



Article

A Southern European Portrait of Learning Outcomes: Perspectives of Educators and Young Learners

Xavier Rambla

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Email: Xavier.Rambla@uab.cat

Federico Rossi

University of Urbino

Konstantinos Pagkratis

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

Abstract

This article draws on interviews with educators, employment services officers, and young people conducted in three localities of Southern Europe in 2024. It contributes to the comparative literature on education, training, and youth transition regimes through an analysis of interactions between these actors in three local contexts. The fieldwork was conducted in Castelló (Spain), Pesaro- Urbino (Italy), and the rural areas and tourist resorts in the district of Thessaloniki (Greece). Across the three local contexts, educators and employment service officers expressed concerns about declining local economic opportunities and identified shortcomings in career guidance and training provision. At the same time, young people reported strong attachments to their localities while expressing pessimism about their prospects for developing long-term life plans in areas where opportunities are perceived to be more limited than in major urban centres. By comparing experiences across three Southern European contexts, the article highlights both common challenges and contextual differences in education and training policies targeting disadvantaged youth. The findings contribute to debates in comparative education on youth transitions, spatial inequalities, and the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights.



©2026 Xavier Rambla, Federico Rossi, Konstantinos Pagkratis. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), allowing third parties to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format and to remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially, provided the original work is properly cited and states its license.

Keywords: Social construction of learning, interactions between educators and learners, educational aspirations and place, comparative analysis of career guidance

Introduction

In this article, we will explore how, in three Mediterranean local areas of the European Union, educators, employment officers and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds construct shared meanings, navigate institutional contexts and eventually shape common understandings of learning in everyday life.

The initial section lays out a comparative, theoretical framework that examines the views on learning that circulate in policy discourses and the public opinion. A methodological section reports on the selection of regions and local research sites, the sample of interviewees, the interview scripts, coding and research ethics. Two further sections present the main findings on the common views of educators and public employment officers, on the one hand, and disadvantaged young people, on the other hand, in three local settings located outside the main cities in Southern Europe. The final discussion examines the emerging dissonance between the perspectives of educators and youths.

The characters of the portrait: educators and young learners

We examine the interaction between education and employment officers and students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds through a sociological lens. While educational professionals must interpret a great deal of course descriptions and career counselling instructions to do their job, students are expected to master basic literacy and numeracy skills alongside the technical knowledge and practical competencies required for a specific occupation. The action of the former eventually depends on the reaction of the latter, which at the same time is conditioned by the availability of programmes and services in their locality.

Our aim is to explore to what extent vocational education policies conceptualise and manage the official definition of lifelong learning as a cornerstone of the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission, 2017). Psychological research has classified diverse cognitive operations as learning outcomes, which range from basic remembering to more sophisticated capabilities such as analysis and creativity (Anderson et al., 2001). Official classifications of ISCED levels and qualification frameworks have adopted similar scales to rank the population according to their lower or higher academic attainment and skills (European Commission, 2020; 2021). Our analysis does not focus on the actual achievement of our young interviewees, but we want to explore how educators and young people use these classifications to make sense of further education, career guidance and employability.

Drawing on previous evidence about the configuration of opportunity structures that pattern individual pathways of transition between school and work (Bæck, 2019; Roberts, 2022), the analysis examines how educators and disadvantaged young students understand and interpret learning in three Southern European local contexts. The protagonists of our study are the two parties involved in the crucial interactions through which education and training programmes seek to help diverse groups of young people improve their learning outcomes, which are often associated with their chances in the labour market. To the extent that we identify disparate understandings of learning between them, we conclude that the portrait of these protagonists of education policy is broken.

We have formulated specific research questions for educators and young learners and will discuss their interaction from the perspective of each party of this relationship. The first question (RQ1) elicits educators' views on young people's learning, while the second one (RQ2) examines whether young learners exclusively respond to the expectations of education and employment policies or whether their reflections also encompass other themes.

We begin with a straightforward statement of the research questions:

- How do educators make sense of learning in three Southern European local contexts? (RQ1)
- Which aspirations and reflections do young people living outside the European Union's more prosperous urban areas hold? (RQ2).

As far as the perspectives of educators are concerned, we draw on the literature on frontline professionals and welfare services. Our concept of educators includes teachers, counsellors and the officers of public employment services. They are the frontline professionals of large organisations and must enact abstract rules and their expert knowledge to foster the officially defined learning outcomes of young people who are exposed to social vulnerability (Kelstrup, 2024; Møller et al., 2022). A broad literature has observed that this responsibility entails a high degree of uncertainty and requires them to exercise discretion. Bonvin et al (2018) have outlined an operational definition of these challenges by observing that such 'welfare services' aim at compensating for social vulnerability through improved learning outcomes. The involved services normally face big operational problems such as variable take-up rates of the programmes, uneven acknowledgement of the needs of learners, ambiguous metrics of assessment and constant pressure to meet certain benchmarks.

In Europe, research on career guidance has explored the interface between educational and employability services, or rather, between regulated education and training programmes and heterogeneous active labour market policies that are targeted at jobseekers in very different and uneven local areas of economic activity. The resulting evidence indicates that these services generally adopt undifferentiated approaches to

the needs of an extremely diverse population, despite this happening differently across territories (Sultana, 2012). These studies argue that such an approach induces learners to internalise an ethos of continuous resilience that detaches their experiences from the feeling of sharing a collective problem with other people (Alexander, 2019; Ryökkynen et al., 2022). Often, a consequence of this perspective is that social problems are spuriously reduced to education problems that can only be solved by changing the preferences and the practices of the people enrolled in education and training programmes (Valiente et al., 2020). The first research question of our analysis concerns the extent to which educators reiterate or qualify this vision when discussing the performance of young learners in Southern Europe (RQ1).

Our analysis of the aspirations and reflections of young learners is inspired by the literature on how the youth experience social inequalities. In contrast with the official construal of learning outcomes scales, research on the experiences of young learners does not indicate that they always aspire to climb a hierarchical ladder. Although many of them feel personally responsible for their transition from childhood to adult life, previous research findings have reported the multiple subjective implications of these aspirations. When planning their future, everybody must respond to a large variety of dilemmas, but young people are compelled to address poignant issues related to class, gender and ethnicity if they are living under conditions of social vulnerability (Skeggs & Loveday, 2012).

Our analysis will focus on a further type of issues that are related to place. The sample includes several respondents who were considered to suffer from social vulnerability by their teachers. A second research question of our study addresses the aspirations and the reflections of young people living outside the more thriving regions of the European Union (RQ2). This analysis draws on social geography to notice that spaces often become places loaded with affect and meaning. In this vein, we explore how those young people framed their prospective learning within an active exploration of their sense of belonging to the places where they lived, studied and sought their first jobs (Antonsich, 2010; Cuervo & Wyn, 2017; Farrugia, 2020). In general, young people ponder their opportunities and the attachment to their roots when they elaborate their plans in de-industrialised regions (Cuzzocrea, 2018; Kettunen, 2023), and these concerns are more remarkable in the Southern European regions that struggle with the ambitious European agenda amid important socio-economic and institutional constraints. The prevailing approach to youth and education policies in Southern Europe has been characterized as predominantly centred on formal schooling, with comparatively limited attention paid to welfare provision, lifelong guidance, scholarships, and housing support (Walther, 2017).

In a nutshell, this article inquires to what extent educators (RQ1) and disadvantaged young people (RQ2) understand the local inception of policies targeted to improve learning outcomes. The strands of literature on frontline public services professionals and youth studies strongly suggest that these two groups navigate

complex landscapes of structural constraints, organisational mandates and relationships to place. The analysis will compare educators' conceptions of learning (RQ1) with young people's aspirations (RQ2) to examine whether and to what extent both groups address similar themes. In our view, comparative analyses of the European Commission's (2020; 2021) European Education Area and Skills Agenda will gain interesting insights from careful consideration of the involved interactions between educators and (young) beneficiaries in several places, with extra-urban, intermediate regions positing a very significant case in the sub-protective youth transition regimes of Southern Europe (Walther, 2017).

Researching learning policies in a selection of Southern European local areas

The article focuses on adult education and learning policies and lifelong learning schemes, which for comparative education specialists require comparative analysis like many other educational programmes. While acknowledging the relevance of research on individual achievement of learning outcomes, it follows a complementary strategy that consists of comparing regional and local "landscapes of lifelong learning" (Benasso et al., 2022).

Our analysis explores the construction of learning outcomes outside the main urban centres that concentrate many educational institutions and thriving labour markets in Southern Europe. It is important to clarify that we have selected three local sites which are located in the wider NUTS2 regions, and that we can only use statistical profiles of these wider regions.

To be precise, each local research site is contextualised by the available data on a NUTS2 region. These regions are compared to more affluent European regions according to a few indicators.

The research sites are the following ones:

- The district of Thessaloniki is in NUTS2 Kentriki Makedoniiki, (Greece). The analysis focuses on the interviews conducted in the rural areas and important tourist resorts located outside the city.
- Pesaro and Ancona are small towns in the NUTS2 region of Marche (Italy). The crisis of 2008 and 2020 have severely hit the family-run companies that had driven a dynamic tourist resort and a thriving manufacturing district.
- In NUTS2 Comunitat Valenciana (Spain), Castelló stages a string of coastal mid-towns that receive a moderate number of tourists, a mountainous area specialised in agriculture and cattle-raising and a declining industrial district of tile manufacturing.

Table 1 indicates that the regions where the local research sites are located lack thriving urban centres. For example, Länsi-Suomi (FI), Hamburg (DE) and Wien (AT) record higher scores of research and development, tertiary educational attainment and employment rates.

Table 1. The regions of the local research sites compared to leading European regions

Region (NUTS2)	Human Resources in Science & Technology (% of labour force)	Tertiary Educational Attainment, Age 25-64 (%)	Employment Rate, Age 15-64 (%)
Länsi-Suomi (FI)	48.7	41.5	72.5
Hamburg (GER)	62.1	43.0	74.5
Wien (AT)	61.4	46.3	67.8
Kentriki Makedoniiki (GR)	42.8	36.4	62.4
Marche (IT)	39.0	24.9	67.5
Comunitat Valenciana (SP)	44.7	38.1	65.5

Sources: Eurostat (2026a; 2026b; 2026c)

This exercise draws on qualitative data resulting from a sampling strategy based on the following criteria. Firstly, it looked for extreme cases where the interaction between, on the one hand, public employment officers and educators, and on the other hand, young learners was a daunting task for several reasons. To start with, in these countries the core approach to lifelong learning was not implemented until the European Council made it an explicit recommendation in the early 2010s (Walther, 2017). In addition, the focus on economically weak regions that lie outside the main cities highlights how the two sides of this interaction operate under severe constraints.

Secondly, we conducted interviews with educators and students of several vocational education and training programmes in the three sites. The sample included programmes delivered by both schools and public employment services and targeted three occupational specialisms, namely: health, hospitality and IT. These disciplines prepare for occupations with varying prestige, which roughly is higher in IT, medium in health and low in hospitality. The research teams approached schools, public employment services and nonprofits to obtain permission to interview both professionals and students. Teachers proposed the interviews to some students which they considered to be exposed to significant factors of vulnerability. Thus, the analysis delves into extreme cases in which the structural constraints of these policies are aggravated by the adverse circumstances that the young respondents had previously lived or were living at the time of the interview.

Table 2 shows the gender of the professionals from these three specialisms of vocational education and training that were interviewed in each place.

Table 2. Characteristics of the interviewed professionals (2024)

Local research site	Male	Female	TOTAL
District of Thessaloniki (Kentriki Makedonia)	2	4	6
Pesaro- Urbino (Marche)	3	5	8
Castelló (Comunitat Valenciana)	4	2	6
TOTAL	9	11	20

Table 3 maps out the main socio-demographic characteristics of the young interviewees in the three local research sites. The sample included a balanced distribution of males and females and one non-binary respondent. The average age was 23, and about half of the thirty youths had a migration background. Several of the interviewed teachers approached some students that they considered were at risk of exclusion for several reasons, and some of them accepted the interview. Besides the demanding adaptation of immigrants, the main factors of this vulnerability were parental low socio-economic background, disrupted educational pathways and experience with precarious non-standard forms of employment.

Table 3. Characteristics of the interviewed young people (2024)

Local research site	<i>District of Thessaloniki</i>	<i>Pesaro- Urbino</i>	<i>Castelló</i>	TOTAL
Male	4	5	7	16
Female	5	5	3	13
Non-binary	1	0	0	1
Average age (years)	24	20	24	23
Immigrant background or other minority status	5	8	3	16
TOTAL	10	10	10	30

Our professional interviewees were invited to discuss challenges, programmes and evaluation criteria. An initial question explored the main challenges faced by the relevant VET specialities in the area, where applicable. Follow-up questions examined the relationship between these challenges and education and training systems, as well as issues related to skill shortages and skill mismatches. A second group of questions focused on the education and training programmes associated with the relevant VET specialities. Interviewers then explored the objectives and intended purposes of these programmes. As the term stakeholder is difficult to translate into some of the target languages, respondents were instead asked who had an interest in the programme. Additional prompts sought information on the extent and nature of these actors' involvement in programme design. Another question addressed the characteristics of programme participants. Several prompts specifically explored issues relating to social exclusion, gender

balance, and migration background. A further set of questions examined the main evaluation criteria commonly used in the European Union, namely effectiveness, relevance, coherence, and European added value. These concepts were operationalised through questions concerning programme costs and benefits, relevance to regional needs, and the respective roles of different levels of government. Finally, interviewers asked about programme evaluation, framed as an assessment of the expected changes and outcomes resulting from the programme.

The interview script encouraged the young interviewees to elaborate on their pathways, their aspirations and the local context. Starting from their situation at the time of the conversation, the questions asked for their perception of advantages and obstacles. Their plans for moving and their sense of place were the main themes of questions about the local context.

Regarding the perspectives of the frontline professionals, interview coding followed the question structure. The questions were transformed to analytic codes that captured three analytical dimensions: institutional pathways, intersectional inequalities, and local programmes. After consulting all the participating researchers, an international leading group agreed on this code grid, which each local team applied to the qualitative evidence collected in its local research site. The local teams gave feedback so that the international group could identify key nuances. At the end of the day, the grid fitted such an officially patterned theme very well, but the local teams had to carefully consider some issues of translation when sharing the main excerpts of their interviews.

The interviews of young learners were analysed in three steps. The first one consisted of portraying brief biographical summaries. The second one was a standard qualitative analysis according to a coding grid. In the final stage, an international team developed a theoretical interpretation of these data. So, these interviews went through a back-and-forth process in which all the research teams discussed and qualified the nuances of a common coding grid and the issues that inevitably emerged from the translation.

Each research team conducted the interviews in the language chosen by the respondents. They transcribed and analysed the content in the same language. Finally, each research team double checked the English translation of the excerpts that have been included in the article.

This study was part of a broader Horizon Europe project that adhered to established research ethics procedures (see Acknowledgements for further details). Prior to providing consent for the recording of the interview, participants received an information letter and a privacy statement outlining the study's ethical framework. These documents informed participants of their rights regarding voluntary participation, autonomy and respect for their views and feelings, the anonymisation of their responses, and the secure management of personal data. The whole research project was approved by the ethical committee of each

university as well as an international independent board of experts in research ethics.

Concerns of professionals with learning

Learning is a loaded word that encourages educators to elaborate on a variety of issues. The interview questions took advantage of these many connotations to ask the participating professionals to speak openly and feel comfortable. It is important to remind that they were not invited to assess levels of learning, skills or professional qualifications but to elaborate on as many themes they associated with learning in their particular area. The main results indicate that the interviewed professionals expressed concern about the prospects of the local economy and voiced strong doubts regarding the governance of local education and training programmes.

In the district of Thessaloniki, they elaborated on the local economy in terms of labour shortages and lack of investment in education and skills development by many employers. The interviewed educators recognised the importance of executives and managers taking responsibility for the professional development of their staff.

Although the number of employers mentioning shortages diminishes in the main opinion polls, about 66% still consider that filling some positions is difficult. (Male member of an employers' association, District of Thessaloniki)

In Pesaro-Urbino, educators argued that credentials and qualifications were somewhat overrated for fostering the employability of a person. In their view, soft skills, specific technical competences and familiarity with the labour market were more necessary than formal credentials.

The ITS [Higher Technical School] is an important answer, because it gives a person the possibility to say 'Ok, I'm training, I quit the idea that only a degree can get me a good paid job', which is often the exact opposite! (Male manager of a private training provider, mostly in hospitality sector, Pesaro-Urbino)

We find ourselves with the need to include educators within social and health structures—protected residences as retirement homes or centres for Alzheimer treatment—without having people adequately trained because they have no teaching programmes about elderly care or even in health or social work areas. (Female human-resources professional in a non-profit, mostly in health and care services, Pesaro-Urbino)

In their view, this situation was linked to unfulfilled demands of economic actors. Professionals often reported complaints of employers about young people who enter the labour market.

A month ago, we had a meeting with entrepreneurs who said that young people are often on their cell phones and arrive late. In fact, there is a confrontation, young people are asking for one thing, so for example work is no longer a priority compared to other things. We must also say that this is against a salary that is no longer enough to do anything. (Male teacher in upper secondary education, Pesaro-Urbino)

In Castelló, the professional interviewees highlighted the persistent effects of previous economic crises and lamented biased strategies of local development.

Castelló is suffering from the effects of the pandemic, the crisis and the war. The tile industry is firing many workers because its business model is not working any longer. (Employment professional, female, Castelló)

Castelló could become an appealing destination for affluent tourists who pay for better, high-quality services. (...) However, the regional government and most municipalities remain unaware of this potential and don't do much to take advantage of it. (Teacher in a VET school, female, Castelló)

Alongside pessimistic economic foresight reflections, in the three localities the professional interviewees were critical of the prevailing institutional arrangements.

However, in Kentriki Makedonia we lack an integrated system to manage human resources in the tourism sector. We cannot articulate the action of all the competent bodies without this framework. (Male tutor of an apprenticeship scheme, District of Thessaloniki)

The Greek Public Employment Service (DYPA) catered to economically disadvantaged groups through subsidised vocational training courses, which attracted significant participation among women with a migration background. Depending on the specific programme, participants could obtain certification of acquired knowledge and skills, rather than a formal diploma leading to a professional qualification.

Many students who are at risk of poverty enter the school because it is free of charge and is also subsidized. The money is little, but they need it and also need the job prospect. (Male tutor of an apprenticeship scheme, District of Thessaloniki)

There is no exclusion policy for that matter. If they belong to minorities or if they are migrants, it is irrelevant really. As long as they speak the Greek language and fulfil the legal requirements, they are welcome. Most beneficiaries are women. (Male member of an employers' association, District of Thessaloniki)

In the district of Thessaloniki, the educators regretted that the territorial distribution of VET specialties was not sensible and that adolescents had to choose among these options without appropriate career counselling.

When many adolescents complete their lower secondary education, they don't know anything about VET specialties, and nobody tells them. Our intake comes from all the towns located in the downlands. Although we are a few kilometres away, however, there is no public transport to come. (Educator, female, district of Thessaloniki)

A major problem is that the range of VET specialties is very narrow in the province. Only a few high schools teach highly demanded specialties in the capital and the nearby towns (Educator, male, District of Thessaloniki). We cannot reach overseas immigrants without a residence permit. We run basic skills programmes since 2000, which were paid by our organisation in the beginning and the ESF+ nowadays. But these immigrants are not allowed to work. (Employment professional, female, District of Thessaloniki)

We can only set up courses that are really demanded. What would the graduates of a training on graffiti painting do here? However, employers prefer VET graduates to our students, who cannot complete a school-based, two-year long VET school programme for several reasons. (Employment professional, female, District of Thessaloniki)

In the opinion of the educators interviewed in Pesaro-Urbino, poor coordination between their programmes, lower and upper secondary education and the local labour market was a big issue. These mismatches occurred at various levels: on the one hand, professionals complained about other actors—

especially, lower secondary teachers and parents—portraying VET as second-class pathways; on the other hand, they often argued against traditional public schools' teachers for not providing the right skills for a smooth transition of young people into the labour market.

The biggest gap is in job coaching. There is a lack of soft skills, young people are not prepared for the world of work, they are not prepared for managing the stress, which in the tourism sector is very high. (Female officer of public employment service, Pesaro-Urbino)

I am very much against the advice that is given at the end of lower secondary school because I think it is limiting. [Vocational school] is usually recommended to young people who don't particularly enjoy studying, who are seen as more practical. (Female training and employment counsellor, Pesaro-Urbino)

Several interviewees regretted that the work ethics of the older generations were lost. Yet, professionals were also aware of the problematic aspects of this perspective and struggled to bridge the gap between young people's expectations and labour market demands.

One thing is being a factory worker. Another is assisting a person. Old-school workers, before saying that they were not going to work because something has happened, would have tried to find a thousand possibilities and maybe they would have come to work anyway, even with fever—and I'm not saying that this is necessarily right. Well, these things are not happening anymore. (Female human-resources professional in a non-profit, mostly in health and care services, Pesaro-Urbino)

On the one hand, it is true that [young people] no longer have those soft skills we used to have (...) On the other hand, I must say that young people are not completely wrong. In the end, they are asking for something that could be right because they are asking for flexibility and maybe to work from 8am to 4pm instead of fragmenting working hours and dedicating your life to work. (Female officer of the public employment service, Pesaro-Urbino)

In Castelló, the respondents described an institutional hierarchy of programmes. In their view, the intake of vocational education schools only included a few youth that were exposed to social vulnerability. The public employment service managed the training programmes that were targeted to employable jobseekers. At the lower tier of the ladder, the service outsourced on nonprofits a set of short-term training programmes that seldom delivered an official diploma to the most disadvantaged youth.

To wrap up, the interviewed professionals shared a conception of learning that focused on the shortcomings of their local context in comparison with a perceived European norm of prosperous and well-organised regions (RQ1). They were pessimistic about the potential of the local economy and missed the involvement of employers in education and training. They also considered that education and employment policies were badly coordinated and were uncertain about the effectiveness of training programmes.

The perspectives of disadvantaged young students

Our interviews recorded that disadvantaged young students struggled with a delicate balance between their perception of local opportunities and their feeling of rootedness (RQ2).

In the district of Thessaloniki, the young interviewees complained about school pedagogies and poor career guidance. They expressed a preference for light VET programmes, often based their decisions on poor information and prioritised finding employment in the short term over pursuing a longer-term educational pathway. Immigrants and ethnic minorities faced the most adverse circumstances.

I don't like theoretical lessons. It was soooo boring for me. (Male interview, dropped out from a VET programme, District of Thessaloniki)

I am now thinking going to IEK [post-secondary vocational training institute], where I also received my hairdressing national diploma to continue studying. I want to be either a beauty expert or nail expert. But again, I am a bit reluctant of going back to study. I don't want a heavy programme now with reading and studying and exams... I need a job more than studies. For my future plans... ermm... I don't know. It is all a matter of making a decision. The more I think about it though the more I tend to lean on going to IEK and study beautician and nail-expert. (Female interviewee, rural area, not in employment, education or training, District of Thessaloniki)

If some of us succeed and escape from the current situation that... happens, study and succeed and find a job, we will be able to straighten up and society may see us in a different light. We are just like everyone else. (Female interviewee, finished compulsory education and left education, Roma minority, beneficiary of NGO, District of Thessaloniki)

In the rural areas of the district, agriculture was the key activity, and therefore inheriting a farm seemed to be the main issue. As a result, young people growing up in these communities often faced limited exposure to alternative career pathways, with their professional future predetermined by family circumstances rather than personal aspirations or market opportunities.

I believe it is small but has a lot of potential. I don't know what all the young people really need in life, but I know many young people who live and work here, in the rice industry, fishing industry as well [mussels culture] and people also have resources here. I see that young people whose parents work in the rice industry have more money than others. Perhaps they also have more opportunities. (Female interviewee, tertiary-level education, self-employed, District of Thessaloniki)

Most of the time it is the family that sets your life course. I also wonder sometimes what I would do if I didn't have the farm. I can't answer this question. Perhaps work as an employee somewhere, part-time maybe... is this better? No, I don't think so. This is why I am still optimistic about the future, or at least I will struggle for a better future here... There is not real support from the education system or similar services. I mean... they do provide you with a lot of information, but this information is useless if you don't own land here and don't know how to make a living out of it. (Male interviewee, graduate from upper secondary VET, self-employed farmer, District of Thessaloniki)

Indeed, expectations of young interviewees in Pesaro-Urbino conveyed a different view than professionals. Their short- and long-term plans were the outcomes of complex mediation between their parents' expectation of social mobility and their own willingness to be independent. In the short term, some accepted jobs but faced difficulties in finding a balance between work and future education paths. In the longer term, they noted that education—and particularly, higher education—might contribute to their personal fulfilment but not so much to their employment.

I'm working in a factory in the afternoon because I don't want to ask my mom or dad for money and tell them

that I need this and that. I want to be independent, but the factory is not a so [good] job, you know; thus, from that point of view, I understand why they want me to go on. [...] Thus, [they tell me to go to university] to have a lighter job, an easier one, a more normal job, different from that in the factory. (Male student of a VET hospitality programme, employed in a factory, Pesaro-Urbino)

Interviewer: Do you think this [job] is affecting your studies? Interviewee: Yes, because it takes a lot of time. I'm working Saturday and Sunday, I work 12 or even 14 hours and do two working nights. You cannot study, it's normal that [your results] are low in school. (Male student of a VET hospitality programme, migration status, Pesaro-Urbino)

The tension inherent to a local labour market offering relatively easy-to-find but highly precarious jobs led them to consider moving. Some young people, despite being seemingly attached to their places, thought of living in either large cities or abroad for some time, where they perceived having more opportunities to build a future matching their expectations in terms of jobs but also personal growth.

I wanted to stay in my hometown. Then, I thought well about it. I said to myself: 'Maybe it's better to go away', even to have more opportunities because here everyone already knows everyone. (Male student of a VET IT programme, Pesaro-Urbino)

Here, I see many shops opening and closing. It's a bit daunting to see all these places that are closing or even see some shops that I have known since I was a child to fail and close. It gives you less hope: what if I'd like to do the same? It's daunting. (...). I'd like to live abroad, to travel across the world. I don't want to remain here, I want to go everywhere because I like to discover, explore, be free and know cultures and countries. I'd like to learn everything about everything. (Female student of a VET hospitality programme, her parents immigrated to Italy, Pesaro-Urbino)

Concretely speaking, maybe in 10 years things will be completely different, but at the moment you cannot have too many ambitions here. You are limited by the place you are living in, since possibilities are inferior compared to a big city like Milan, Rome, Paris or London. (Student of a VET programme, Pesaro-Urbino)

Notwithstanding, many Italian young respondents shared a general sense of optimism about the future and the realisation of their aspirations, which were often expressed in terms of having a 'good job', vaguely defined as one that is decently paid, relatively stable and personally engaging, albeit not necessarily providing self-identification. In this sense, the main issue seemed to be the balance between times of work and leisure, and the possibility to be independent and autonomous persons.

I hope to have a job that allows me to be personally satisfied, that I like and that maybe allows me to travel, to do new experiences, do things that I'd like to do. (Male student of a VET IT programme, Pesaro-Urbino)

Honestly, I tried [to work in a factory] and that's not life, I think. Working 8 hours per day, 5 days a week makes no sense to me, especially in the factory. A heavy job for my whole life... I cannot imagine a life like that (...) I don't know which path to take, I don't even know where to start to understand what I like. I'm still at the beginning, I don't know what to do and I'd like to understand where to start. (Male student of a VET IT programme, his parents immigrated to Italy, Pesaro-Urbino)

First of all, I have to find a job and try to obtain the driving license as soon as possible. It is an issue of freedom in the end, you become more independent. You take the driving license, you find a job... a job in which you are well paid... even in the factory, any job as long as I'm doing something. And that's it, [I want to] take back my life in my hands. (Male student of a VET IT programme, his parents immigrated to Italy, Pesaro-Urbino)

Remarkably, the students of both the school-based VET and the vocational training programmes delivered

by non-profits coincided to consider Castelló was a nice place to live where opportunities were limited but sufficient. Students in cooking and food service courses in a school understood most local restaurants hired unqualified staff with very low wages. However, they insisted on an untapped potential of the local geography, which might generate better paid jobs.

Some restaurants deliver low-quality, cheap food at the expense of the many opportunities of Castelló. The mountains are nice and offer authentic and tasty food. I worked for a local one that tried to do that, but the owner retired and sold it to people who only offer basic meals for a low price. (Female student of a VET hospitality programme, Castelló)

Castelló is the best place for hospitality in Spain because it has mountains and beaches as well as grilled meat and fried fish. (...) I would love to finish my education and find a job here, but I am open to what life provides. (Male student of a VET hospitality programme, Castelló)

If you pursue your purpose with passion and work hard you can do well here (...) You can carry a modest life, as I say, you have a job, come home and get your pay at the end of the month, However, I want to set my own business, because if something is yours, you can be more creative. (Male student of a VET hospitality programme, Castelló)

Some students coped with the dissociation between their aspirations and the local labour market by relying on individual merit. They considered that everybody could find a way of succeeding amid adversity even in economically weak places.

There are few opportunities here because at the end of the day we live in small towns and there are more people, commerce, more of this in big cities. However, since COVID, many programmers are working remotely. Some of my friends who graduated from university are working this way. (Male student of a VET IT programme, Castelló)

There are enough training centres in the Valencian Community. Some people struggle with their education because learning is hard when neither students nor teachers are motivated. (Female student of a VET hospitality programme, Castelló)

The more disadvantaged students enrolled in short-term vocational training portrayed a sombre yet still optimistic account of local opportunities.

Castelló is a small town and a big village that you can walk in one hour. Several non-profits cater for young people living in vulnerability, and the public employment service also helps. It is a city of opportunities with a good labour market and a thriving economy. (Male student of a short-term vocational training programme, Castelló)

Young people are not interested in higher education here. I don't know why, but many university students come from other regions. There are many training programmes: marketing, room cleaning, forklift operator, administrative tasks, waiter and the like. You can take these short-term trainings and get a job afterwards. (Female student of a short-term vocational training programme, Castelló)

To wrap up, in the interviews disadvantaged young people intertwined reflections on learning and social vulnerability and emphasised their attachment to the local community (RQ2). This vivid account of the local education and training system contrasted with educators' more detached perspectives.

Discussion and conclusions: A broken portrait

In the district of Thessaloniki (Kentriki Makedoniiki, Greece), the towns of Pesaro and Urbino (Marche, Italy) and the centre and nearby area of Castelló (Comunitat Valenciana, Spain), the views of professionals on learning outcomes (RQ1) are not aligned with young people's aspirations and their exploration of local contexts (RQ2). Our findings reverberate with the undifferentiated accounts of career guidance as reported by Sultana (2012).

In the three countries, the frontline professionals who are responsible for helping young people improve their academic achievement amid significant social vulnerability draw on their expert knowledge to implement a very similar policy template. They rely on a common understanding of learning within the European Union (RQ1).

These professionals struggle with an official mandate that reproduces several problems of the welfare services state (Bonvin et al., 2018). Their comments on the difficulty to implement career guidance programmes are a telling example. Remarkably, these professionals bear strong pressure to deliver training programmes but cannot draw on policy evaluation reports that appraise the potential of these programmes. They are responsible for students to enrol in the available courses but cannot discuss which actions are more needed in local contexts exposed to risks of economic decline (RQ1).

At the other extreme of the spectrum, the discourse of young people introduces subtle implications of this conversation. For most young interviewees, the burning topics are completely different. Rather than technical adjustments, they want to know about the eventual opportunities in a local context where they feel comfortable. They are not complaining of uneven territorial development or distribution of education and training. Instead, they are primarily focused on coping with their sense of place and their growing perceptions of limited opportunities in the area where they are living. If they feel satisfied with the local labour market, education is not indispensable to find the available low-wage and precarious jobs. When they discuss learning in a more general sense, they must ponder the advantages and disadvantages of moving out of their place (RQ2). This finding underpins the previous conclusions of the literature on young people's sense of place and belonging outside the main European urban centres (Cuzzocrea, 2018).

Therefore, the portrait of learning outcomes in three Southern localities of the European Union is broken because professionals and young learners are immersed in very different logics. The official image of linear social lifts, upskilling programmes and individual investment in education and training does not correspond with the actual outcomes of interaction between frontline professionals and the alleged beneficiaries of the *Skills Agenda* and the ongoing reforms of education and training.

The broken portrait is a significant similarity among the district of Thessaloniki in Greece, Pesaro- Urbino in Italy and Castelló in Spain. In three different Southern European countries, educators and young beneficiaries of basic skills and VET programmes face analogous dilemmas when implementing or enrolling in educational programmes. The frontline professionals must adapt the general guideline of improving learning outcomes and encouraging the beneficiaries to undertake an upskilling pathway to a limited set of programmes and employment opportunities. When young people enrol in these programmes, they face a similar predicament between the expectation to improve their employability and the need to make sense of their roots in the place where they grew up.

We found out this disconnect of perspectives in a small sample of research sites that constitute extreme cases. In these Southern European research sites education and youth policies are sub-protective (Walther, 2017), and young people face economic hardship. These findings will remain exploratory until analogous studies are conducted in different types of local contexts across Europe. However, at this point they suggest three tentative implications for policymakers and practitioners in these areas.

First, the endeavour that regions converge across the European Union cannot only depend on common policies but must acknowledge that cities, towns and regions are extremely diverse. Declining industrial districts have weakened the local economies of Castelló and Pesaro-Urbino, while the severe fiscal pressures derived from the euro crisis damaged social conditions in the district of Thessaloniki. Recent research has convincingly shown that these regions can recover from different types of development traps if authorities and local business promote economic activities that are complementary to the economic activities that are already carried out in each local context (Tessarini et al., 2026). Therefore, if regional cohesion is a priority, policymakers must design multidimensional approaches that recognise the perspectives of the local actors regarding investment, employment, innovation, and last but not least, education and training. VET provision must be coordinated with other services on these grounds.

Second, adult and lifelong learning initiatives have no point unless policymakers and teachers are fully aware of the perspectives, aspirations and life plans of students and learners. This observation is still valid for flexible forms of delivery that emphasise the role of learners more than the role of students (Biesta, 2006). In the areas of our study, VET teachers, public employment officers and any other educators cannot only rely on allocating young people to training programmes but are in urgent need to elaborate guidance strategies that are sensitive to the local context, not least by considering young people's aspirations and concrete opportunities.

Finally, the sound strand of psychological research on learning outcomes and the emerging policy studies on the inclusion of this concept in the official agenda are complementary areas of investigation. If

policymakers are updated on both the potential of instructional designs and the inevitable nuances of enacting official guidelines, they can draw on a broader corpus of knowledge that suggests a wide array of well-grounded recommendations.

Acknowledgements

This study as conducted within the frame of the Construction Learning Outcomes in Europe (CLEAR) Horizon Europe project. It has received Grant Agreement No. 101061155. Further information is available on the project website: <https://clear-horizon.eu/>

References

- Alexander, R. (2019). Social justice and geographical location in career guidance. In R. Hooley, T. Sultana, & R. Thomsen (Eds.), *Career guidance for social justice: Contesting neoliberalism* (pp. 77–92). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315110516-5>
- Anderson, L. W., Krathwohl, D. R., Airasian, P. W., Cruikshank, K. A., Mayer, R. E., Pintrich, P. R., Rath, J., & Wittrock, M. C. (2001). *A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: A revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives*. Longman.
- Antonsich, M. (2010). Searching for belonging: An analytical framework. *Geography Compass*, 4(6), 644–659. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2009.00317.x>
- Bæck, U.-D. K. (2019). Spatial manoeuvring in education: Educational experiences and local opportunity structures among rural youth in Norway. *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 3(3), 61–74. <https://doi.org/10.7577/njcie.3274>
- 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(3-4), 169–180. <https://doi.org/10.2304/EERJ.2006.5.3.169>
- Benasso, S., Buillet, D., Neves, T., & Parreira do Amaral, M. (2022). Introduction: Exploring landscapes of lifelong learning policies across Europe. In S. Benasso, D. Buillet, T. Neves, & M. Parreira do Amaral (Eds.), *Landscapes of lifelong learning policies across Europe* (pp. 1–16). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-96454-2_1
- Bonvin, J.-M., Otto, H.-U., Wohlfarth, A., & Ziegler, H. (2018). Introduction. Ambivalences of the Rising Welfare Service State – Hopes and Hazard of Modern Welfare Architectures. *Social Work & Society*, 16(2). <https://ejournals.bib.uni-wuppertal.de/sws/article/view/1203/2237>
- Cuervo, H., & Wyn, J. (2017). A longitudinal analysis of belonging: Temporal, performative and relational practices by young people in rural Australia. *Young*, 25(3), 219–234. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1103308816669463>
- Cuzzocrea, V. (2018). 'Rooted mobilities' in young people's narratives of the future: A peripheral case. *Current Sociology*, 66(7), 1106–1123. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392118776357>
- European Commission. (2017). *European Pillar of Social Rights*. European Parliament, Council of the European Union, European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/publications/european-pillar-social-rights-booklet_en
- European Commission. (2020). *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on achieving the European*

- Education Area by 2025* (COM(2020) 625 final). European Union. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0625>
- European Commission. (2021). *European skills agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience*. European Commission. https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/skills-and-qualifications/european-skills-agenda_en
- Eurostat. (2026a). *Human resources in science and technology (HRST) by NUTS 2 region (tgs00038)*. European Commission. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tgs00038/default/table>
- Eurostat. (2026b). *Persons aged 25–64 with tertiary educational attainment level by sex and NUTS 2 region (tgs00109)*. European Commission. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tgs00109/default/table>
- Eurostat. (2026c). *Employment rate (persons aged 15–64) by NUTS 2 region (tgs00007)*. European Commission. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tgs00007/default/table>
- Farrugia, D. (2020). Class, place and mobility beyond the global city: Stigmatisation and the cosmopolitanisation of the local. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 23(2), 237–251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2019.1596236>
- Kelstrup, J. D. (2024). Understanding the role of practical knowledge in evidence-based welfare reform: A three-stage model. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 11, Article 1438. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03937-y>
- Kettunen, M. (2023). Negotiating multiple spatialities: Geographies of youth educational subjectivity. *Young*, 31(3), 215–232. <https://doi.org/10.1177/11033088231151354>
- Møller, A. M., Pedersen, K. Z., & Pors, A. S. (2022). The bureaucratic ethos in street-level work: Revitalizing Weber's ethics of office. *Perspectives on Public Management and Governance*, 5(2), 151–163. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ppmgov/gvac001>
- Roberts, K. (2022). Integrating young people into the workforce: England's twenty-first century solutions. *Societies*, 12(2). <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc12020038>
- Ryökkynen, S., Raudasoja, A., Heino, S., Maetoloa, K., & Pynnönen, P. (2022). Administration staff's descriptions of inclusion in Finnish vocational education and training. *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 6(3–4), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.7577/njcie.4818>
- Skeggs, B., & Loveday, V. (2012). Struggles for value: Value practices, injustice, judgment, affect and the idea of class. *British Journal of Sociology*, 63(3), 472–490. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2012.01420.x>
- Sultana, R. G. (2012). Learning career management skills in Europe: A critical review. *Journal of Education and Work*, 25(2), 225–248. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2010.547846>
- Tessarín, M. S., Boschma, R., Li, D., & Petralia, S. (2026). *Regional development traps in Europe: A study of occupational trajectories of regions*. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 19(1), 49–67. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsaf040>
- Valiente, O., Capsada-Munsech, Q., & de Otero, J. P. (2020). Educationalisation of youth unemployment through lifelong learning policies in Europe. *European Educational Research Journal*, 19(6), 525–543. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904120908751>
- Walther, A. (2017). Support across life course regimes: A comparative model of social work as construction of social problems, needs, and rights. *Journal of Social Work*, 17(3), 277–301. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017316640195>