges, vulnerabilities and intersecting inequalities that today's young people are confronted with on their educational pathways. To this end, the volume – and the interdisciplinary, comparative, mixed-method CLEAR research project on which it draws – aimed, as a first step, to critically examine the dominant understandings of learning outcomes and educational (under)achievement in policy and research. Thereby, evidence is provided of why many well-intentioned policy attempts to increase educational equality for and social inclusion of young people have so often failed to produce significant results.

The need for such critical reappraisal of policy solutions is well illustrated by a rigorous literature review carried out by Enchikova and colleagues (2024). It demonstrates how, after twenty years of quantitative measurements of learning outcomes by OECD's PISA studies, this approach has not, overall, been able to significantly contribute to educational equality in the participating countries. Instead, this narrow learning outcomes approach has primarily served as a tool for governing education.

The chapters in this volume elucidated the dominance and the consequences of a circumscribed, quantitative and standardized understanding of learning and education in both policymaking and scholarly literature. While European education and training policies take national and regional diversity into account to a degree, strong assumptions of objectivity and similarity of learning outcomes across national, institutional and professional contexts continue

to underpin the dominant policy approaches (Prøitz et al., 2017). However, Chapter 1 of this volume highlights that understandings of ability, performance and achievement are socially constructed, thus dependent on the context of their construction, and these spatially differing understandings lead to differing degrees of inequalities in learning outcomes. Lack of sufficient sensitivity to the diversity of contexts often leads to adopting one-size-fits-all definitions of learning outcomes. This leaves out factors such as the life courses of people, the intricacies of policy implementation, social inequalities among learners and disparities between educational contexts, as discussed particularly in Chapters 2 and 4. As the authors argue, absencing these factors stands in stark contrast to the multi-faceted nature of educational experiences and their impact on young people's future as well as the complexity and unpredictability of social life more broadly. This leads to a mismatch between policy expectations of the transformative power of learning outcomes and their actual definitions. Whereas, as argued in Chapter 8, widening the ways in which educational achievement is conceptualized can help to uncover the existing mismatches, tensions and barriers manifesting in institutional and policy ineffectiveness. Since policy is informed by research, the significance of the findings of the synthesis review of research literature on learning outcomes presented in Chapter 4 becomes evident: in research literature, learning outcomes are presumed as common-sensical attributes of learning and are seldom defined, especially outside subject-specific requirements. Also, the underlying theoretical assumption of learning outcomes is, predominantly, behaviourism; despite the substantial and varied critiques made against it for a long time now. Consequently, learning outcomes are primarily described in quantitative terms. These observations underscored the necessity of a reconceptualization of learning outcomes and (under)achievement. Rather, learning outcomes should be conceived in a holistic and context-sensitive way whereby learners' life courses and life worlds are also considered. Such a reconceptualization will overcome the pitfalls and shortcomings of the prevailing understanding, which conflates educational and academic achievement and narrows the wider arena of educational matters to what is academically relevant, thus providing further justification for our approach.

The relevance of the national contexts is demonstrated further in Chapter 5 by scrutinizing how, in policymaking, concepts related to learning do not converge across countries. Moreover, and very importantly, Chapter 3 illustrated that educational (under)achievement is characterized by spatial dimensions that go beyond the national level as learning outcomes are significantly shaped by

territorial opportunity structures. Furthermore, the results presented in Chapter 10 show how local capacities for consolidating more inclusive institutional systems and tackling spatial justice are unevenly distributed.

The empirical findings presented in this volume testify to the need to cross-check and revise statistical measurements using contextual information by integrating quantitative data with in-depth institutional and qualitative data. In other words, as underscored in Chapters 2 and 3, cross-country educational comparisons alone are not able to provide a comprehensive picture of the issues at hand: indicator data flattens the presence of contextualities, uncertainties and measurement limitations. Thereby, the emerging findings of the CLEAR project highlight the importance of both refocusing attention from national to regional and local levels and carefully considering the perspective of spatial justice when researching learning outcomes and educational (under)achievement, as is promoted in this volume.

In addition – and in relation – to spatiality and the diversity of different contexts, there is also the diversity of people, across intersecting dimensions such as ethnicity, immigration status, gender, sexual orientation, language, culture, religion, mental and physical abilities and social background. This is a key aspect of learning outcomes and educational achievement, which is recognized in European education and training policies. However, as shown in Chapter 6 and further discussed in Chapter 10, the diversity of learners is frequently understood in educational policy documents as an issue which should only be addressed formally, pointing to the lack of a comprehensive understanding of individual identities and lived experiences in different educational settings. Furthermore, the mainstream policy understanding of social and spatial inequality remains incomplete, with European policy experts displaying only a vague image of inequality.

This is particularly worrisome because, in addition to spatial dimensions, learning outcomes and achievement are also characterized by intersectional traits, as illustrated by the analysis presented in Chapter 3. Indeed, one key argument brought forward and validated in this volume is that learning outcomes, which are impacted by complex intersecting factors, can neither be decontextualized from the spaces of their construction nor from the life courses and biographies of learners. Therefore, considering intersectionality together with spatiality and life courses of learners is of utmost importance when researching learning outcomes and achievement. In this regard, Chapter 9 promoted the CLEAR project's theoretical-methodological framework, which combines the theoretical perspectives, concepts and methodological tools of life

course research, intersectionality and spatial justice, as a means for meeting the significant demands of studying learning outcomes.

Learning outcomes, educational (under)achievement and their construction processes are, this volume has shown, complex and multi-dimensional. Consequently, facilitating, designing and implementing more innovative, context-sensitive and effective policies which target unequal structures of opportunities, polarization of learning outcomes and achievement, and skills shortage in the labour market is far from easy. What is required, as discussed throughout the chapters, is willingness to think beyond the conventional; acceptance of the complex nature of knowledge and open-endedness of learning outcomes; preparedness to discuss what kinds of learning and learning outcomes are worth supporting; constant problematization of the current policy tendencies to individualize learning outcomes and essentialize vulnerabilities to certain groups of young people; and engagement in conversation and collaboration with policymakers, scholars, education administrators, educationalists and other relevant stakeholders – most importantly young people themselves. Whereas research on learning outcomes often brackets out many relevant actors from the construction of the understanding of learning outcomes, as shown in Chapter 4, we want to promote active participation of all the different stakeholders. To this end, the CLEAR project applies the Transversal Participatory Approach presented in Chapter 7. One of the main aims of this approach is to increase the project's overall capacity to give value to the different voices in the field of education, particularly those usually not 'heard' by policymakers, namely young people in vulnerable situations. The approach also helps to find proper languages to engage, relate with, inform and better understand the different stakeholders and to potentially trigger reflexivity in all those involved in the research.

In this volume, we avoid taking learning outcomes as a 'self-evident' concept not requiring definition. Further, and in accordance with the conceptual discussions, cutting-edge empirical evidence and preliminary results of the CLEAR project presented in the chapters, we argue that high-quality outcomes of formal, non-formal and informal learning include several aspects eluding quantification and measurement. These, we note, are in addition to but certainly not subjugated by 'set[s] of knowledge, skills and/or competences an individual has acquired and/or is able to demonstrate after completion of the learning process' (CEDEFOP, 2016, p. 30), as measured by school grades and test scores. They comprise inter- and intrapersonal 'soft' skills like resilience and teamwork; higher order thinking skills, such as analysing and creating; attitudes and values

supporting democratic and diverse societies; participation and citizenship skills empowering youth to influence the world they are living in; strong and realistic self-efficacy beliefs and self-images together with agentic and reflexive capabilities needed to build subjectively meaningful pathways; and – consequently and very importantly – positive life course outcomes, such as participation in education and employment as a means of finding one's place in the world.

The works presented in this volume have justified and shown the value of our research approach. They have shared relevant insights to guide future research work – by us and others – while also providing conceptual and methodological tools for researchers aiming to tackle the complex issue of educational and social equality. The CLEAR project will continue to follow these signposts through a multi-level, comparative analysis of its rich and nuanced data sets, examining the combination of multiple factors shaping learning outcomes and, thus, affecting their quality. In all our work, we place a strong focus on the experiences, needs and wishes of European young people in multi-disadvantaged and vulnerable life situations. We recognize that, for youth to be empowered to build their life courses in today's challenging environments, there is an urgent need to overcome their mainstream representations as passive recipients. Paralleling this, we pay heed to the fact that spatial inequalities create conditions which further stigmatize and marginalize groups in disadvantaged positions.

The comprehensive and context-sensitive understanding of the processes of constructing learning outcomes which results from our rigorous analyses and carefully designed participatory activities has, we believe, strong potential to spark innovative policy measures to tackle underachievement and increase the social inclusion of young people. While a single research project obviously cannot solve these challenges once and for all, we nonetheless deem that striving towards this goal is of great value. Thus, we hope and trust that opening up holistic discussions on learning and education, as well as promoting collaboration with the various stakeholders, will lead us in the right direction to affect crucial and overdue change.

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