Evaluating Educational Impact for Social Inclusion and Competence Development: Longitudinal Data, Evidence Based Policy, and Pedagogical Science in the Spirit of Raimond Buyse

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Abstract
This paper explores the crucial role of impact evaluation in education, emphasizing the importance of longitudinal data analysis and evidence based policymaking for fostering social mobility, reducing educational inequalities, and enhancing competencies. Inspired by the legacy of Raimond Buyse, the paper argues for a scientific approach to pedagogy that embraces empirical experimental methods while respecting the ethical and axiological dimensions of education. It highlights how impact evaluation can contribute to a pedagogy that is not only theoretically informed but also grounded in robust empirical evidence, capable of addressing the complex educational challenges of contemporary societies.

Key words: Impact Evaluation, Socio-Educational Inequalities, Quanti-Qualitative Longitudinal Data, Competences Development, Scientific Evidence Based Policies, Pedagogical Science

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1. Introduction

Raimond Buyse's pioneering treatise, L'expérimentation en pédagogie (1934), marked a turning point in making educational science more rigorous and empirically grounded. Rather than merely describing learning processes, Buyse urged educators and researchers to measure and evaluate them – combining a respect for human dignity with the methodological precision of experimental approaches. His dictum tayloriser l'instruction pour valoriser

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l'éducation captured the idea that systematic, scientific methods can bolster both the effectiveness and equity of educational practice. Building on Buyse's insights, this essay explores how contemporary impact evaluation can support social inclusion and competence development, especially in the context of "Society 5.0." We adopt his dual emphasis on scientific rigor and ethical responsibility. Specifically:

- Scientific Rigor: to draw on longitudinal data and mixed-method designs to capture educational processes over time.
- Ethical Responsibility: to stress that measuring impact is not purely technical but must safeguard human dignity and promote social justice.

Central to this approach is the recognition that quantitative and qualitative methods, when combined, offer richer insights. Quantitative strategies (e.g., longitudinal surveys, quasi-experimental designs) isolate causal effects and trends; qualitative inquiry (e.g., interviews, focus groups, classroom observations) illuminates the lived experiences behind the numbers. This dual perspective aligns with Buyse's overarching vision: robust data must be interpreted within real pedagogical contexts to fully serve education's humanizing role. As we will see in the following sections, rigorous impact evaluation is crucial not only for understanding whether an educational intervention "works," but also for verifying that it contributes to broader goals of equity and social mobility. We will explore what impact evaluation entails, including the most commonly used approaches in educational research, before turning to the mixed-method design we favor.

Today, this vision finds renewed relevance in the context of Society 5.0, where education is expected to foster competence development, social mobility, and sustainability (OECD, 2018). However, educational inequalities persist (Dubet, 2019; Piketty, 2014), requiring rigorous impact evaluations to assess who benefits from educational policies and under what conditions. Impact evaluation, particularly when supported by longitudinal data, is not just a technical exercise but a scientific and ethical imperative. Evaluating educational impact means understanding how education contributes to individual development, social justice, and economic progress over time. This requires combining empirical evidence with ethical reflection, ensuring that educational research respects human dignity and cultural diversity (Meirieu, 2007).

2. The Importance of Impact Evaluation in Education

Educational policies must be assessed not only for their internal coherence but also for their real-world effects. As Rossi, Lipsey & Freeman (2004)

highlighted, impact evaluation measures whether a program achieves its intended social change. In the field of education, this means looking at both learning outcomes and social mobility.

2.1 Defining Impact Evaluation

Impact evaluation refers to the systematic process of determining the causal effects produced by an educational intervention, policy, or program (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004). It seeks to isolate and measure the specific changes directly attributable to the intervention, distinguishing them from other contextual or external influences (Gertler et al., 2016). In educational research, this translates into assessing whether a given policy – such as curriculum reform, the introduction of digital learning technologies, or the implementation of inclusive teaching strategies – has generated measurable improvements in learning outcomes, reduced educational inequalities, or promoted social mobility among disadvantaged groups (OECD, 2018; Escudero & Martínez, 2011). The concept of impact evaluation is rooted in the counterfactual logic: comparing what actually happened after the intervention with what would have happened in its absence (Shadish, Cook & Campbell, 2002). This requires designing robust evaluation strategies, such as randomized controlled trials (RCTs), quasi-experimental designs, and propensity score matching, which aim to establish the causal attribution of outcomes to interventions. However, contemporary educational research increasingly questions the exclusive reliance on experimentalism, highlighting the need to contextualize quantitative data through qualitative approaches that explore students' lived experiences, institutional dynamics, and the cultural embeddedness of educational processes (Biesta, 2007; Mortari, 2007).

In the field of education, impact evaluation cannot be confined to cognitive outcomes alone (e.g., test scores), but must also consider broader dimensions such as students' well-being, critical thinking, civic engagement, and the development of transversal competences essential for lifelong learning (Hoskins & Fredriksson, 2008). Moreover, impact evaluation should actively engage stakeholders, including teachers, families, and students, in a participatory evaluation process, ensuring that contextual knowledge and local needs shape the criteria used to define and measure success (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998). The impact evaluation in education is not neutral or purely technical: it is always embedded within ethical, political, and epistemological frameworks (Biesta, 2010). The selection of what to measure, whose voices to include, and which outcomes are prioritized reflects specific normative assumptions about the purpose of education – whether focused on economic productivity, social justice, or personal development (Apple, 2013). Therefore,

rigorous impact evaluation must be methodologically sound while also being axiologically aware, ensuring alignment with the democratic and emancipatory aims of education, particularly in contexts of social inequality (Sen, 1999).

2.2 Longitudinal Analysis and Educational Trajectories

Longitudinal data hold a pivotal role in the field of educational impact evaluation, as they enable researchers to track the same individuals or cohorts over extended periods of time, capturing the dynamic and cumulative nature of educational processes (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2015). This diachronic perspective, already intuitively recognized by Raimond Buyse in his early work on experimental pedagogy, allows for a holistic understanding of educational trajectories by linking early educational experiences to long-term life outcomes, including labour market insertion, social mobility, and civic participation (Heckman, 2006; OECD, 2018). Unlike cross-sectional evaluations, which provide only a static snapshot of educational effects at a given point in time, longitudinal approaches allow for the study of developmental processes – how learning gains accumulate (or dissipate) across critical educational transitions (early childhood, primary school, secondary education, higher education) and how these pathways diverge according to socioeconomic status, gender, migration background, or territorial disparities (Schütz, Ursprung & Wößmann, 2008; Blossfeld et al., 2019). This makes longitudinal analysis particularly valuable for understanding educational inequalities, since opportunity gaps tend to widen as educational careers progress, a phenomenon often described as cumulative disadvantage (DiPrete & Eirich, 2006). Moreover, longitudinal designs enable the identification of causal relationships not only through pre-post comparisons, but also by incorporating time-varying covariates, thereby allowing researchers to account for changing contexts (policy reforms, economic crises, technological innovations) that might moderate the relationship between educational inputs and outcomes (Singer & Willett, 2003). This temporally sensitive approach is especially important in today's rapidly evolving Society 5.0, where technological disruption, climate change, and demographic shifts continually redefine the skills and competencies required for full participation in economic and civic life (Schleicher, 2019). In addition to academic achievement, longitudinal studies also make it possible to track non-cognitive outcomes such as motivation, self-efficacy, resilience, and civic engagement (Gutman & Schoon, 2013), thereby aligning educational evaluation with a broader understanding of education's contribution to human development (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). This expanded outcome set is particularly relevant for evaluating the social impact of education in terms of social cohesion, active citizenship, and the reduction of intergenerational

inequalities (Putnam, 2015). The use of longitudinal data requires methodological and ethical awareness. Attrition – the loss of participants over time – represents a major threat to validity, particularly when it affects the most disadvantaged students, thereby biasing estimates of educational impact (Fitzgerald, Gottschalk & Moffitt, 1998). Ethical issues also emerge regarding data protection, consent renewal, and the long-term use of sensitive educational data, requiring adherence to strict ethical guidelines and a transparent dialogue with participants (BERA, 2018). For all these reasons, longitudinal analysis provides a unique lens for understanding education not as a discrete event, but as a lifelong process in which institutional structures, individual agency, and structural inequalities continually interact, shaping educational careers and life opportunities in ways that demand both scientific rigor and normative reflection (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Blossfeld et al., 2019).

2.3 Education, Inequality, and Social Mobility

Education has long been considered a central mechanism for fostering social mobility, representing what is often called the "meritocratic promise": the idea that educational achievement, rather than inherited privilege, should determine life chances (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). However, empirical research consistently reveals that this promise remains only partially fulfilled, particularly in societies characterized by high levels of social stratification and structural inequalities (Dubet, 2019; Blossfeld & Shavit, 1993). The capacity of education to function as a social elevator is systematically mediated by the interplay between family background, territorial disparities, and school quality (Checchi, 2006). Students from socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds benefit from higher cultural capital, more supportive educational environments, and greater access to enrichment opportunities outside school (Bourdieu, 1986). In contrast, working-class students, migrants, and ethnic minorities often face structural barriers within the educational system, ranging from lower teacher expectations to tracking mechanisms that reproduce existing inequalities rather than mitigating them (Van de Werfhorst & Mijs, 2010; Ballarino & Schizzerotto, 2011). Impact evaluation thus becomes a critical instrument for identifying which educational interventions effectively promote equity and which, instead, reinforce social reproduction (Escudero & Martínez, 2011). Evaluating the impact of targeted programs – such as early childhood interventions, financial support schemes, inclusive curricula, and mentoring for first-generation students – provides essential evidence for the design of policies aimed at reducing educational inequalities (Heckman, 2006; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2015). Furthermore, longitudinal impact evaluation allows researchers to

observe the long-term trajectories of students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, assessing not only academic achievement but also access to higher education, labour market insertion, and civic participation (OECD, 2018; Blossfeld et al., 2019). However, measuring educational impact in relation to inequality requires moving beyond purely individual outcomes (such as test scores or employment rates) and considering broader structural dimensions: how educational policies transform (or fail to transform) social structures, reduce territorial inequalities, and enhance collective capabilities (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). A critical perspective on impact evaluation also calls for interrogating its underlying assumptions, particularly the risk of promoting a narrow, economistic view of educational success, thereby neglecting the emancipatory and democratic dimensions of education (Biesta, 2010; Apple, 2013). Additionally, social mobility itself should be problematized: while upward mobility is often celebrated, downward mobility – experienced by middle-class families facing precarization – also shapes educational aspirations and strategies, further contributing to educational anxiety and competition (Ball, 2003). Evaluating educational impact on inequality therefore requires a multidimensional approach, capable of capturing the intersectional nature of disadvantage (gender, ethnicity, disability, territory etc.), as well as the structural transformations affecting the value of educational credentials in post-industrial societies (Brown, 2013). Education's role in shaping inequality and mobility cannot be understood through isolated interventions but must be situated within a broader sociological and political analysis of how education systems distribute (or withhold) opportunities, recognition, and resources across social groups (Dubet, 2019). Impact evaluation, if critically and reflexively applied, can offer a powerful diagnostic tool to expose the hidden mechanisms of reproduction and, at the same time, inform more just and inclusive educational policies aligned with the principles of social justice (Fraser, 2009).

3. Methodology: A Mixed-Method Approach for Comprehensive Impact Evaluation

3.1 Rationale for Mixed Methods

The methodological legacy of Raimond Buyse, grounded in empirical-experimental approaches, represents a crucial foundation for modern educational research. The contemporary complexity of educational phenomena – embedded in social, cultural, economic, and institutional contexts – requires an expansion of the methodological toolkit beyond strictly quantitative

experimentalism. While randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and quasi-experiments remain powerful tools for identifying causal impacts, they are often insufficient when it comes to understanding how and why educational interventions work (or fail to work) in particular contexts (Biesta, 2010; Maxwell, 2012). Mixed-method research design, integrating quantitative impact evaluation techniques with qualitative interpretative inquiry, offers a more holistic perspective particularly suited to the interconnected goals of developing active citizenship, expanding human capabilities, and fostering a more equitable and just society. In the next subsections, we will explore in detail how quantitative and qualitative components each contribute essential insights to educational research and why combining evidence from these seemingly different domains is crucial for capturing the full complexity of teaching and learning processes. This integrated approach, grounded in multiple forms of data, ensures that both numerical patterns and contextualized experiences guide our understanding and shape more effective, inclusive policy decisions.

3.2 Quantitative Analysis: Measuring Impact through Longitudinal and Administrative Data

The quantitative component of the proposed approach relies on longitudinal datasets and administrative records, which provide a diachronic view of educational trajectories. Longitudinal designs allow researchers to trace the cumulative effects of educational policies and programs over time, capturing both direct and indirect impacts on learning outcomes, social mobility, and civic participation (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2015; Blossfeld et al., 2019). Such data sources include:

- Standardized test scores collected at multiple points in a student's educational path.
- School completion rates, transitions to higher education, and labour market outcomes.
- Socioeconomic and demographic data, allowing for equity-focused disaggregation (gender, ethnicity, family background).
- Quantitative impact evaluation techniques may include:
- Difference-in-Differences (DiD) to assess the effects of policy changes across treated and control groups.
- Propensity Score Matching (PSM) to estimate the counterfactual for non-randomized programs.
- Multilevel Modelling (HLM) to account for the nested structure of educational data (students within schools, schools within regions).

Such methods allow for robust causal inference, but they offer limited insights into the processes and mechanisms through which educational policies shape student experiences and outcomes. As such, quantitative analysis needs to be complemented by qualitative investigation.

3.3 Qualitative Inquiry: Capturing Context, Experience, and Meaning

The qualitative component of the mixed-method design serves multiple complementary purposes:

1. Contextualization: Policies and programs do not operate in a vacuum; they are mediated by local educational cultures, school climates, and teacher beliefs. Qualitative research – through interviews with educators, policymakers, and students – helps uncover these contextual factors, providing a thick description (Geertz, 1973) of the environments in which educational interventions unfold (Stake, 1995).
2. Student Voice and Subjective Experience: Educational impact is not solely measurable through test scores; it also encompasses subjective experiences of inclusion, perceptions of fairness, aspirations, and self-efficacy. Focus groups with students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds can reveal how they perceive and experience educational opportunities, highlighting barriers and enabling factors invisible to purely quantitative approaches (Brannen, 2005; Archer & Francis, 2007).
3. Unintended Consequences: Educational policies often generate unanticipated effects, some of which may exacerbate inequalities or distort pedagogical practices (for example, through "teaching to the test"). Classroom ethnographies and participatory observations can document these side effects, enriching the evaluation with critical insights into policy enactment (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012).
4. Policy Learning and Co-Construction: Rather than treating evaluation as a purely external and technocratic process, qualitative approaches allow for the co-construction of knowledge, involving teachers, students, and families as active participants in interpreting results and shaping subsequent policies (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). This democratic turn in evaluation aligns with participatory action research (PAR) traditions (Reason & Bradbury, 2008), strengthening the ethical and emancipatory dimensions of educational research.

3.4 Integration: From Triangulation to Synthesis

The true strength of a mixed-method approach lies not only in combining methods but in integrating findings into a coherent narrative. This requires:

- Triangulation: Comparing quantitative trends (e.g., achievement gaps, dropout rates) with qualitative explanations (e.g., students' narratives about discrimination or lack of support).
- Sequential Analysis: Using quantitative data to identify patterns and outliers, followed by qualitative investigation to explain them.
- Iterative Cycles: Moving back and forth between data collection and analysis, refining research questions and interpretation as new evidence emerges (Maxwell, 2012).

This epistemological pluralism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) reflects Buyse's original spirit of methodological openness, updated for the complexity of contemporary educational challenges within the framework of Society 5.0 – where digital, environmental, and social sustainability imperatives intersect (Carretero, Vuorikari & Punie, 2017).

4. From Evidence Based Data to Policy: Ethical and Scientific Challenges

Buyse's dual emphasis on scientific rigor and ethical responsibility remains crucial today. Educational impact evaluation must respect human dignity (Meirieu, 2007), combining quantitative analysis with qualitative understanding (Biesta, 2007): educational impact cannot be reduced to narrow metrics alone; it should enhance human dignity, social justice, and "care" – understood as attentiveness to learners' needs and well-being (Mortari, 2022; Noddings, 2002). In this sense, the intersection of robust, measurable data with interpretative, context-sensitive evidence becomes indispensable for fostering both individual development and an inclusive society.

Ethical responsibility in research is a fundamental issue to reflect upon, closely related to the sense of the practice of care. The knowledge of care is, in fact, based on practice, a practice that is acquired by comparing specific cases and reflecting on them. "Guiding ideas are those built experientially based on continuous comparative reflection on cases." (Mortari, 2022: p.160) As Nussbaum (2011) highlights, it is important to combine attention to the case in its singularity, having a sensitive perception of the particular, while referring to the general principles through which one can interrogate one's thinking, even though no general principle can capture the complexity of reality. At the core of this reflection is also Amartya Sen's capability theory, already cited in this contribution (1999). But how can we apply to experimental pedagogy a perspective that considers the ethical aspect of research? The only possible way is to develop a theory founded on the care of both ethics and politics. To elaborate this theory, it is necessary to recognize that everyone, whether in life

stages marked by dependence or in those where independence increases, needs care, and therefore, care must play a central role in the formation of ethical and political theories (Noddings, 2002). In fact, there is no true ethics of care, but it is important to deepen the culture of care: it is a practice whose essence is to be sought in various ways of being in relation to others, including the learner. Care is guided by emotionally charged ways of thinking; thus, an important issue to address is understanding the thinking horizon within which a good practice of care operates, and consequently, a good research practice that takes into account the emotional sphere of research subjects.

The thinking horizon within which the practice of care operates is constituted by ethical directionality (Mortari, 2019): we can do educational research with nurses, teachers, educators, and caregivers. What emerges from this research is the objective of promoting well-being, feeling this need as a necessity, and helping the other in the search for what constitutes a good life for them. Care is not an ethics, but an ethically informed practice (Tronto, 1993), based on principles such as conceiving ethics as questioning the quality of a good life, and conceiving care as an action driven by the desire to promote the need for a good quality of life. Those who care seek to act in the realm of what is good, promoting the well-being of others. The three directions indicated by Mortari (2022) in which the essence of the ethics of care resides are:

- Taking responsibility: From an Arendtian perspective, in which the human being cannot avoid acting (Arendt, 1958), it is necessary to intervene by overcoming the resistance to promptly initiating a relationship of care, maintaining a distant proximity (Zambrano, 1994).
- Having respect: Without respect, there can be no good care, as Aristotle said: "The lack of respect is the result of an opinion about something that appears to have no value" (Ret., II,1, 1378 b).
- Acting in a self-giving manner: Engaging in care means giving one's time and physical, emotional, and cognitive energy, expanding the boundaries of the self (Pulcini, 2003).

We can conclude that within a research process, as within a process of care, we know what we are offering, but we cannot predict the outcomes we will achieve. The self, in fact, is encapsulated in the English word serendipity, which leads us to perceive the gift as outside the logic of the market (Derrida, 1991). When integrated with robust quantitative measures – such as longitudinal data on learning outcomes – and context-rich qualitative insights, this ethic of care provides a more complete picture of educational impact, guiding policy decisions that prioritize both the measurable and the immeasurable aspects of human development in an inclusive society. In the next paragraph, we will briefly illustrate the methodologies of an ongoing project that similarly combines multiple data sources and an ethical principles to evaluate educational

trends across Europe ultimately proposing strategies for making learning processes more effective and inclusive at both local and transnational levels.

5. Reversing Educational Exclusion Trends: A Mixed-Methods Initiative to Tackle Educational Inequalities in Europe

Education as a social elevator (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970) is a foundational narrative in modern societies. Yet, research from Piketty (2014) and Dubet (2019) reveals persistent educational inequalities, challenging the optimism embedded in this metaphor. Impact evaluations, supported by robust and diverse scientific data, are essential to identify mechanisms of exclusion within educational systems and to propose effective remedies. In this context, the "REVERS-ED. Trends in inequalities over time and successful interventions to reverse them" project (funded by the HORIZON-CL2-2023-TRANSFORMATIONS-01-Inclusiveness in times of change programme and coordinated by the University of Barcelona, Spain) aims to address educational inequalities in Europe by

1. Identifying trends in such inequalities over time,
2. Proposing effective interventions to reverse them, and
3. Formulating methodological improvements for collecting, analyzing, and disseminating data.

REVERS-ED recognizes the multifaceted nature of educational disparities, influenced by factors such as socioeconomic status, home language, migration history, and access to early childhood education. Despite existing policy efforts, progress has often been limited or uneven across European countries. By studying longitudinal datasets – including student cohorts tracing back to 1999 – and combining this quantitative evidence with specific qualitative case studies, the project seeks to pinpoint not only where and when inequalities emerge but also how and why certain interventions can mitigate them. Overall, REVERS-ED represents a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to educational inequalities, underpinned by Communicative Methodology (CM). This methodological framework emphasizes co-construction of knowledge, ensuring that research participants and end-users engage in an egalitarian dialogue with researchers. In so doing, it integrates scientific rigor (through robust quantitative and qualitative data) and a transformative orientation (by including participants' voices and experiences). The goal is to impact society by producing actionable insights and practical recommendations for policymakers:

1. Mapping and Analysis of Inequalities: Identifying relevant datasets, conducting retrospective cohort and longitudinal studies, and applying statistical modeling to examine trends in educational outcomes.
2. Identifying Effective Interventions: Investigating successful educational actions through quantitative analyses and qualitative case studies over time, with the aim of determining which program components contribute most to improving equity, and how these can be transferred to other contexts.
3. Providing Policy Recommendations: Reviewing scientific literature, evaluating existing assessment techniques, and translating mixed-method findings into proposals that address disparities more effectively.
4. Dissemination and Management: Sharing successful interventions and ensuring scientific, technical, and ethical rigor throughout the project's lifecycle.

A key aspect of REVERS-ED is the social impact of its research, realized when published and disseminated results – including policy recommendations or NGO-led initiatives – deliver measurable improvements aligned with societal objectives. Building on experience from related projects (Includ-ed and Refug-ed), REVERS-ED partners have defined Key Impact Pathways (KIPs) to guide project activities toward enduring medium- and long-term outcomes.

6. Conclusion

A scientifically sound and ethically aware pedagogy requires embracing impact evaluation not as a purely technical process, but as a pedagogical act – a form of critical reflexivity about what education is and ought to be. Inspired by Raimond Buyse, educational researchers and practitioners should harness rigorous empirical methods – quantitative and qualitative – to assess and enhance the transformative potential of education. Projects like REVERS-ED exemplify how longitudinal data, dialogic co-creation, and a broader understanding of competencies can foster more inclusive and equitable educational systems, ultimately contributing to societal well-being in the era of Society 5.0.

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