

POLICY BRIEF

From Assessment to the Construction of Learning Outcomes: Key Policy Lessons

September 2025

Constructing Learning Outcomes in Europe: A multi-level analysis of (under)achievement in the life course (CLEAR)

Policy Issues

The **poor quality of learning outcomes** has been a pertinent policy issue in the European Union. Member states, cities and regions have been invited to set up ambitious lifelong learning policies to **level up local and regional disparities** and enable smooth school-to-work transitions and re-qualification. Based in particular on statistical indicators and a regular monitoring of the policies' impact, the varying quality of learning outcomes has been addressed as resulting from disparate modes of coordination, uneven concepts of programme evaluation, homogeneous perceptions of labour shortages, or one-dimensional perceptions of regional diversity. Such approach, however, neglects existing knowledge hierarchies and conceptual understandings of inequality that many education and employment professionals share.

Similarly, the policy discourse on learning outcomes is mostly bound to national contexts, originating a **tension between EU aims of harmonisation and a missing consideration of local specificities and spatial needs**. The multidimensionality of learning outcomes, i.e., their embeddedness in complex interplay of factors, actors, and spaces, is only partly acknowledged, also due to the limited circulation of knowledge across diverse fields and the trend towards standardised quantitative measurements as their sole implementation.

Finally, the **role of spatial and structural inequalities** is often overlooked in the design, implementation and interpretation of learning outcomes. This may result in the exacerbation of such inequalities, especially when they are used for **fixed categorisations of learners into achievement categories**. This observation aligns with the **insufficient involvement of relevant stakeholder groups** in education and training, including young people themselves, as well as education and employment professionals, which leads to an unbalanced public perception and representation in the discourse on learning outcomes.

We have addressed the issue of poor learning outcomes from three specific perspectives:

- ❖ We have captured the construction of learning outcomes as a **dynamic, relational, and contingent process** shaped by a variety of actors and factors – a process that leads to numerous definitions of educational achievement depending on temporary variations of policy provision, labour market performance, individual dispositions, cultural and social trends, and dominant discursive meanings.
- ❖ We have assessed the dominant definitions of learning outcomes and (under-)achievement as a result of asymmetric discursive and power relations, which are shaped by **unequal spatial distribution of economic, political, and educational resources, and opportunity structures**, and which, in turn, further shape the definitions of policy addressees as multi-disadvantaged youth, vulnerable individuals, low-achievers, school dropouts, youth 'at-risk', and so forth.
- ❖ We have countered the statistically captured construction of (under-)achievement as a **solely individual and outcome-oriented criterium** for understanding educational trajectories of young people and emphasised how structural and institutional changes intermingle with youth's life courses and shape their individual biographies.

Evidence and Main Findings

We have developed our policy recommendations based on different sources of evidence:

- *quantitative analyses* at national (NUTS 0) and regional (NUTS 2) levels with the focus on correlations between learning outcomes, labour market, and socio-economic conditions, amounting to a total of 51 indicators subdivided into 403 variables (Kazepov et al., 2023);
- *institutional review and assessment of policies* addressing low-achievement in basic skills to map out processes of skills formation and skills utilization, which resulted in reviewing 502 documents defining learning outcomes and conducting 105 semi-structured interviews with local professionals in education and training (Rambla et al., 2024);

- *narrative biographical interviews* with young people in vulnerable and/or multi-disadvantaged positions living in thriving and declining regions, which included 169 young adults aged 18 to 29 years (Järvinen et al., 2024);
- *online expert surveys on policy coordination* to forecast future scenarios of educational disadvantage and assess the multilevel governance and coordination of different policy strands, in which 494 national and regional policymakers in various fields of education and employment were engaged (Barberis et al., 2024);
- *participatory actions* during various phases of the project engaging 307 local and regional practitioners, young people, career counsellors, teachers, and trainers in a series of workshops and meetings, most notably in local Innovation Forums (Benasso et al., 2025).

In following, we present selected project findings showing how factors, actors, and spaces enter the construction of learning outcomes.

Factors

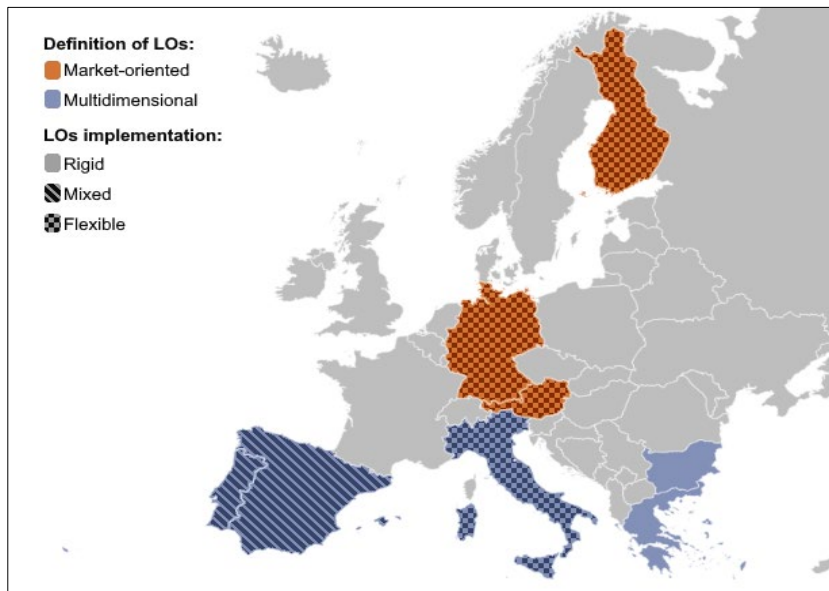
We have identified various factors affecting the quality of learning outcomes. When we look at the institutional factors, national differences in the *definition* and *implementation* of learning outcomes emerge (see Figure 1). With regard to the definition of learning outcomes, one group of countries, particularly Northern and Central European countries (Finland, Germany, Austria) relate learning outcomes more closely to labour market needs, placing employability at the core of their definitions more often, with a strong focus on the acquisition of skills and qualifications that allow a smooth transition from education and training into employment. Southern European and South-Eastern European countries (Portugal, Spain, Italy, Bulgaria, Greece) assume a more multidimensional approach to the definition of learning outcomes, placing issues of citizenship and fulfilment of individual potential almost at the same level of employability.

As concerns the implementation of learning outcomes, Austrian, German, and Finnish experts regard the increased flexibility of learning outcomes measurement and the education system in general as more positive. This is visible in the negative attitudes towards credentials and grades as well as towards standardised and quantitatively measured learning outcomes, but also in the higher consideration of the role of skills acquired through informal education. Conversely, Bulgarian and Greek respondents are more inclined towards categorisations and rigid tools, most importantly grades. Stakeholders from other Southern European countries remain in the middle on this issue, with Italy leaning towards the position of Finland and Continental Europe. The findings highlight how the policy expectations on learning outcomes vary across the countries and frame the possibilities for young people.

Policymakers addressing groups in multi-disadvantaged positions have to consider vulnerability more as a symptom of a negative interplay of different factors (i.e., negatively

affecting some groups of young people more than others), the analysis of which can reveal parameters for future change. One example of a positive re-enactment of a failed interplay is the improvement of young people's life courses through significant others (career guidance workers, counsellors, social workers), who oversee and (re)connect a multiplicity of factors to navigate young adults.

Figure 1. Classification of CLEAR countries according to learning outcomes



Source: Barberis et al., 2024

Actors

We have further examined the multiplicity of actors and actor constellations involved in the process of constructing learning outcomes. Our analyses suggest a fluid cleavage between various educational stakeholders and their agency.

Teachers, trainers, and labour market professionals at the local and regional level often meet young people during their turning life events or crucial transition points (e.g., school-to-work transition, new beginning after migration, re-entering education or labour market at a later stage). As implementers of the policy programmes, their function requires a high degree of flexibility towards young people and their structural needs, but also towards their own institutional and administrative requirements. Our findings show that local stakeholders are aware of individual, informal or non-formal skill sets of their students or clients (e.g., reflexivity, resilience, patience, adaptability). Yet, they also recognise the pitfalls and shortcomings of their desires and aspirations, which are either poorly realisable with their own credentials, or not properly adjusted to the local labour market structure. Their crucial role as facilitators can have a positive impact on young people's agency, but it can also spur systemic changes in supporting communities and schools with structural needs. In this regard, one crucial element to be considered is the promotion of spatial, educational, and professional ownership.

Our analyses have revealed existing *divergencies between various stakeholder groups*. While young people seek to find occupations that fit their interests, education and employment professionals primarily consider skills shortages and existing institutional capacities. For them, school curricula and qualification frameworks are necessary to define overall goals, while soft skills should be increasingly integrated into the policy design. On the other side, national and regional policy experts implement either market-oriented or multi-dimensional approaches to the design of policy tools. As a result, economic rationales and structural capacities take over individual life courses and voices of young people. Although there is a limited understanding for local/regional economic challenges, especially in more remote regions, these are not sufficiently considered. Policy actors only speak of spatiality indirectly when recognising regional economic problems, but do not connect it with teaching, training or learning processes. Thus, the collaboration between the various actors hampers partially due to the lacking recognition of problems that affect all actor groups, not just one, partially due to absence of joint intersections that enable equal participation for all, and partially due to regional policy differences.

The mismatches in communication and collaboration between various actors show the prevalence of a uniform social construal over regional socio-structural dynamics in most European countries. And although the agency of different actors involved in our research is relational, it allows for crossing the institutional and spatial boundaries, for which thinking and acting outside the mere professional frameworks is of utter importance.

Spaces

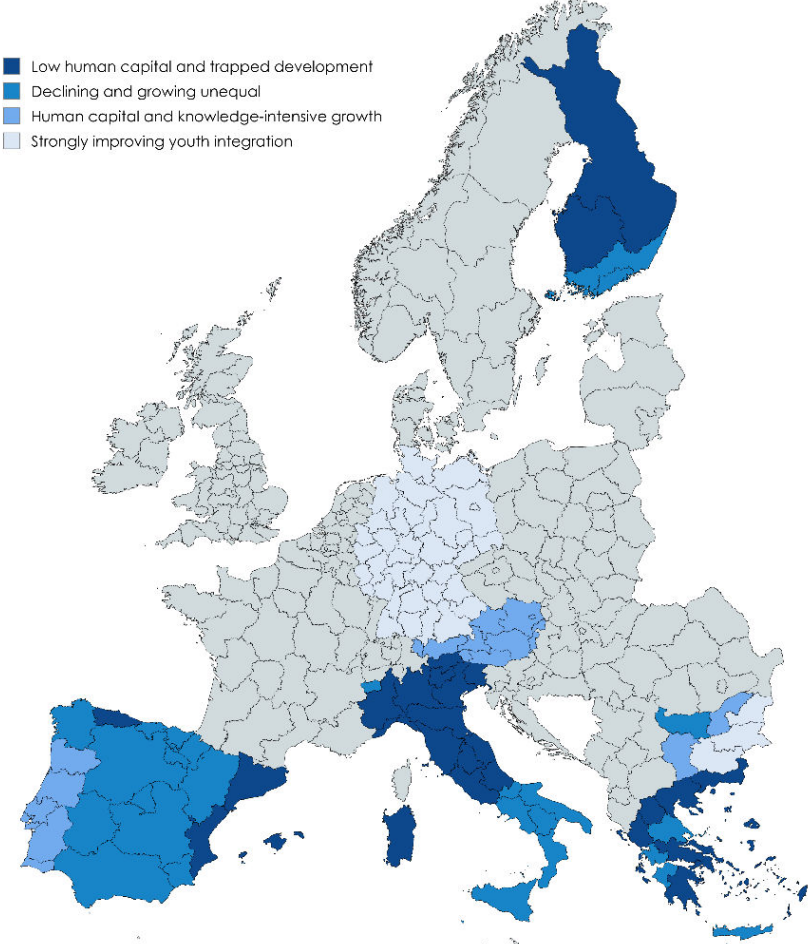
Our findings indicate that although spaces play a significant role in structuring educational and training opportunities, they are rarely accounted for in policymaking.

We have conducted cluster analyses with selected indicators related to educational, labour market, and socio-economic contexts to identify the most distinctive characteristics of regional clusters (see Figure 2). The figure shows four distinct clusters: 1) regions with *low human capital and trapped development* (navy blue): decreasing tertiary qualifications, poor employment conditions, slight population loss; 2) regions with *unequal decline and growth* (blue): decreasing rates of low-educated youth, rising youth unemployment, slow economic growth, shrinking and aging population; 3) regions with *knowledge-intensive growth* (light blue): increasing tertiary qualifications, strong trend towards knowledge economy, poor labour conditions for medium-qualified workforce; and 4) regions with *strongly improving youth integration* (white): increasing tertiary education, decreasing youth unemployment, aging population.

The quality of (educational) spaces can be determined through many aspects. One particular parameter of the spaces is their *capacity to develop*, i.e., either accelerate economic and societal growth or decline/stagnate. While some places are more prone to transform into attractive global sites, others remain lagging peripheries facing out-migration and related problems. As the figure portrays, large parts of Finland (albeit

caution is advised, since the statistical categories applying to the Finnish case are partly misleading), Northern Italy, and parts of Spain and Greece exhibit a trapped regional development, with structural changes progressing at a low pace. Under such conditions, young people are forced to suppress their ambitions and expectations.

Figure 2. Groups of regions according to their Rate of Change (2007; 2019)



Source: Kazepov et al., 2023

Spaces further poses the ability to close or open *local/regional opportunity structures*. Depending on the flexibility of regional and national governance bodies to act on the opportunity structures, they can be experienced as restraining individual ambitions, or as providing a good basement for them. Regions with unequal decline and growth, including Southern Finland, large parts of Spain, Southern Italy and parts of Greece, offer ambivalent opportunities, which not everyone can equally utilise. While some perceive them as structurally given, others relate them to their existing social networks.

We argue that education is not only a positional good, but a highly contested spatial good that decides upon access to and accessibility of educational provision. It is linked to the capability of learners to develop their social structures, build relations, set up families, and fully integrate into the society. Addressing poor learning outcomes, therefore, must move beyond the static conception of spaces and embrace the full scale of spatial impacts.

Policy Recommendations

We have addressed the construction of learning outcomes and yielded new evidence on local and regional dimension of educational and labour market policymaking. In this section, we provide a series of recommendations aiming to stimulate innovative approaches to tackling the persisting low levels of educational achievement in Europe.

In following, we offer concise recommendations applicable at any governance level. To account for the variety of recommendations that we have developed throughout the project, we have used AI-assistance to synthesise them and produce a compact infographic (see Figure 3).

Explore a broader understanding of learning outcomes

A recurring theme in our research is the limited conceptual understanding of learning and (under-)achievement, often reduced to formal skills and competencies. We therefore make a strong case for a more multi-dimensional understanding of learning outcomes that embraces not only formal, but also informal and non-formal skills and capabilities of learners.

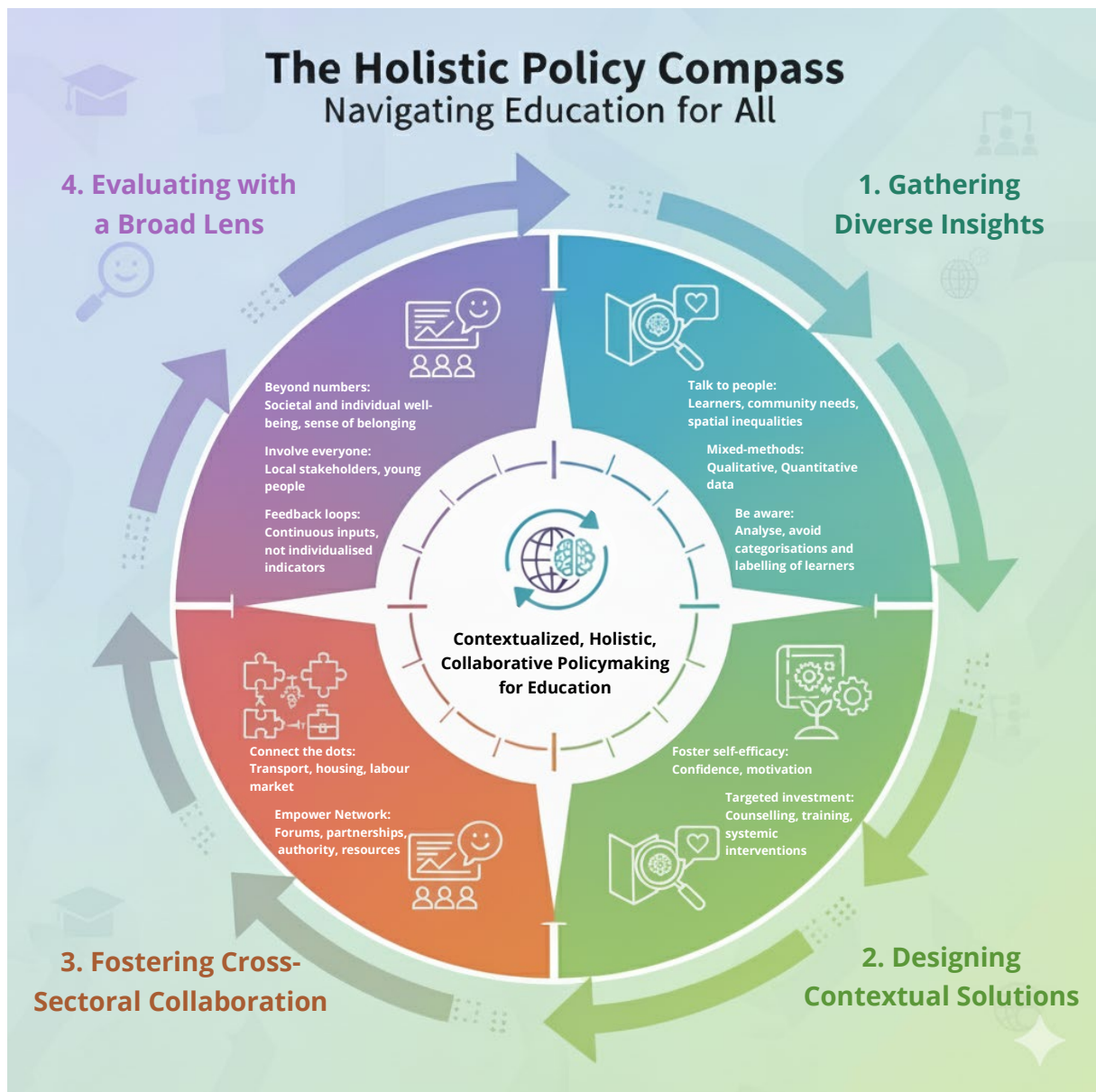
This can be achieved by complementing the expertise of state actors (e.g., teachers, career guidance) with the experiences of various non-governmental organisations that support young learners and can identify their specific vulnerable positions (e.g., limited socio-economic resources, poor language skills, mental health issues etc.).

Cultivate inclusion and participation of multiple voices in the decision-making arenas

Successful policymaking processes open new opportunities for all stakeholders. When considering poor learning outcomes, the multiplicity of actors and actor groups involved in their construction is seldom acknowledged. While national and supranational actors frame the conditions for educational policies, the actual enactment and lived experiences are more visible at the regional and local levels and among groups closely related to young learners: teachers, trainers, professionals in education and employment, social workers and others.

Our participatory actions have shown that participation can stimulate thinking beyond mere administrative frames and organisational rationales (financial conditions, terms of office, fiscal policies or the like). Our suggestion aims at creating cross-institutional and cross-sectoral opportunities for collaboration and exchange of experiences, observations, and critique.

Figure 3. The Holistic Policy Compass



Source: CLEAR policy recommendations synthesised and visualised by gemini.com

Engage young learners in the policy design and evaluation

Young people desire to fulfil their life projects and institutional support is crucial in supporting their decision-making. Often, they are targeted by policy measures without being actively engaged in the policymaking process. We therefore suggest to include young people’s voices into the policymaking.

An important prerequisite for a successful integration of young people, especially of the younger generations more sensitive to identity issues, is the avoidance of essentialising categorisations of learners based on external descriptors. This can prevent ill-informed policies and contribute to building institutional trust.

Consider spatial and intersectional inequalities in the policy actions

Educational policymaking often neglects the impact of spaces and social/structural inequalities on educational outcomes. Indicators of socio-economic stratification and demographic change are considered key for evidence-based policymaking. However, research evidences that spatial and intersectional inequalities have an immense impact on learning quality, particularly in times of crises and uncertainty.

One way of integrating spatial and intersectional experiences and dispositions of learners is to bridge the different governance levels, both vertically and horizontally, and foster the cooperation between various policy units, including housing, transportation, social and youth policy, environmental and development strategies and others. This can unearth hidden potential and inspire synergies for regional and national growth.

Promote room for manoeuvre for local and regional stakeholders

Local and regional practitioners have first-hand contact to young learners. They are aware of the diverse life paths and biographies of their clients and trainees, yet are invested with limited power to successfully navigate them through the institutional and bureaucratic structures. Not seldom, this leads to frustration on both sides, as young learners remain disillusioned and discouraged, and practitioners feel incapable of further supporting them and losing their potential.

The policy actors involved in our research have repeatedly underscored the necessity to enlarge their rooms for manoeuvre so that they can effectively channel young learners into suitable educational programmes, labour market trainings, or policy measures. We strongly recommend to strengthen the capacity and flexibility of local/regional stakeholders to overcome existing institutional constraints and devise effective solutions for youth in vulnerable and multi-disadvantaged positions with non-linear educational pathways.

Reflect on the contrasting expectations on learning outcomes in policy evaluation

Educational stakeholders refer to learning outcomes in various contrasting ways. For policymaking at European and national levels, learning outcomes are often reduced to statistical indicators of whether top-down policy concepts have impact. For professionals at local and regional levels, learning outcomes are usually discussed as effects of organisational and pedagogical arrangements. For young people, learning outcomes become preconditions and stepping stones in pursuing their life projects and dreams. The variety of expectations does not always translate into the evaluation of policy programmes.

The process of evaluating and re-adjusting the existing policy programmes requires a shared space for free articulation of conflicts and experiences with the policy. We argue for a multi-dimensional assessment of policy programmes that involves various educational stakeholder groups. This allows to draw in feedback from different angles and account for the local knowledge, spatiality of educational sites, as well as for the peculiarities of socio-cultural backgrounds of the learners and regions.

CLEAR Research Project

The European funded research project *Constructing Learning Outcomes in Europe. A Multi-Level Analysis of (Under-)Achievement in the Life Course* (CLEAR) (2022–2025) examines the interplay of factors, actors, and spaces involved in the construction of learning outcomes. It intends to spark innovative policy approaches to tackle academic (under-)achievement and increase social upward mobility for young Europeans. The project is conducted in eight EU Member States—Austria, Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain—and is designed as a multi-level, mixed-method comparative study focusing young people (18–29 years) in multi-disadvantaged positions. The Policy Brief results from cumulative research on policy assessment and policy coordination, quantitative analyses of local/regional opportunity structures, qualitative studies with local policy actors and young people, and participatory actions involving local professionals (teachers, trainers, counsellors, practitioners).

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PROJECT NAME	Constructing Learning Outcomes in Europe: A multi-level analysis of (under)achievement in the life course (CLEAR)
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CONSORTIUM	University of Münster – WWU – Münster, Germany European Research Services GmbH – ERS – Münster, Germany Leibniz Centre for Lifelong Learning – DIE – Bonn, Germany Autonomous University of Barcelona – UAB – Barcelona, Spain University of Turku – UTU – Turku, Finland University of Vienna – UNIVIE – Vienna, Austria University of Lisbon – ULISBOA – Lisbon, Portugal University of Porto – UPORTO – Porto, Portugal University of Genoa – UNIGE – Genoa, Italy University of Urbino – UNIURB – Urbino, Italy Codici Cooperativa Sociale – CODICI – Milan, Italy University of Plovdiv – PU – Plovdiv, Bulgaria Aristotle University of Thessaloniki – AUTH – Thessaloniki, Greece
FUNDING SCHEME	Horizon Europe research and innovation funding programme Horizon 2.2 – “Culture, creativity and inclusive society” (2021-2027), call HORIZON-CL2-2021-TRANSFORMATIONS-01, topic “Addressing poor learning outcomes in basic skills and early school leaving at national, regional and local level in Europe”
DURATION	1 October 2022 – 30 September 2025 (36 months).
BUDGET	EU contribution: 3.047.221 Euro
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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation funding programme under Grant Agreement No. 101061155.