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Rethinking Educational Achievement, Expanding Learning Outcomes

Tiago Neves, Gil Nata, Jozef Zelinka and Natália Alves

Introduction

In this chapter, we depart from the observation that, in the scholarly literature and in policymaking, educational achievement is often equated with academic achievement. Such an equation results in the wider arena of educational matters being narrowed to what is academically relevant. Instead, we suggest, rethinking educational achievement requires going beyond this taken-for-granted conflation of these two dimensions of educational and academic achievement. We argue that widening the ways in which educational achievement is conceptualized helps to uncover the existing mismatches, tensions and barriers which emerge both as institutional ineffectiveness and individual frustration, as well as invite new sources of inspiration regarding educational achievement.

Informed by the analyses and research findings of the CLEAR research project¹ presented in this volume, the chapter unfolds in three steps. First, we scrutinize the rationale behind the narrow scope of educational achievement; looking particularly at the processes through which it is implemented and the functions it serves. Second, we suggest expanding the currently dominant understanding of educational achievement by encompassing methodological reflections that denaturalize the process through which figures become facts; thereby opening the door to rethinking the measurement of educational outcomes. Third, we reflect on the procedural, functional and political implications of the proposed suggestions.

Tensions and paradoxes in thinking about educational achievement

We start with a brief etymological exploration of terms related to education to problematize their relation and usage in research and policymaking. An etymological exercise provides insights into the historical and cultural contexts which have shaped the core educational concepts. It helps to clarify the meanings of these concepts and avoid misinterpretations, as often occurs with the concepts of educational achievement and academic achievement. We focus on the terms ‘educational’, ‘academic’, ‘learning’ and ‘learning outcomes’.

The term ‘educational’ finds its roots in the Latin word *educare*, which means ‘to lead out’ or ‘to rear’. It evolved through Old French and Middle English influenced by words like *éduquer*, emphasizing systematic training and development (Oxford English Dictionary, 2025). The Latin form reflects the idea of guiding and shaping individuals emphasizing the transformative nature of the educational process.

In its turn, the term ‘academic’ has a more diverse linguistic journey. It originates from the Greek word *akadēmeia*, referring to the groves near Athens where Plato taught. Adopted into Latin as *academia*, it referred to a place of study and intellectual pursuit (Harper, 2020). In Middle English, *academy* evolved to represent an institution of higher learning, giving rise to the adjective ‘academic’ (Oxford English Dictionary, 2025). The historical association with Plato’s teachings underscores the pursuit of knowledge and intellectual excellence.

When we look at the term ‘learning’, we find that it has Old English and Germanic origins, with the Old English word *leornian* and the Old High German word *lernōn*, both meaning to gain or acquire knowledge of or skill in (something) as a result of study, experience or being taught (Oxford English Dictionary, 2025). These roots highlight the active and dynamic nature of the process of learning as an ongoing engagement with attaining new knowledge and skills.

The concept of learning outcomes is a more contemporary addition to educational terminology. While the individual words ‘learning’ and ‘outcomes’ have ancient roots, the specific phrase gained prominence in the context of educational assessment and measurement in the late twentieth century. The term ‘outcome’ has Latin origins, from *ex* (out) and *venire* (to come), emphasizing results or consequences (Oxford English Dictionary, 2025). In the educational

context, learning outcomes refer most often to the measurable results or achievements which indicate a learner has achieved what they are expected to know or be able to do after completing a learning experience (see also Chapters 2 and 4 in this volume).

As can be seen from this short etymological exercise, the term 'educational' has a much broader meaning than the term 'academic'. Indeed, the educational realm encompasses both academic and non-academic structures – from schools to community centres and even the streets – and academic and non-academic processes – from lectures to informal learning. Yet, scoping the literature makes it readily apparent that the expressions 'educational achievement' and 'academic achievement' are used with a very high degree of overlap (see, e.g. DiPrete & Jennings, 2012; Kao & Thompson, 2003; Karlen et al., 2019; Marsh, 1990; OECD, 2019, 2022; Sikora, Evans & Kelley, 2019). This indicates that, when considering achievement – and its correlates such as attainment, accomplishment and performance – the wider arena of educational matters is narrowed to what is considered academically relevant: regarding achievement, what counts as educational is what is academic. This contraction of the conceptual scope of the phenomenon has been accompanied by an almost exclusive focus of the official education agencies on the standard indicators of academic performance, such as grades, retention rates, and a set of other quantitative measurements (OECD, 2019, 2022; UNESCO, 2008). Reducing the conceptual scope goes hand in hand with a shrinkage of the methodologies available to deal with the phenomenon. This combination of conceptual and methodological reduction has been put to use within the framework of a distinctive political operationalization rendering performance in school and school-related events such as national exams, a widely used yardstick with which to assess educational achievement. Admittedly, these metrics sometimes consider contextual factors like equity in access and socio-economic resilience. However, despite their explanatory power, they are treated as supplementary rather than fundamentally integral. As already discussed throughout this volume in, for instance, Chapters 7 and 9, this narrow, quantitative-based view of learning outcomes needs to be problematized and reframed, namely by exploring 'the processual character of their construction, which is necessarily situated and shaped by the relationships among the various actors in the field of education' (Benasso et al., Chapter 7 in this volume). Similarly, Quadrelli and colleagues (Chapter 9 in this volume) propose methodological reflections and alternative practices which are grounded in emergent theoretical

perspectives, such as intersectionality and spatial justice, as well as in increasing attention to how young people exercise agency in their life courses.

Currently, the quantifiable understanding of learning outcomes has become, for all practical purposes, a proxy for educational achievement. On the institutional level, two factors contribute decisively to this setting. On the one hand, school is a 'people-processing organization' (Luhmann, 1978, p. 248), meaning that it is not only a site where teaching and learning take place but, fundamentally, one in which people are classified and labelled in such a way that other, external organizations can handle or respond to them in predefined ways. On the other hand, schools currently operate in a so-called 'metric society', one in which 'data and indicator-based methods of evaluation and monitoring [...] are encouraging a wholesale quantification of the social sphere' (Mau, 2019, p. 2). This has brought three consequences: '(1) numbers invade and colonise the lifeworld and become the means through which we ascribe value and social status; (2) the quantitative recording and measurement of social phenomena prompts a (near) universalisation of competition, as winners and losers can more easily be identified; and (3) qualitative differences are now coded, whenever possible, as quantitative differences, to facilitate comparability and assessment' (Neves, 2019, p. 311). Based on this scenario, we argue that debates on the nature and meaning of educational concepts and processes cannot neglect the social function of education in a given space-time. Yet, many analyses of learning outcomes appear to do this very thing, placing them in paradoxical, or at least fraught, positions. Indeed, there is often a loud and clear critique of the use of learning outcomes as quantitative assessment indicators of what has been learned. Such critical discourses, however, tend to focus their efforts on formulating policies and practices that should inform the elaboration of learning outcomes. They could, instead, focus on engaging strongly and innovatively with the issue of assessment since it is such a central feature of both learning processes and educational systems. The *OECD Learning Compass 2030* and the *CALOHEE – Measuring and Comparing Achievements of Learning Outcomes in Higher Education in Europe* exemplify this. Unfortunately, rather than tackling the problems of assessment head on, critical discourses typically take a parallel line and leave those problems untouched and, consequently, unresolved. That is, by focusing on the input side of the learning outcomes rather than on their output side, critical discourse seldom helps to redefine the ways in which learning outcomes are measured: it contributes little to solving the very problem it pointed out at first. While the aspiration for more social justice is

commendable and necessary, it is reasonable to assume that social change will, more readily, result from reconfiguring existing practices than from substituting one model of education or, indeed, one model of society for another.

Certainly, this type of critical approach can assist in identifying relevant variables or dimensions to include in the formulation of learning outcomes. As indicated elsewhere in this volume, it is essential to revisit what is understood by educational achievement or learning outcomes. This can be achieved by bringing into the discussion new methods of evaluation and new actors, such as young people, especially those in multi-disadvantaged positions. There is, however, a range of questions that need to be considered to address this topic more pointedly:

- Is there any guarantee that these 'new' actors will not reproduce the dominant points of view; thus, reinforcing instead of outbalancing a metric society?
- Does the knowledge of these new actors automatically translate into competencies or expertise needed for an adequate response to the specific task of rethinking learning outcomes? If not, what can be done to overcome the situation?
- To what extent are the new proposals for learning outcomes such as *OECD's Learning Compass 2030* truly beneficial, both in the short and long run, for those facing multiple disadvantages? Can the new variables or dimensions – no longer just knowledge nor even skills, attitudes and values but, now, also transformative competencies and the cycle of anticipation, action and reflection (as stated in *OECD Learning Compass 2030*) – brought about by such proposals be adequately assessed via the current standard instruments (e.g. tests, comparisons) or via alternative instruments (e.g. interviews, portfolios, CVs)?
- What are the implications of assenting to the possibility (or desirability) that 'universal' goals regarding learning outcomes should be abandoned (even conceptually)? Are (or should) learning outcomes meant to be 'local' and not 'global'? If so, how can greater equity be achieved and maintained?

Very importantly, it is yet unclear whether assessing – and ultimately implementing – those 'new' input variables or dimensions would ultimately generate more or less social and educational inequality than the use of the 'old' metric instruments. Indeed, the process of translating comprehensive and inclusive input variables aimed at enhancing the formulation of learning outcomes into output variables

which are to be somehow assessed may drastically change their nature and consequences. In other words: what was intended to promote equity and inclusion may reinforce inequity and exclusion. A recent example illustrates this.

In 2020, the Portuguese National Council for Education (CNE) – an independent consultancy body for the government and the parliament with regard to education policy issues – put forth a recommendation on access to higher education. This recommendation aimed to fulfil the worthy objectives of promoting success in higher education, social justice and educational and social inclusion. It drew strongly on an official document, titled ‘*Students’ profile by the end of compulsory schooling*’, which sets itself as ‘a reference document for the organisation of the entire education system, contributing to the confluence and alignment of the decisions within the various dimensions of curriculum development’ (ME/DGE, 2017, p. 7). Its ambitious goal is ‘to contribute to the organisation and management of curricula and also to the definition of strategies, methodologies and pedagogical-didactic procedures to be used in teaching practice’ (ME/DGE, 2017, p. 7). While emanating from the Portuguese government, this document takes a broad, comprehensive approach to the definition of competencies which aligns with the OECD’s learning framework as presented in ‘*The future of education and skills 2030*’ (OECD, 2018). Given the tight articulation between the elaboration of student profiles and learning outcomes (Sousa-Pereira & Leite, 2019), this is, then, a structuring document for understanding how both are currently defined.

In a nutshell, the CNE’s recommendation suggested ‘reducing the weight of national exams in the candidate selection and ranking process’ (p. 5), stating that ‘there are various elements that can be considered in candidate selection processes, such as portfolios, interviews, tests with juries, CV assessment, motivation letters, opinions from previous teachers, etc.’ (p. 4). In the recommendation, CNE argues that national exams can only partially assess the wide set of competencies that students are supposed to have acquired by the end of secondary education. This is said to be because national exams focus mostly on assessing knowledge but neglect the assessment of skills and attitudes. The latter are the other two dimensions of a tripartite understanding of competencies which informs both the Portuguese and the OECD frameworks mentioned above. Indeed, the ‘Students’ profile’ document sees competence areas as being ‘cognitive and metacognitive, social and emotional, physical and practical. It should be highlighted that competencies involve knowledge (factual, conceptual, procedural and metacognitive), cognitive and psychomotor skills,

attitudes associated with social and organisational skills, and ethical values' (ME/DGE, 2017, p. 8).

Approached from the input side and given its breadth, this definition of competencies sounds appealing and reminiscent of an integral approach to education. However, its translation into assessable outputs poses serious difficulties which may perversely distort the initial, well-meant intentions into inequity enhancers. When CNE's recommendation was issued, Nata and Neves (2020) wrote an open letter pointing out its weaknesses which was published in a major Portuguese newspaper. In the open letter, Nata and Neves argued that it is hard to see how portfolios, interviews and other access methods would promote social justice. The fundamental problem here is a recurring one: subjective assessment methods, which emphasize features such as social skills and ethical values, can be exploited by those from affluent backgrounds to gain an advantage over others. It is not difficult to foresee, for instance, the development of markets dedicated to developing portfolios and writing motivation letters alongside the already existing private tutoring business. The problem of a differential – and unequal – appropriation of the assessment processes by those who are well-off, to the detriment of those who are not, is at risk of reinforcement as this more holistic model's struggles to provide comparability of results. Indeed, by definition, national exams and standardized tests are identical for all those who undertake them and can be subject to double-blind assessment. In contrast, devices such as interviews, portfolios, motivation letters or CVs are more difficult, if not impossible, to put under double-blind assessment. Additionally, they have a contextual relevance which is greatly impacted by values, attitudes and behaviours. That is, their meaning varies according both to evaluators and those who are evaluated, according to their habitus and their social expectations. Furthermore, they can vary according to the conditions under which they are collected and evaluated. As such, inter-coder reliability tends to be lower, which hinders objectivity and comparability of results (Woo et al., 2023). On these bases, 'subjective assessment' clearly opens up avenues for bias and the systematic favouring of specific social groups (for similar studies, see Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015).

Critical realist sociology of education has long shown that school has developed as a site which favours students from the middle and upper classes who correspond better to the stereotypes of what is expected of a 'good student'. This underlines the adjustment problems experienced by the socially excluded groups and reinforces social and educational inequalities (e.g. Bernstein,

1996; Bourdieu, 2010; Willis, 1977). These sociological approaches, which are currently part and parcel of a widely shared understanding of the schooling processes, argue that such reinforcement of inequalities affects all aspects of school life, even if not in equal measure, including academic performance in subjects less associated with social issues, like math, physics and chemistry. At the same time, as shown elsewhere in this volume, the whole discourse on competencies and related pedagogical practices tends to advocate holistic approaches to assessment, focusing not only on knowledge but also on skills and, importantly, on attitudes. Thus, there may be a deeper, more structural contradiction at work here: if the school is a site with a capacity for reproducing and reinforcing social inequalities, and if such capacity impacts those features which might be presumed more distanced from society's dominant values (e.g. academic performance in mathematics or physics), it is conceivable that society's dominant values will have even more impact on features which are closely related to their transmission, such as attitudes and ethical values promoted in and by a school. Thus, it seems plausible to argue that attitudes, and even skills, are more prone to being affected by society's dominant values than knowledge assessed, for instance, by academic performance in mathematics. If this is the case, then broadening the assessment to include attitudes runs a high risk of increasing rather than decreasing social inequality. In the same line of argument, we deem it expectable that the impact of the school's structural propensity (or at least strong potential) to reproduce and reinforce social inequalities is stronger on subjects like citizenship education or personal and social development than on physics or chemistry. This is in accord with Michael Young's approach to 'powerful knowledge'. Indeed, such knowledge is specialized, meaning that it is different from the 'common sense knowledge that people draw on in their daily lives' and 'is not acquired or produced informally as part of people's every day lives' (Young & Muller, 2014, p. 231). Needless to say, it is reasonable to assume that civic matters are meant to be, at least in democratic societies, generalized and, thus, something very different from specialized, powerful knowledge. The other side of this is that it is precisely the common sense people in the middle and upper classes acquire and draw on in their daily lives which constitutes the core of their values and attitudes, and signifies an ethos often shared with that of the school. It is far from straightforward, then, that the more 'attitudinal' areas of civic education and moral development should be regarded as islands or oases of opposition to the dominant values, when those are precisely the more value-laden areas of school life. It may even be that 'competency-based training locks the working class out of powerful knowledge' as the title of Leesa Wheelahan's

(2007) contribution suggests. Acknowledging these paradoxes is the first step towards considering adequate ways of overcoming them. That is, to resolving the current disjuncture between learning outcomes as inputs and outputs in which not only is a vast proportion of the inputs left out of the assessment stage but also where the assessment of at least some of the more competence- and attitude-based outcomes may reinforce, rather than curb, inequalities.

Moving forward

Addressing the above-mentioned paradoxes requires considering the social functions of education and of the education system, in particular. This demands a firm understanding of what our societies are, not just what they should or might be. Education's utmost goal, we believe, is to enable change in the world and to create better living and working conditions for all. That said, endeavours aimed at producing change need to realize their starting point. Otherwise, they may be proposing strategies which, due to a lack of fit with reality, may end up generating unintentional, sometimes even counterproductive, consequences.

Western societies are not only metric (Mau, 2019) but also capitalist, oriented to production and accumulation of wealth. Even against today's urgent and, most often, irreparable climate change, modern capitalist societies show little signs of engaging in degrowth: many countries still pursue capitalism as the means to increase wealth and welfare. Within the set of complex relationships which accompany this trajectory, education is but a piece, albeit a significant one. Education is, indeed, a 'people-processing organization' (Luhmann, 1978, p. 248). Today, one of its purposes is to rank not only individuals but also schools, regions and countries. Irrespective of which variables or dimensions are included on the input side in the formulation of learning outcomes, we need to methodologically reflect on the way we operationalize them as measurement and assessment tools. In a capitalist, production-oriented system, rankings are pivotal and based on assessments of 'marketable' results rather than processes. Quantitative assessments are able to do this much more efficiently, though not necessarily more effectively, than qualitative ones. Qualitative assessments inevitably require far more time-consuming and subjective interpretations which could generate rankings which are more contested and, possibly, contestable. Furthermore, the evolution of results would be harder to track given a requirement for consistency in the interpretation of assessments over time. On the other hand, in quantitative assessments, figures become facts. This does not

mean, of course, that figures are actually facts. What it does mean is, most of the time and for all practical purposes, statistical data are considered a reliable source of information which can be, and are, used as evidence in research and policymaking.

The latter indicates it is of paramount importance, then, to assess the psychometric qualities of the measurements which generate data – or the figures that become facts. Whether we evaluate knowledge, competencies or attitudes, it is crucial to consider what component of learning is indeed measured when engaging in evaluation processes. In a sense, assessing the psychometric qualities of measurement instruments is the quantitative equivalent to the qualitative analysis of the social construction of a given phenomenon. Both denaturalize the observed object, making visible the efforts put into its construction and showing that its current form is neither absolute nor perennial. By showing this, not only do figures and data un-become facts but new, better modes of measurement may emerge. Within the context of metric, capitalist societies, this appears to be the first, necessary step to take: it can produce change from within and the direction of the change can be clearly stated and reviewed.

It is certainly true, however, that learning outcomes are not simply managerial devices, even in metric, capitalist societies. It would be reductionist to state that the only thing which matters about learning outcomes is their output side, which translates into measurements and rankings. This chapter has already made clear that the current status quo is investing significant efforts in redefining learning outcomes on the input side (as highlighted regarding transnational agencies such as UNESCO and the OECD). It now raises the question of whether everything which is part of education processes can, or even should, be subject to assessment and what the consequences of this would be.

We have already highlighted the problem that the assessment of attitudes and values, at least in some of its current forms, may entail; namely, the increase, rather than decrease, of inequalities between people from different socio-economic backgrounds. One way of tackling this problem is via the aforementioned psychometric approach. However, the problem may have to be faced on a deeper level: should attitudes and values be assessed at all? If so, should their assessment serve the same purpose – that is, the same social function – as the assessment of knowledge? Given our observations of the impact of society's dominant values on attitudes and skills, we see it as somewhat paradoxical that the need for their assessment is being put forward while its social functions ultimately remain the same as the assessment of knowledge; that is, ranking students and allocating them to academic and professional opportunities. Against this background,

the CLEAR research project is one of many possible attempts to approach and frame the delicate balance between redefining learning outcomes and acknowledging the wide range of educational processes and forces. While the tension between academic and educational achievement cannot be ultimately resolved here and now, the contributions in this volume have sought to identify the mismatches and possible entry points for further debates and investigations. We will restate and further problematize some of the arguments made.

In Chapter 2, Zelinka and colleagues argue that the translation of learning outcomes into purely quantitative indicators leaves aside multiple aspects which remain invisible to statistical measurement yet which exercise great impact on the ability of learners to reach certain levels of educational attainment. Dimensions such as intersectional (e.g. ethnic, gender or class-based) disadvantages or the impact of spaces and spatiality, such as the locations of educational facilities, contribute to the widening of educational disparities among countries and regions. While this is undoubtedly true, two things are also clear: (1) those missing dimensions are not learning outcomes per se, as learning outcomes are the 'observable products of the activities of the educators', that is, 'the products of the learning process within the pupil' (Hussey & Smith, 2002, p. 223); and (2) an assessment result or score cannot account for the processes leading to it unless it is based on weighted attributes of chosen elements. For example, it would be necessary to know what variance in academic results is explained by gender or what variance is explained by territorial location. Thus, one can ask whether the argument developed by Zelinka and colleagues is, ultimately, departing from the realm of assessment and heading into the realm of quotas by considering the need to account for diversity. Or is it, perhaps, staying within the realm of assessment and promoting the way in which the CLEAR project challenges more traditional conceptualizations of learning outcomes which are focused mostly on a quantitative grasp of their quality? If so, it may be suggesting the inscription of the socially constructed nature of learning outcomes in the very figures (quantitative data) that are used to display them: that is, the number describing any given learning outcome would be a weighted compound of the actual result and the conditions which impact the ability of learners to reach certain levels of educational attainment.

In their turn, in Chapter 6, Zarifis and colleagues highlight 'diversity as an important variable in the building of educational outcomes. ... [This is part of] a working strategy to improve the learning outcomes of young adults, especially those in vocational training and non-working and non-learning youth (the NEETs group)' who are, broadly speaking, those in underrepresented and

underprivileged groups. This strikes at the core of the question, raised above, of whether attitudes and values should be assessed at all. Note that the authors refer explicitly to considering diversity to improve the building of learning outcomes. Does such an approach risk generating first- and second-rate criteria? In the current status quo, this is most definitely a possibility, as can sometimes be seen in early tracking systems and in the different values attributed to academic and vocational training. Again, trying to avoid this would require careful consideration of the psychometric properties of the instruments used for evaluation. This need for more accurate metrics is also implied by Zarifis and colleagues when they suggest that ‘Generating learning outcomes needs, therefore, to entail more than merely conveying and evaluating assignments: the process should also consider the possible accomplishments of the array of students within any particular academic environment. [...] It is imperative to contemplate the essential knowledge students need to acquire and the most effective methods for them to learn’. This requires both prescribing what is possible and measuring with enough accuracy to rank learning methods in terms of their effectiveness.

Conclusion

Many of the limitations of the current metric, quantitative and ‘positivist’ approach to learning outcomes are widely acknowledged both within and outside the current volume (see also Rawolle & Lingard, 2008; Soland, Hamilton & Stecher, 2013). Likewise, the potential benefits of expanding the concept of educational achievement and the methodologies used to study it – including participatory approaches, emergent theoretical perspectives such as intersectionality and spatial justice, as well as increasing attention on how young people exercise agency in their life courses – are often stated (see Chapters 7 and 9 in this volume; also Biesta, 2009; OECD, 2018; Schudde, 2018). Yet, it remains unclear how those different inputs will be weighed and combined, particularly when possibly conflicting perspectives emerge. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge the underlying tensions and limitations of other paradigms beyond the ‘positivist’ one. Specifically, it is vital to note that, while participatory research brings perspectives and contributions which would otherwise be absent in the education realm, the understanding that individual perspectives are ‘situated’ implies that they will include a reflection of the context in which they are produced. In that sense, it remains a challenge to

decide how to weigh personal agency against the social constraints that each individual/group perspective may face. For example, if a focus group were to yield a positive view on quantifiable learning outcomes as the best (and perhaps the only) way to fairly rank students for access to higher education, how would the subsequent data analysis unfold? Would the individual or group perspectives be read as a consequence of the rhizomatic nature of the metric society implicitly disavowing the participants' contributions and agency, or would they be read as valid knowledge held by the participants? To make things even more complicated, the theoretical and empirical complexity of the scientific literature on this (and other matters) may make it difficult for participants to engage meaningfully in the unfolding discussions, let alone comprehend and take control of the interpretations made upon their discourses and perspectives.

The CLEAR project contributes to these issues in an innovative way by explicitly addressing the socially constructed nature of learning outcomes and promoting the embedding of contextual and equity-driven considerations in measurement and assessment frameworks. Thus, dimensions typically outside the conventional scope of learning outcomes would be framed not as external factors but as integral to the overall assessment process. This shift would mean incorporating factors such as gender, race, socio-economic background and geographical location (and their intersections) into how educational outcomes are both measured and interpreted. A central innovation could be the development of composite indicators integrating both academic results and contextual weights, making the disparities within and between groups more visible in quantitative assessments. Although very much open to debate, we contend this approach would amount to a massive challenge – both methodological and political – to traditional metrics which tend to decontextualize learning outcomes. This fits with the project's ambition to move beyond the taken-for-granted focus on competencies and skills and question the very nature of educational achievement, its connection to lived experiences of young Europeans as well as its effect on national, local and European policymaking which is so desperately (and at great expense) seeking to level out social inequalities.

We started this chapter by suggesting that, in order to rethink educational achievement, we need to move beyond the taken-for-granted conflation between educational and academic achievement. What has become apparent in making this move is the fact that, no matter how we look at it, achievement remains a core part of educational processes. And this is not only due to the interests

of various stakeholders (including policymakers, schools, young people and businesses) but is also rooted in much deeper features of the anthropological nature of modern societies. In the opening note to his recent book, the German anthropologist Christoph Wulf writes:

Today we are living in the Anthropocene, the Age of Humans. It is an age marked by the destructive influence of humans on the planet in all kinds of areas. We are subjugating nature, heedlessly exploiting it to our own advantage and in so doing, we are, to a large extent, destroying the very foundations of our own lives. This is becoming visible in climate change, the destruction of biodiversity, the annihilation of non-renewable energy and the pollution of the environment.

(Wulf, 2022, p. 1)

Wulf argues that the capability to develop and to destroy is currently the dominant human trait in the Age of Anthropocene. For instance, our profound advances in technologies and engineering of every kind are deployed in medieval-like warzones all over the world. In education, the commercial exploitation of knowledge-based services and products is equally present. Yet, for development and production, new achievements are becoming more dependent on cooperation, trust, sustainable funding and the allocation of intellectual resources, none of which are equally or justly distributed. While this sharpens the differences between sites of intensive research and the lagging peripheries, it also raises the question of what is important to achieve. For industries, commercial use is relevant. For governments, prestige and growth opportunities matter. For individuals, the motives are countless. If we are to seriously rethink educational achievement, we need to ask ourselves what future prospects are worth the time, the energy and the limited resources we have left to invest.

Note

- 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.

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