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EDITORIAL

LEARNING OUTCOMES IN SCHOOLS: POLICIES AND PRACTICES

The concept of performance and achievement has long been a focal point of debate in the field of education. Over time, the focus has shifted toward learning outcomes, which now play a central role in shaping priorities and practices. Learning outcomes serve as a critical framework for redefining success in educational policy, emphasizing not only what individuals learn but also how they apply their knowledge in meaningful ways. In light of these evolving priorities, this special issue centers on learning outcomes, providing a platform for diverse perspectives and insights on their role in redefining educational success (Fuller, 2009; Prøitz, 2015).

Learning outcomes encompass multiple dimensions, including values, curriculum goals, and societal expectations (Hargreaves et al., 2001; Nygaard et al., 2009). They also bring to light critical questions about what constitutes “desirable” outcomes and how best to measure them (Mejía-Rodríguez & Kyriakides, 2022). For instance, critical thinking and adaptability are increasingly vital in navigating rapid technological advancements and global challenges, yet integrating these skills into curricula remains a persistent hurdle. Beyond academic knowledge, students today must acquire 21st-century skills such as problem-solving, cultural communication, and continuous learning, paired with ethical values, positive dispositions, and personal well-being.

International assessments, particularly PISA, have a significant impact on shaping educational policy (Hopmann, 2008; Schleicher, 2017). The focus of assessments largely determines what is prioritized in schools. Assessment results are used not only by learners and teachers to guide teaching and learning but also by researchers to examine systemic influences, interpret results within broader contexts—such as the outcomes and implications for different social groups—and address questions focused on the accurate measurement and interpretation of outcomes. Through the articles presented in this special issue, we aim to advance understanding of these critical questions and contribute to ongoing efforts to redefine success in education. For example, the first study, authored by Barbara Japelj Pavešić, Klaudija Šterman Ivančič, and Gašper Cankar, analyzes the broader context of educational outcomes. Titled *Achievement in the Light of Aspects of Student Well-being and Teacher Attitudes: The Case of Slovenia*, the study highlights the critical connection between educational outcomes and student well-being, drawing

on Slovenian data from international assessments. The findings reveal that student-teacher relationships significantly predict achievement, particularly in vocational and technical programs, emphasizing the importance of empowering teachers to create supportive and inclusive learning environments.

The second study, *If They Talk More During Lessons, Will They Achieve Better? Unlocking the Reciprocal Relationship Between Student Verbal Participation and Achievement*, was authored by Martin Sedláček, Klára Šedřová, Roman Švařiček, and Zuzana Šalamounová. The authors conducted an intervention study to examine the relationship between student verbal participation and achievement in sixth-grade language arts. While the intervention successfully increased and equalized student participation, no immediate impact on academic achievement was observed. The longitudinal nature of the data allowed the researchers to test the hypothesis that student talk time predicts achievement rather than the reverse. Their analysis confirmed that participation in classroom talk is indeed a significant predictor of achievement. The findings underscore the need for further research to investigate the long-term effects of increased verbal participation.

The third study, titled *From Policy to Practice: Monitoring SDG Targets with PIRLS 2021 Austrian Data*, by Surette van Staden and Sunet Grobler, investigate the alignment of Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2021 data with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) targets, particularly focusing on quality education, equity, and lifelong learning opportunities. The findings highlight a decline in reading literacy in Austria and reveal notable gender disparities. The study further emphasizes the positive impact of early literacy activities and pre-primary education on reading outcomes, underscoring the critical role of early interventions. However, the analysis indicates that teacher qualifications have limited direct influence on reading achievement, pointing instead to the importance of teaching methods and classroom dynamics.

An example of a study focused on learning outcomes within a specific student population is the fourth study, titled *Analyzing Student Performance in Connection with Learning Disorders and Extracurricular Activities in Foreign Language Classes*. Authors Roland Hegedűs and Krisztina Sebestyén utilized data from the Hungarian National Assessment of Basic Competencies to examine the academic performance of students with atypical developmental pathways, including dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia, compared to their peers without such disorders. The study explored how performance is influenced by family background and participation in different curricular programs. The findings reveal that students with learning disorders perform better in advanced foreign language classes than in standard curricula. However, advanced-level training in other subjects often leads to better learning outcomes, a trend frequently associated with variations in family background.

The last study, authored by Julie Grombířová and Jana Kratochvílová, adopts a completely different methodological approach. Titled *Innovation in the Final Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes (Report Cards): The Process of Change and its Impacts on School Practice*, the study employs a qualitative research design to examine the development and impact of implementing an innovative report cards in primary and lower secondary schools. Through interviews with 23 teachers and school leaders, the findings highlight the positive effects of the report card on teaching culture and assessment practices in primary schools, where it has been widely accepted by teachers. However, the study also reveals resistance among lower secondary teachers, pointing to the need for further development and dialogue to address these challenges.

The articles in this issue delve into the complexities surrounding the definition, implementation, and assessment of learning outcomes across varied educational contexts. We hope these contributions inspire readers to reflect on how learning outcomes can be harnessed to create equitable, effective, and meaningful educational opportunities. We invite you to explore these studies and consider how their insights might enrich your work and foster discussions within your professional communities.

Martin Sedláček, Paula Koršňáková and Jana Straková
editors of the special issue

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