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Editorial

Constructing and Comparing Learning Outcomes in Europe: Factors, actors and spaces

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Editorial

The *Nordic Journal for Comparative and International Education* (NJCIE) seeks to analyse how local understandings can bring to light the trends, effects, and influences that exist in different contexts. Indeed, over the last decades, international and comparative education has been concerned with the outcomes and effects of international large-scale assessments (ILSAs), most prominently the *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA), that dominate the policy and scholarly discourse (Gorur, 2016; Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2018) and sideline the role of and interactions among multiple contextual factors, actors, and spaces that at local and regional levels significantly shape the outcomes of learning and education.

Discussions of the outcomes of education and learning are recurrent in education research and comparative studies. Already the first results of ILSAs have re-framed how education functions and should function to bring benefit to the society. Countries that scored high in the assessed subjects, especially Nordic countries, have gradually become role models and *reference societies* (Waldow, 2017), inspiring

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educational reforms that aimed at growing educational monitoring alongside improved cooperation between education research and education policy (Klieme et al., 2010; Krejsler & Moos, 2023). However, more critical voices on the actual impact of ILSAs on education quality (Enchikova et al., 2024; Rowley et al., 2019) have stressed that the obsessive measurement of learning outcomes has facilitated a limited understanding of education that is narrowed down to quantifiable indicators (Mølstad & Pettersson, 2019; Grek, 2024) incapable of accounting for the multifarious contextual elements involved in their construction.

Against this background, the *Special Issue* draws attention to the very process of *constructing learning outcomes* (LOs) that results from the interplay of multiple actors, factors, and spaces: *How do local/regional contexts and opportunity structures shape educational pathways? To what extent do various educational stakeholder groups connect to support learning processes? What is the role of spaces in ensuring just and accessible education?* The addressed issues are particularly interesting from an international and comparative perspective as they shed light on the role of local and regional contexts in the provision of educational opportunities and highlight their intertwining horizontal and vertical relations with global discourses, national frameworks, and individual life courses.

The empirical research on the construction of LOs was sparked by a European-funded research project, Constructing learning outcomes in Europe - A multi-level analysis of (under-)achievement in the life course (CLEAR). The project was conducted over three years (2022-2025) in eight EU member countries – Austria, Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain. The project was designed as a mixed-method, multi-level analysis with transversal participatory elements and aimed at examining the combination of multiple factors that affect education quality. We briefly present the key takeaways from the project that frame the debate on the construction of LOs in Europe and inform the debates in this *Special Issue*.

First, the findings evidence that the mainstream understanding of LOs requires a systematic and conceptual re-assessment. As scholars have pointed out, the LOs approach has not only reduced education to learning—leading to a true *learnification* of education (Biesta, 2009), it has not only narrowed learning down to what is visible and actively performed (Hattie, 2009), but it has completely detached education from the lived realities of people. This so-called *metrological realism* (Grek, 2024) turns education into data that represent universal values, it tackles complex educational problems by mono-disciplinarity, and it restricts expertise to performance management to ensure an evidence-based, data-driven decision-making. In this context, LOs "changed from individuals' personalities and personal skills, to a measurement of the fulfilment of tomorrow's curriculum, which becomes a 'myth' of tomorrow's possibilities." (Pettersson & Popkewitz, 2019, p. 32) This, we claim, threatens the just provision of education and risks prolonging unequal relations. As Susan Robertson has pointed out, ILSAs "mobilise a range of anticipatory strategies and devices—from indicators to scenarios, foresight and anticipation as a discipline, as well as compete

with each other regarding hegemonic education futures" (Robertson, 2022, p. 201), thereby instrumentalising and exploiting human capital. As a result, anticipating learners in multi-disadvantaged positions in the future calculations and scenarios reinforces their double role as scapegoats for educational underperformance and as a target group for policymaking and research.

Second, the research on the construction of LOs demonstrates that local stakeholders and professionals can play a far greater role in facilitating learning experiences. The latter are too often distorted by the discursive and political imaginaries that turn learners into clients, democratic accountability into technical-managerial accountability, and professional knowledge into evidence-based solutions. In that regard, scholars call to “challenge, interrupt and resist the redefinition of the professions” (Biesta, 2020, p. 111) at the local and regional levels and empower those in direct contact with young people and their learning and living environments. In this sense, participation is key to the transfer of ideas and practices as it urges to recognise and reflect upon one’s own positionality and role in developing sustainable educational and living spaces. The construction of LOs, we argue, has to be re-framed to address less top-down models of policy incentives and requirements and more sustainable, grassroots-driven, and pluriversal understandings of educational transformation (Hill et al., 2025; Silova et al., 2025). The pluriverse of local landscapes and voices, particularly those of young people, policy practitioners, and professionals in education and training, remains still underrated in the design and provision of context-sensitive policy measures.

Third, the recurrent inability of policy actions premised on measuring and statistically enhancing levels of LOs raises concerns not only about the inefficiency in the use of resources, but also in failing to provide for the social inclusion of a significant portion of European youths, often reinforcing essentialising claims about their presumed vulnerable status (Parreira do Amaral & Zelinka, 2021). We argue that de-essentialising vulnerability and other social or spatial representations of young people (e.g., villagers, hinterlanders, street children, youth at risk, wicked youth etc.) can reduce stigmatisation and ill-informed policymaking: “Especially in our time of renewed ethnic conflicts and wars, which always produce vast trauma, impairment, and forced migration, the gaps between ideals, rhetoric, and lived realities extend, often to the breaking point.” (Powell, 2024, p. 7) Thus, learning and living spaces conflate at multiple intersections, with the potential for educational research and policymaking to go beyond instructive pedagogies (Morais et al., 2001) and examine how the spatiality of educational pathways, decisions, and programmes can be re-imagined to better fit the challenges and opportunities resulting from the interplay of space and education (Freytag et al., 2022).

The *Special Issue* has invited contributions that analyse the conceptual understandings and uses of LOs, offer quantitative and qualitative studies on the spatial dimension of education and LOs, share findings of cross-regional and cross-national analyses of local/regional opportunity structures impacting LOs, discuss

individual-level analyses focusing groups most affected by (under-)achievement, and address the relationality of spaces and LOs. In total, the *Special Issue* includes seven papers covering a range of 14 countries, including all Nordic countries. Two papers focus on how young people navigate their life courses amid different spatial and temporal frameworks but also institutional expectations on their life skills and competencies (see Löffler et al., 2026; Tikkanen et al., 2026). Two other papers deal with diverse spatial and policy contexts, within which policymaking, practice, and young people's trajectories intertwine in the construction of LOs (see Rambla et al., forthcoming; Zelinka et al., 2026). Another two papers delve into various assessment models, their compositions and impact on learners and on the quality of LOs (see Assylbekova et al., 2026; Ouakrim-Soivio et al., 2026). Finally, one paper maps the research landscape on LOs using Structural Topic Modelling in order to assess the variations in the understanding and application of the concept (see Neves et al., 2026).

The contributions to this *Special Issue* systematically analyse the construction of LOs and account for the situated knowledge and untransferable educational expertise that "has to be constantly seized and debated." (Pettersson & Popkewitz, 2019, p. 33). In particular, the contributions elaborate on the entanglement of spaces and education in the construction of LOs that are otherwise rendered invisible through quantified and individualised measurements. The analyses of international assessments, in turn, call attention to the lived realities of young people, their embeddedness in local and regional spaces and policy frameworks, as well as to the mismatches and unintentional effects of relying on statistical evidence alone. The contributions to this *Special Issues* invite to critically reflect on and re-examine the sedimented, self-evident assumptions about learning and education from an international and comparative perspective.

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