ALLIANCE 3 -

SCHOOL, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

AGAINST

EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

Research report

Index

1. Introduction

This report is an assessment of the training course ***Preventing and combatting early school leaving,*** carried by the [Alliance 3](#), that has, as coordination the Catholic Western University (French: Université Catholique de l'Ouest, UCO, France) and, as partners, Universitat de Vic (Spain), Nyborg Ungdomsskole Youth School (Denmark), and the Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE, Hungary). This project brings together different partners who have been working for several years on issues of inequality in school, inclusive education or early school leaving. The report presents the general problematic of the project to fight against ESL.

The aims of the training are the following ones:

- To contribute in a significant way to improve the academic results of the young people through the improvement of their basic skills.
- To reinforce the accompaniment of the students' families to include them more within the learning process.
- To train educative actors for the accompaniment of young people with less opportunities.
- To contribute to the professional development of teachers, youth workers and educators.
- To reinforce the family-school-community relationship through the participation of all the actors in the territory to a project, which brings a global answer to the needs of young people.
- To raise awareness among the children and their families of the existence of socio-cultural and educative resources in their environment and to facilitate their daily use.
- To contribute to the (auto-) critical debate on schools and their roles in the reproduction of extant social inequalities and the mechanisms which facilitate it.

In order to evaluate whether the training achieved its goals, this assessment is structured as follows. First, the **methodology** is described (i.e. a combination of state of the art in official statistics and academic literature, questionnaires, and focus groups). Then, each part of the **results** is described. Posteriorly, **political recommendations** are listed, and a **final discussion** concludes the assessment.

2. Methodology

To carry on the assessment of the training, we used a methodological approach that combined various sources: materials provided by Alliance 3 (e.g. reports, modules of the training, etc.), focus groups and questionnaires to students, and secondary sources (including official statistics and academic literature) (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Methodological approach to analyse the course
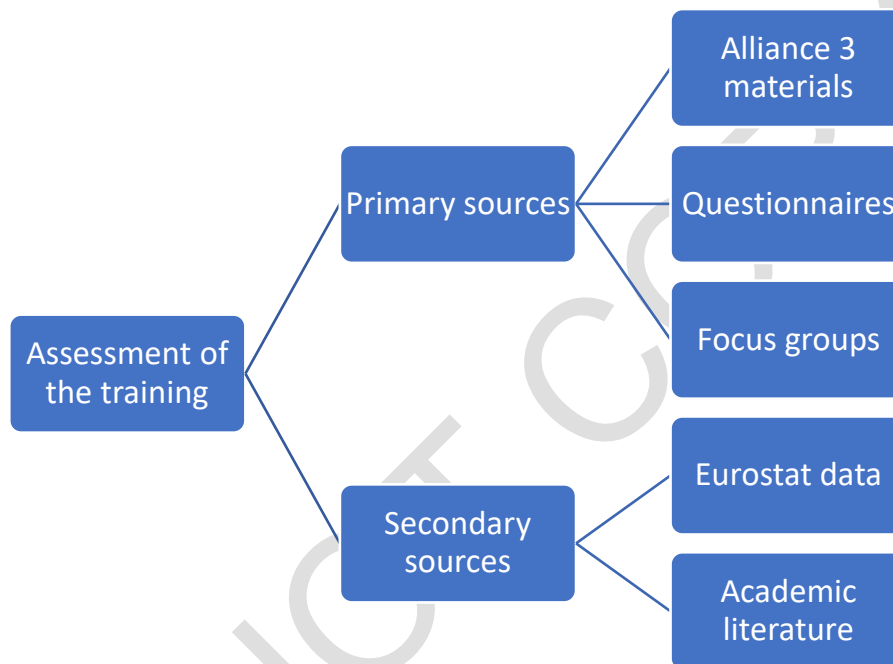
Source: own elaboration

Indeed, the triangulation of different sources was aimed to evaluate specific elements of the course. First, the **analysis of Alliance 3 materials** was aimed to analyse its potential coherence with the current state of the art data (both statistical and from academic literature).

Second, the **focus groups** were carried (n=4), aiming to capture the perception of students regarding the content and pedagogies of the training, in a collective manner. Each focus group was composed by individuals participating in the same national partner (and included between 8 and 20 participants each one).

Third, a **questionnaire** to all participants (n=16) was carried in order to identify the degree of satisfaction of the different participants of the course.

As already mentioned, the state of the art analysis was aimed to evaluate the degree of coherence and incoherence between the materials produced by the Alliance 3 and the current trends, historical evolution and theoretical trends on academic literature on Early School Living (ESL) processes. (Therefore, the main objective was not to produce academic knowledge but, moreover, contrast Alliance 3 materials with the general state of the art in ESL processes). In order to do so, two particular techniques were applied: On the one hand, a **descriptive statistical analysis on ESL European data** was carried out, based on an exploitation of Eurostat databases. It was aimed to describe the general evolution of ESL in diverse European countries.

On the other hand, a **literature review** was aimed to identify the factors, causes and conditions that contribute to generate, promote or facilitate processes of ESL in different particular groups of students in very different educational contexts. Also, to identify the policies, programmes, services and solutions that may mitigate (or, conversely, promote) those ESL processes, or at least for some groups in certain contexts. Since this approach was particularly oriented to explore theory, this literature review constitutes a configurative review, that (in contraposition to aggregative reviews), tend to combine qualitative and quantitative data (i.e., not excluding qualitative studies of the sample)[1]; be based on inductive design; be aimed at exploring and generating theory; focus on heterogeneity and variation (to identify patterns); and have an iterative nature. In parallel, the most typical configurative review approach is the realist synthesis (Gough, Thomas, & Oliver, 2012; Pawson, Greenhalgh, Harvey, & Walshe, 2004, 2005).

The repositor selected to carry the literature review was Education Resources Information Center (ERIC). The searches included key concepts such as early school leaving and drop-out. The selection criteria included:

(a) geographical scope, and only studies carried in Europe, America and Oceania were included. Given the context-sensitive nature of the concept (and its intense relation with the socioeconomic environment), studies focusing on Africa or Asia were excluded;

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[1] In addition, although often studies on ESL processes tend to rely in quantitative data, the complex nature of drop-outs processes (linked to contextual meanings, social values, etc., which necessarily require a great deal of interpretation and resignification) makes qualitative studies also particularly suitable in order to understand it (De Witte, Cabus, et al., 2013).

(b) time frame, since only studies of the past last 10 years were included (with a few exceptions[2]);

(c) quality criteria: only empirical studies (not exclusively theoretical) were included, plus literature reviews. Academic quality and, also, relevance and proximity to the topic were taken into consideration when including articles into the pool. According to the configurative reviews, both qualitative and quantitative studies were included into the pool; and

(d) due to language constraints, the searches were performed in English, Spanish, Portuguese and Catalan.

In the next pages, the results of those different approaches are described:

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[2] Given the iterative nature, some relevant studies were included in the sample, despite not meeting the selection criteria -mostly related to the time frame. Most of the studies included were systematic reviews, for their particular value: e.g. literature reviews on drop-out (Dale, 2010; Lyche, 2010; Rumberger & Lim, 2008) or on special education needs and ESL (Cobb et al., 2006).

3. Academic literature on ESL processes

The literature review final selected studies were n=63. In terms of geographical scope, most of the studies were focusing on only one country, but there are a few of comparative nature (Bademci et al., 2020; Elamé, 2013; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Ikeda & García, 2014; Jugovic & Doolan, 2013; Keppens & Spruyt, 2018; O'Gorman, Salmon, & Murphy, 2016; Olmos & Gairín, 2021; A. Ross & Leathwood, 2020). Of course, there has been found diverse studies in reference to the Alliance 3 countries: in Hungary (Kende & Szalai, 2018; Schmitsek, 2022), France, Spain (often focusing on Catalonia) (Bayón, Lucas, & Gómez, 2021; Fernández-Macías, Antón, Braña, & De Bustillo, 2013; Marchesi, 1998; Tarabini, Curran, Montes, & Parcerisa, 2018, 2019; Tarabini & Jacovkis, 2020) and Denmark (Schmitsek, 2022).

In the next pages, the basic results of the findings of the SLR are presented. As already emphasized, the results do not present an exhaustive, complete revision of all the results of academic articles regarding ESL processes, but moreover a way to identify the coherence of Alliance 3 materials with those current state of-the-art analysis.

The multiplicity of factors conditioning ESL processes

Most of the studies emphasized the multifactorial dimension of ESL, since several, simultaneous, interrelated factors impacted on ESL. According to Roger Dale:

> ESL always occurs in particular contexts that produce and shape it in specific ways. It has both individual and institutional causes. It results from interaction between family and social background, and school processes and experiences. It is the culmination of what is usually a long process that often begins before a young person enters school.

(Dale, 2010, p. 5)

Typically, individual characteristics, socio-familiar background, school settings, and also territorial contexts are the most included factors impacting on educational trajectories (including ESL) (Figure 8).

Figure 2. Factors impacting on ESL processes
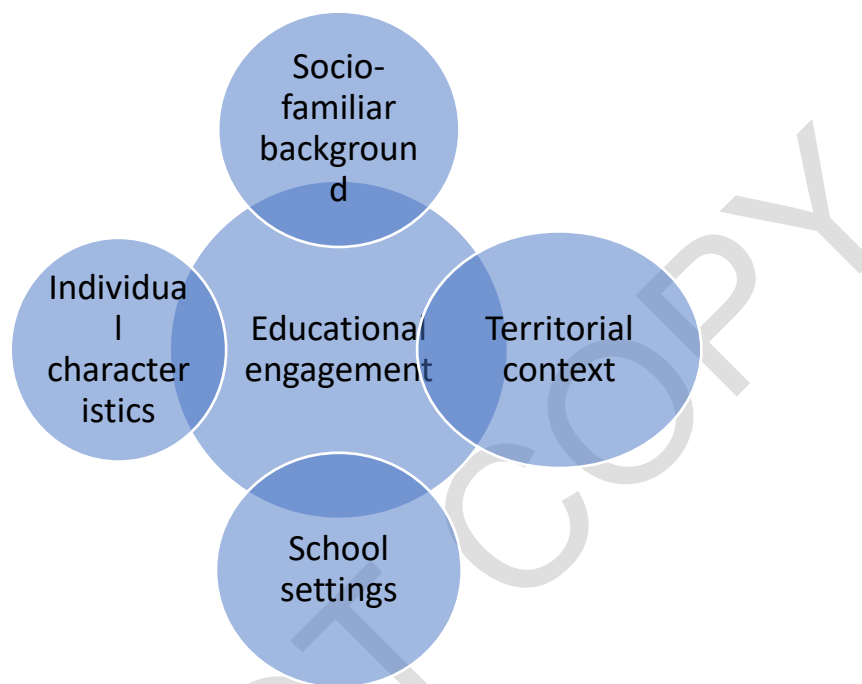
Source: own elaboration

Although those several factors tend to operate in conjunction, it is possible to analytically distinguish them (as exemplified in Table 2).[3] This is not to say that those multiple factors are unrelated, on the contrary. As it will be later discussed, it is of capital importance the permanent, dialectic relationship between individual, social and institutional settings, as noted by De Witte and colleagues.[4]

> For example, the interaction of ethnicity (or race) and sex, respectively, with attitudes, subjective norms (perceived expectations of teachers), perceived behaviour control, and retention seems noteworthy. Blue and Cook (2004), for instance, have found for the US that if a student is black or Hispanic and male, he is more likely to display negative attitudes towards education, perceive his teachers as having low expectations of him, and situate the locus of control over important things in his (school) life outside of himself.

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[3] Of course, there are other possible classifications. For instance, factors are typically divided as exogenous (e.g. socio-economic conditions, poverty, social exclusion, institutional settings and policy interventions) and endogenous factors (e.g. scholastic performance, educational attainment or the holistic needs of students) (Bayón et al., 2021). Also, factors are also often divided between pull – factors versus push – factors (Momo et al., 2019).

[4] Nevertheless, it is equally important to note that certain theoretical traditions tend to emphasize some of those factors (in detrimental of other ones). For instance, some scholars suggest that academic literature on ESL typically use one of three models: the deficit model (i.e. early leavers of education and their families have some 'failure' or 'deficit', such as lack of interest, scarce motivation of under-achievement), the push-out model (i.e. systemic factors and educational settings, including curriculum, teacher-pupil relationships or ability grouping, are the main factors explaining ESL), and the rational choice model (i.e. drop-out as a 'rational' choice of students, from the point of view of costs, opportunity costs, risk, etc.) (Doyle & Keane, 2018).

Thus, at least some minority students evidently risk ending up in a vicious circle.

Similarly, the interaction between parental involvement, on the one hand, and ethnicity, family income, and home environment, on the other hand, seems to be of some importance. Okpala et al. (2001) found in this respect that, although parental involvement matters a great deal, its effectiveness depends on the kind of involvement parents show, but also, and perhaps equally essential, on their ethnicity, income and home environment. In other words, cultural and structural barriers may have to be removed before parental involvement can be successful.

(De Witte, Cabus, Thyssen, Groot, & Van Den Brink, 2013, p. 23)

Table 1. Factors impacting on ESL processes (examples)

Factors	Examples
Individual characteristics	Mental and health issues. Age, maturity. Special Education Needs (SEN).
Socio-familiar background	Family material and symbolic capitals, and its relation to educational institutions. Social class. Ethnicity and migrant status. Gender.
School settings	Curriculum and evaluation practices: academic/practical knowledge, institutional use of repetition. Pedagogical practices: ability grouping, styles of teaching. Teacher – pupil relationship: i.e., internalisation of expectations.
Educational engagement	Emotional engagement, subjective dimension of schooling: self-perception, expectations, goals. Behavioral engagement: participation in extra-curricular activities, absenteeism, truancy, etc. Cognitive engagement: academic records, grade competition, etc.
Territorial context	Neighborhood effect Rural – urban divide

Source: own elaboration

In parallel, ESL is a processual and gradual phenomenon: drop-outs are the end of long processes, often initiated on early ages of schooling (Rumberger & Lim, 2008), 'the final

step in a process of disengagement that begins early' (Lyche, 2010)⁵. In that sense, as Roger Dale states:

> This report refers to ESL as a process, not an event. That process involves both the individual ESLers and their personal histories, and what happens to them when those personal histories meet the public world and life of the school. One of the main findings of the report is that in very many cases the route to ESL begins before the child goes to school. Later academic, behavioural and social patterns are often laid down in the first encounters with pre-school. These patterns become salient, and often negative, before the age of leaving school is reached. They lead young people to become "disengaged" from school, and create problems for schools, especially when they are concentrated in homogeneous institutions

> (Dale, 2010, p. 10)

The following chapters identifies the most salient factors impacting ESL processes: individual ones, related to family or social background (i.e. gender, ethnicity), school-based factors, and territorials; the last chapter uses the concept of educational engagement since it may capture most of the previous factors described and its impacts on young people educational career.

Individual factors

Overall, **general health and, particularly, mental health** are of great importance for young peoples' perceptions about their life, educational emotional engagement or ESL. A literature review of mental health identified that adolescents who suffer from a mental disorder (such as depression) risk finding themselves in a downward spiral: the combination of psychological symptoms with negative school experiences which may culminate in early school leaving -as literature reviews have found (Esch et al., 2014). In addition, the relationship between mental health and ESL processes is mutual, reciprocal. For instance, an analysis of early school-leavers in Ireland (a qualitative study, based on an arts-based method of participant collage, n=40, and individual interviews, n=11) identified that negative schooling experiences had a damaging effect on their mental health. Furthermore, the importance of mental health in ESL processes is even more relevant after Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, Covid-19 (and social isolation,

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[5] The methodological corollary of this is that longitudinal, biographical studies (or, at least, retrospective studies) may capture the nuances of the drop-out processes, since they analyze several moments of the life of young people (Santos et al., 2020).

schools closings, contact restrictions and economic shutdown) exacerbated mental illness, including anxiety, depression, and/or stress related symptoms, particularly on young people (Fegert, Vitiello, Plener, & Clemens, 2020; Racine et al., 2020).

Although often unconsidered, **young people age and maturity** are also key variables explaining educational engagement and early school leaving. In comparison to initial stages of education, in which homogeneous grouping by age is encouraged and promoted, during later stages of secondary education heterogeneous grouping by age is more common. In this sense, a qualitative study carried in Flanders (Belgium), based on focus groups discussions (n=8) to students, argued that young people needed to be surrounded by classmates with a similar level of maturity and, therefore, homogeneity of secondary levels class groups may ultimately become exclusionary for students who are older than their peers; it also argued that those young people felt treated an 'immature' way by the school rules and school staff (Van Praag, Van Caudenberg, & Orozco, 2018).

In parallel, young people with **Special Education Needs (SEN)** face higher risk of early school leaving; this is related to students' feelings of social alienation, lack of competence of social skills -particularly under stressful or challenging social pressures, as a systematic reviews have identified (Cobb, Sample, Alwell, & Johns, 2006). Still, it is not correct to automatically assume that all students with SEN are more at risk of losing interest in school and leaving school early. In this sense, a study in Norway to 132 students with SEN identified that peer support and teacher support are key for staying motivated at school; conversely, loneliness in students with SEN may exacerbate the risk of ESL (Pijl, Frostad, & Mjaavatn, 2014). In addition, students with SEN may be -on average- less engaged with school than their peers. A study of 1.336 students with SEN in the US found that those students had less engagement (specially in behavioural engagement, such as misbehavior, fighting, coming to class without pencil, paper, books, or completed homework) with school than their average-achieving peers (Reschly & Christenson, 2006).

Family structure and characteristics (including material and symbolic capitals)

Family factors are also of great importance in relation to ESL; those factors include family characteristics, structure and capitals (both material and symbolic) as well as its relationship with educational institutions.

In this sense, material capitals and socioeconomic **families' economic situations** (e.g. families' poverty, social exclusion, unemployment) are elements that by consensus are considered vital in this regard. In the review carried by the OECD it broadly exemplified how the need for income and job insertion may be detrimental to educational trajectories, thus increasing the risk of dropout (Lyche, 2010): for instance, from Bridgeland et al.'s (2006) study in the US identified that young people dropped out because they had to care for a family member or to get a job. Similarly, a quantitative analysis in Spain also broadly evidenced the statistical significance of economic factors in academic results (Marchesi, 2003); indeed, it was identified that the influence of the sociocultural context in compulsory education is especially important in students who are situated in the lower socio-economic strata.

Also, **family structure** may impact on school drop-out. As systematic reviews on ESL had shown, students from large families (five or more siblings), as well as children from single-parent households also seem to be more likely to dropout (De Witte, Cabus, et al., 2013; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). For instance, a large representative longitudinal survey(n=19,254 students) carried out in the Netherlands identified that young people in 'non-nuclear' (including single parent) families reported to be at greater risk of dropping-out (Traag & van der Velden, 2011). In a quantitative study in Spain (using logit and probit models), based on data from the Spanish Labour Force Survey (LFS) (2000 – 2007), identified that: the absence of one of the parents from the household clearly reduces the probabilities of finishing secondary education; and, also, that having a mother with less than secondary education has a statistically significant and positive effect on being out of school at 16 and 17 of almost 20% (Fernández-Macías et al., 2013).

Still, the importance of family structure in ESL processes is also object of debate, since **family structure or composition may also relate to socioeconomic status**. Certainly,

there is a broad evidence that single parent household tend to have, on average, lower income, higher likelihood of mobility and, also, lower parental supervision (Lyche, 2010).

However, the relation of families' composition and resources (both material and symbolic included) with schooling processes must be carefully analysed, and simplistic explanations should be sensibly **avoided (particularly, the so-called 'deficit model explanations'**). In this sense, it is important to note the specific role of educational institutions as their specific mechanisms in this processes of social reproduction. In the following pages, the specific role of educational institutions will be described.

Finally, it has to be highlighted that, in general, **educational actors (such as teachers or principals) tend to attribute the highest importance to families composition and resources in educational and ESL processes**. For instance, a survey to secondary school teachers from different countries (Bulgaria, n=147, Italy, n=105, Malta, n=71, Romania, n=261, and Turkey, n=212) identified that teachers perceived that ESL was caused predominantly by individual and family factors -and not, in contrast, to school related factors (Bademci et al., 2020).

Gender

As described previously, within the European context, **women tend to have less ESL than of their men peers**.[6] Because of that, since a strong part of the academic literature tend to focus on the on ESL predictors at the individual level of the students, being male is often considered that boys are more often at risk of being early school leavers than girls. For instance, in a quantitative research carried in Norway (a multinomial regression analysis applied to survey and public register data for 9,749 students) it was identified that, even after controlling other demographic and educational variables, boys still had a higher probability of not completing upper secondary education than girls (Markussen, Frøseth, & Sandberg, 2011). Similarly, in the aforementioned study in Spain (based on data from the Spanish Labour Force Survey (LFS) (2000 – 2007), it was identified that being a woman has a statistically significant and negative effect on the probability of

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[6] This is not, however, a universal trend. For instance, in many African and Asian countries women tend to have more ESL than of men, as identified by a systematic review on academic literature on ESL processes (Momo et al., 2019)

being out of school too early of around 7% in both 2000 and 2007 (Fernández-Macías et al., 2013).

Nevertheless, **those dynamics do not imply that young women do not face educational exclusion, on the contrary**. As the academic literature has identified, the micro-dynamics of educational exclusion act differently in boys and girls, in terms of academic results, school choice, self-esteem, expectations and aspirations, etc., have all gender bias; indeed, the macro-trends of masculinization of ESL coexist with these micro-dynamics of differentiated exclusions in girls and boys (Tarabini, 2017). Likewise, the impact of ESL processes in labor inclusion are not more harmful for men than for female -on the contrary. For instance, a quantitative study in Norway (analysis of administrative data of school-to-work trajectories of 3 cohorts of early school leavers, between the ages of 16 and 26, and observation period from 1994 to 2015) identified that male early school leavers steadily predominate in trajectories leading to middle and high incomes, with more economically rewarding trajectories than of women male early school leavers (Vogt, Lorentzen, & Hansen, 2020).

Ethnicity

Ethnicity and migrant status are highly correlated with educational trajectories, since ethnic minorities (such as Roma young people) and migrant people have higher risk of dropping out.

Regarding **migrant status**, the OECD reported that in most countries, immigrant students tend to have -on average- more restricted access to quality education, leave school earlier and have lower academic achievement than their native peers (although most of those differences are explained by language barriers and socio-economic differences as shown) (OECD, 2010).

Also, regarding ethic background, **ethnic minorities** face unjustified obstacles in their educational career. In general, ethnic minority and migration status tend to present worse academic result that ethnic majorities and non-migrant young people, but the situation is particularly harmful for **Roma children**. A literature review on ESL processes in

Southeast Europe identified that Roma children early school leavers in all of the countries examined (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia) (Jugovic & Doolan, 2013). Similarly, an ambitious comparative research, the so-called MABE project, carried 1,532 questionnaires administered to immigrant and Roma children in the ten countries (Italy, Greece, Romania, Cyprus, Spain, Slovenia, Portugal, France, Bulgaria and Germany) showed that immigrant and Roma children tend to sense a bias of teacher against them, and also suffer bullying more frequently (Elamé, 2013). Of particular interest for this literature review is the case of Roma people in Hungary. Indeed, it is often argued that the highly selective meritocratic competition Hungarian educational system make difficult for Roma students the transitions towards post-compulsory education, thus being disproportionately enrolled into the lowest-quality segment of vocational training and, ultimately, being involved in processes of dropping out when reaching the compulsory age (i.e. 16 years old) (Kende & Szalai, 2018). In historical terms, the evolution of Roma children has been positively. For instance, a study based on administrative data found that, since 1970, the number of Roma children in kindergartens has quadrupled (aprox. 2/3 of aged 3 – 6 visited them); also, a positive tendency has been observed in the completion of primary education; still, in secondary school graduation and in obtaining a higher education degree they are still far behind the non-Roma population (Maczó & Rajcsányi-molnár, 2020).

In addition, typically ethnic minority students, or having completed a migratory process, tend to be placed disproportionately in certain schools (often, also attended by pupils of low socio-economic status). This unjustified concentration of social difficulties tend to generate exponential difficulties at school level, thus impacting adversely on the educational trajectories of young people. Indeed, 'schools that are attended by minority students tend to have low promoting power, especially majority minority schools' (De Witte, Cabus, et al., 2013, p. 21). This process is called **school composition effect**, and is particularly prevalent in more segregated educational systems. Regarding this effect, a study based on a large representative longitudinal survey carried out in the Netherlands (19,254 students from a random sample of 108 schools), it was found that schools with a high proportion of ethnic minorities show higher dropout rates, after controlling for the individual effect of being a minority student (Traag & van der Velden, 2011).

In conclusion, **ESL processes tend to disproportionately affect particular groups of young people (i.e. typically people with special needs, males, economically disadvantaged, ethnic minorities or migrated persons, living in families with scarce material and symbolic capitals)**.[7]

This is not to say that all young people has the same social profile, educational disengagement or motivations for dropping-out. **Young people involved in early school leaving processes are not homogeneous, on the contrary: there are several situations, dynamics, rationales, discourses and experiences of young people in ESL processes**. Indeed, academic literature has emphasized the different profiles of young people in ESL (Dale, 2010). A quantitative study in Montreal (Canada), two generations of white French-speaking boys and girls from 12 to 16 years old (of 1974, n=791, and of 1985, n=791) completed a self-administered questionnaire on their psychosocial adjustment at least one year before leaving school (Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 1997). Based on that, Janosz and colleagues classified early school leavers based on the basis of individual characteristics: maladjusted, who have poor grades and who behave poorly at school; underachievers, who just have poor grades; disengaged, who perform better than the maladjusted and the underachievers, but simply do not like school; and quiets, who, other than having slightly lower grades, resemble graduates more than dropouts. Also, Traag and colleagues distinguish "four groups of school-leavers: 'dropouts' (those without any qualification), those who leave school with a diploma in lower secondary education ('low qualified'), those who complete apprentice-based tracks ('apprentices') and those who continue education and receive a full upper secondary qualification ('full qualification')" (Traag & van der Velden, 2011).

Another example, in an academic review, several typologies of early school leavers were identified (Thibert, 2013, based on Kronik & Hargis typology, 1990): pupils in learning and behavioural troubles; quiet pupils (only learning difficulties); and silent pupils (who simply fail at exams).

In a qualitative study (based on narrative interviews, n=123) in Austria, it was identified seven types of early-school leavers: the 'ambitious', the 'status-oriented', the 'non-conformist', the 'disoriented', the 'resigned', the 'escapist' and the 'caring'; still, despite some substantial differences and internal heterogeneity, all types of early school leavers had in common experiences of stigmatization (Nairz-Wirth & Gitschthaler, 2019).

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[7] Indeed, all academic difficulties (not only ESL) are diversely and unjustly distributed among social groups: repetition, grade completion, academic results, absenteeism and, also, drop-out and ESL.

Similarly, a qualitative study analysing educational biographies of students from secondary schools (with an important fieldwork: in-depth semi-structured individual interviews with young people between 16 and 24 years old, n=252, from seven countries, Poland, Belgium, Sweden, Portugal, Spain, UK and the Netherlands), identified the specific trajectories of young people in Warsaw. It specifically identified several trajectories of school disengagement: unanticipated crisis, parabola, downward spiral, boomerang, resilient route, shading out (Tomaszewska & Wrona, 2019).

School factors and institutional settings

However important the individual characteristics and the social background may be, these are not the only factors impacting on ESL processes. In many occasions, drop-out processes are simply associated with individual factors (such as gender, social class, ethnicity, parental education, etc.), in a reductive manner.

> Indeed, the majority of research on early school leaving still endeavours to pin-point personal and social characteristics of potential dropouts that may differentiate them from graduates, so as to create a kind of ''photofit'' of those most at risk, for whom targeted intervention measures can then be devised
>
> (De Witte, Cabus, et al., 2013)

In contrast, it is important to highlight the **central role of educational institutions in ESL processes**. Many academic literature tend to omit the role of schools, and educational institutions are considered to be 'black boxes', thus 'naturalising' the relationship between certain individual or familiar characteristics with drop-out processes and academic failure (De Witte, Cabus, et al., 2013; Santos, Nada, Macedo, & Araújo, 2020).

> Regarding the whole problem of ESL as one of individual vulnerability frames policy responses in unhelpful ways. Though few of these factors are easily amenable to direct policy intervention, it is possible to identify and respond to the kinds of experiences and circumstances, especially in schools, that promote or retard the likelihood of young people from similar backgrounds becoming ESLers.
>
> (Dale, 2010, p. 6)

The contextual and historical construction of ESL processes require indagating the nature of school, particularly its processes of selection, transmission and certification of

knowledge (i.e., curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment) (Bernstein, 1973). Indeed, school may actively participate in processes of social reproduction, validating and legitimating specific forms of familiar knowledge, symbolic capitals and educational dispositions -which are typical of middle and upper classes (Bourdieu, 1996; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964). In general, it is considered that schools' characteristics may explain about 20% percent of the variability in student outcomes (while individual and family characteristics still explain most of the variability) (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Academic literature has identified several school-based elements that may impact on ESL processes, as exemplified in the following Table 3:

Table 2. Dimensions and components of the school effect (examples)

Dimension	Component
Social composition, peer effect	Students' social class
	Percentage of migrant students
Resources	Class size and the teacher–pupil ratio
School – community relationships	Relations with families, broader community, etc.
Pedagogical practices	Teaching styles
	Institutional uses of repetition
	Institutional devices of orientation and guidance, particularly between tracks (academic vs vocational) and in the transitions towards post-compulsory education
Management of student heterogeneity	Teachers' conceptions of diversity
	Logics for managing student heterogeneity
	Mechanisms for managing student heterogeneity. E.g. ability grouping

Source: own elaboration

School composition is the effect generated by the disproportionate and unjustified concentration of students with difficulties (e.g. economic disadvantages, migratory situation) in certain schools, thus creating exponential difficulties at school level (Dale, 2010; De Witte, Cabus, et al., 2013). Those effects are related to residential and educational segregation.

School resources indicates the properties and capacities of educational institutions to properly offer educational quality. Typically, the most often school resources considered are class size and the teacher–pupil ratio. Generally, schools with small-sized classes

and reduced teacher-pupil ratios tend to perform better than the rest (De Witte, Cabus, et al., 2013). In addition, another school resource of particular relevance is the amount of instruction time devoted to learning (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2017; Woessmann, 2016): this is of great importance in contexts where the school day is limited (e.g. double or triple shifts).

Pedagogical practices are of central importance in any educational process; nevertheless there is a heated debate on whether are the best practices in order to reduce ESL processes. Given the vast amount of academic literature regarding this topic, the next pages do not pretend to comprehensively or exhaustively synthetize all results regarding pedagogical processes, but moreover to show some fundamental, almost consensual findings regarding teacher support, institutional uses of repetition, or devices of orientation and guidance are provided.

In general, **teacher support** is considered to be a key factor in order to generate educational engagement and to prevent drop-out processes. Indeed, a review on ESL and school climate identified that many young people experienced isolation and lack of meaningful relations at schools, which was considered by students as a great factor leading to dropping-our (Cefai, Downes, & Cavioni, 2016). Similarly, it is often argued that peer relationships and teacher – student relationship play a key role in students' emotional development and well-being; and both elements may be crucial on the intention to leave school early (Schwab, 2018). Also, a quantitative study in Norway (a questionnaire to students, aged 16 from upper secondary schools, n=2.045) identified, through a hierarchical regression model, that the factor most important preventing ESL processes was teacher support (Frostad, Pijl, & Mjaavatn, 2015). In addition, academic literature has identified that teachers' perceptions may heavily impact on students' expectations, aspirations, self-esteem and educational engagement, based on the so-called Pygmalion effect (i.e. internalization of low expectations) (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968); this mechanism is of particular importance in students from ethnic minorities or lower socio-economic backgrounds (Doyle & Keane, 2018). In that sense, those perceptions are also institutionally based. For instance, based on an analysis of the perceptions of different principals of upper secondary schools (ISCED 3 through regular or vocational tracks) (interviews, n=4), it was considered that the specific ethos of each school may have significant impact on how each particular school tackled ESL processes (Araújo, Macedo, Santos, & Doroftei, 2019).

In parallel, **repetition** is considered to be one of the main predictors of dropout (De Witte, Cabus, et al., 2013). According to a comparative study, that analysed the interaction

between contextual settings (e.g. economic and labour factors, demographic and migration processes, educational system characteristics) and ESL processes in Europe, it was identified that the most effective strategies against drop-out included the reduction of grade retention (De Witte, Nicaise, et al., 2013).

In general, international organizations tend to critically consider repetition. For instance, according to the OECD, repetition is negative because: it is extremely cost for countries; it may have negative impacts on repeaters, in academic and behavioural dimensions; and it disproportionately impacts on socioeconomically disadvantaged students, after accounting for other variables -such as academic performance. In a comparative study, based on countries that participated in PISA 2009 edition (n=30), it was identified that repetition had negative consequences in cognitive aspects (i.e. repeaters students tended to perform worse academically than non-repeaters) as well as in behavioural dimensions (i.e. non-repeaters tend to report more positive attitudes towards schools than repeaters) -after accounting for background characteristics of the students (Ikeda & García, 2014). Similarly, also based in PISA 2009 edition, a document of the OECD concluded that repetition has great costs, since it entails the provision of an additional year of education for a student, but it is also costly for the society (i.e. delaying a young adult entry into the labor market by at least one year); it also concluded that the social background of students had a great impact on repetition (controlling other variables).

High rates of grade repetition can be costly for countries.

In countries where more students repeat grades, overall performance tends to be lower and social background has a stronger impact on learning outcomes than in countries where fewer students repeat grades. The same outcomes are found in countries where it is more common to transfer weak or disruptive students out of a school. (…)

PISA 2009 shows that countries with high rates of grade repetition are also those that show poorer student performance. Some 15% of the variation in performance among OECD countries can be explained by differences in the rates of grade repetition, and students' socio-economic background is more strongly associated with performance in these countries, regardless of the country's wealth.

(OECD, 2011c, pp. 1–2)

Lastly, also based on PISA (2018 edition), the OECD continues to identify that in almost all countries students in socio-economically disadvantaged schools were more likely to have repeated a grade than students in advantaged schools (OECD, 2020) (as can be seen in the Figure, France results are worse than OECD average, while Denmark and Hungary results fare better than the average of OCED countries) (Figure 7).

In conclusion, it is generally assumed that high level of repetition are particularly worrying and negative, since **repetition is an expensive mechanism, with few educational benefits, and especially inequitable - as it widens educational inequalities** (OECD, 2012; Save the Children, 2016).

Figure 3. Grade repetition, socio-economic status and reading performance. OECD countries based on PISA 2018 data
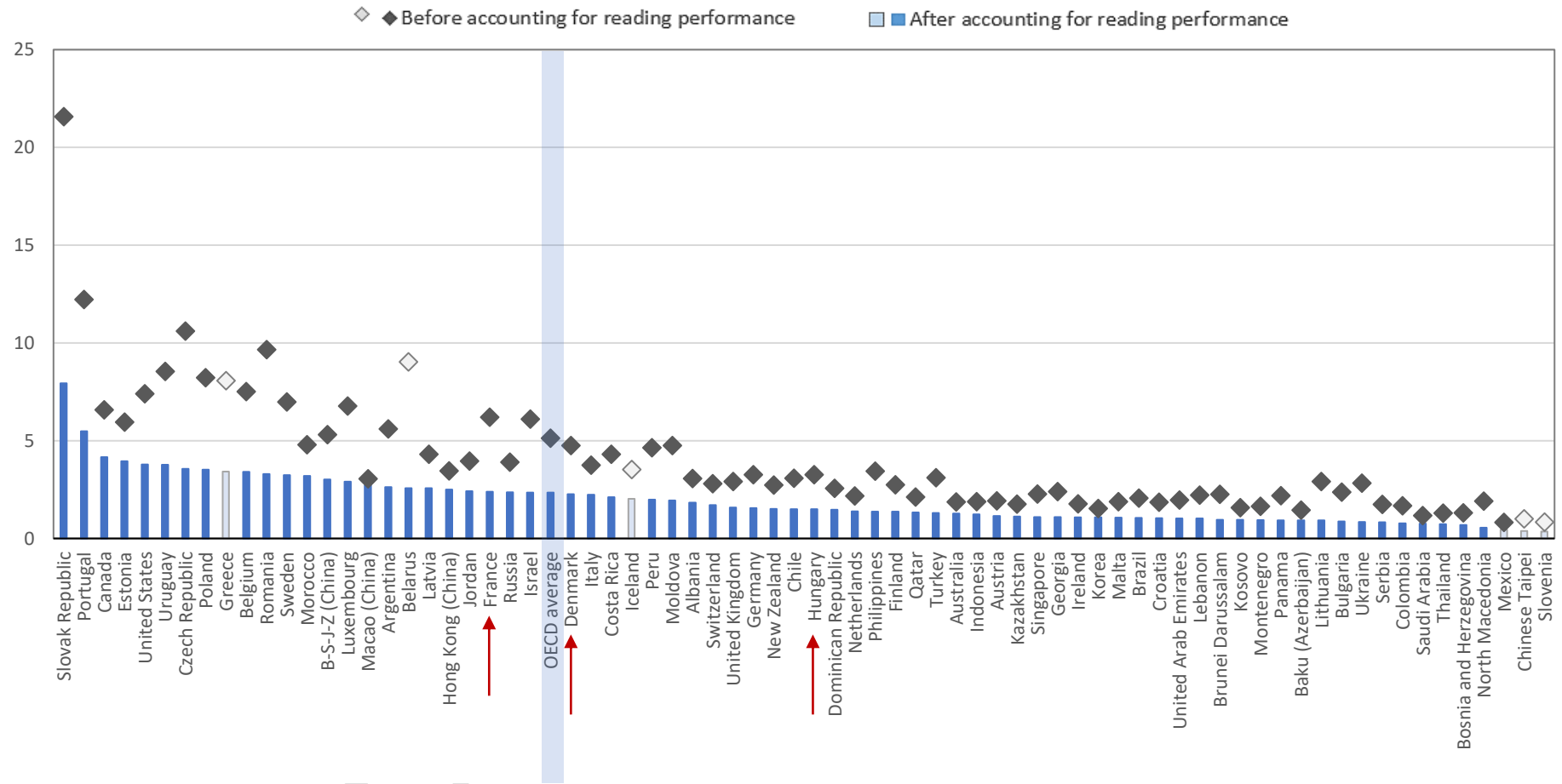
Source: own elaboration based on PISA 2018 database

Management of student heterogeneity, including **ability grouping or tracking**, is considered to be another key aspect in terms of educational engagement and academic success. In particular, it is considered that ability grouping or tracking in the lowest groups, based on cognitive or behavioural characteristics, **may be detrimental for young people; this is doubly unfavourable since it is frequently economic disadvantaged students, or young people with migratory background who are placed on those low tracks** (UNESCO, 2015). Because of that, early tracking increases educational inequality (Castejón & Zancajo, 2015; Hanushek & Wößmann, 2006).

Similarly, it is often argued that both repetition (or grade retention) as well as early tracking affect negatively the level of equality of opportunities and the success of socioeconomically disadvantaged students (as data PISA shows; see, e.g. Castejón & Zancajo, 2015), and as international organization suggest (OECD, 2011a).

Finally, regarding **orientation, guiding devices**, fundamental in transition to post-secondary or post-compulsory education are particularly challenging points. For example, a Portuguese study, based on a qualitative methodology (interviews to young students, n=12), it was identified that the transition between schools and postcompulsory educational tracks, such as vocational programmes, were 'turning points' in students' trajectories (e.g. moving to a new, different school, building, curricula, meeting new peers and teachers) (Santos et al., 2020). In parallel, Aina Tarabini and Judith Jacoviks have extensively analyzed how institutional settings shape young students' transition and, also, ESL (Tarabini & Jacovkis, 2020). In a qualitative study, based on in-depth interviews with key politicians (n = 28) (Tarabini & Jacovkis, 2020), they found three main institutional characteristics that may impact on ESL: (1) the structure of upper secondary education (Baccalaureate is the easy transition, with a lot of available places, the contrary of VET programs); (2) the planning of post-compulsory education, which requires the difficult coordination of the interests and needs of young people, families, schools and companies; and (3) the guidance of educational tracks, based on an implicit model in which academic tracks are of great prestige, while VET programs are often considered to be of lesser educational prestige. Finally, a comparative study of the impact of institutional settings in ESL processes in European educational systems, it was identified that an attractive strand of vocational education at upper secondary level tended to reduce ESL processes (De Witte, Nicaise, et al., 2013).

Territorial context: neighborhood effect, region, the rural – urban divide.

Academic literature has shown that the neighborhood, the region, the territory where young people, families and schools are located tend to have great impact on them (although not always easy to commensurate). **Distressing environments, marginalized neighborhoods, rural areas without basic educational services, etc., may cause many young people to abandon schooling** (De Witte, Cabus, et al., 2013). For instance, based on a small qualitative study in Ireland (interviews to parents of young that had dropped-out, n=9) argued that people living in stigmatized areas tend to perceive low expectation and lack of support from the educational community (Doyle & Keane, 2018)

In this sense, the contribution of the field of urban studies (and on particular on the **neighborhood effect**) has had significant impact on ESL analysis, since it has enabled the introduction of several territorialized variables into the analysis of drop-out processes. Specifically, it is considered that geographic distribution of public services or of local institutional resources may have a great impact on education (Galster, 2010). For instance, an study in Helsinki identified that in neighborhoods with above-average educational resources have a significant positive impact on individuals' post-secondary level of educational attainment (controlling other variables). Still, it is important to note that neighborhood effects appear to produce outcomes in a non-linear, threshold-like fashion, this problematizing simple ideas about causal relations between territories (or social/peers contagion, or collective socialization) and individual educational careers; indeed, the positive externalities of affluent neighbors tends to be higher than the negative impact generated by the less-well neighbors (Galster, 2010). Because of that it is important to identify the specific, particular mechanisms (e.g. projection of negative prejudices, internalization of stigma, etc.) that operate in the relation between territories characteristics and educational trajectories.

The **rural – urban** divide has been described in the chapter dedicated to the evolution of ESL in the EU, based on Eurostat data. In this sense, as it has been argued, the availability of educational institutions in certain territories (such as rural areas) is of crucial importance. This has been highlighted, for instance, in the case of Roma young people living in settlements with reduced access to schools.

Educational engagement

The relationship between young people and schooling appears to be mediated by the different dimensions of educational engagement. Specifically: emotional, behavioral and cognitive engagement of students (Wang & Fredricks, 2014). Based on previous works on ESL (e.g. Tarabini et al., 2019), it is possible to exemplify some of the components of each dimension of schooling (Table 4):

Table 3. Dimensions and components of educational engagement (examples)

Dimension	Components
Expressive order	Causes attributed for educational failure and success
	Subjective dimension of schooling: self-perception, expectations, goals.
	Teacher responsibility for student learning
Behavioral engagement	Regular assistance to classroom
	Active involvement in the classroom activities
	Participation in non-academic or volunteer activities
	Regular realization of homework or school assignments
	Non-attendance, absenteeism, truancy (reverse)
Emotional engagement	Opinion of teachers (pros and cons)
	Trust in the "teacher figure"
	Opinion of the school (pros and cons)
	Perception of teachers' academic support
	Perception of teachers' emotional support
	Perception of discrimination, exclusion, or labelling (reverse)
	Sense of belonging to the center
	Sense of belonging with peers
	Feelings experienced at school
Cognitive engagement	Motivation to learn
	Interest in the learning activities
	Academic records, grade competition, etc.
	Beliefs about the role and utility of schooling
	Self-perception as student
	Self-regulation of behaviour and learning strategies
	Involvement in learning activities outside the school

Source: own elaboration, based on *Can educational engagement prevent Early School Leaving? Unpacking the school's effect on educational success* (Tarabini et al., 2019)

There is a vast academic literature based on engagement of students to school; most of it is based on the original work of Fredericks and colleagues, who proposed definitions, measures, precursors and outcomes of engagement (Fredericks et al., 2004). Each mode of engagement has its specific positive impact on preventing ESL. Behavioral engagement entails positive conduct (e.g. following the rules, adhering to classroom norms, involvement in learning and academic tasks, participation in school-related activities such as athletics or school governance) and the absence of negative conduct and disruptive behaviors (e.g. skipping school, getting in trouble); emotional engagement includes students' affective reactions in the classroom (interest, boredom, happiness, sadness and anxiety, as well as relationship with peers, teachers and identification with school); and cognitive engagement (e.g. investment in learning, self-regulation, interest in academics, such as includes flexibility in problem solving, preference for hard work, and positive coping in the face of failure) (Fredericks et al., 2004).

For instance, in terms of **emotional engagement**, the sense of isolation and the lack of personally meaningful relationships at school are main contributors to academic failure and to ESL processes (Cefai et al., 2016). Indeed, the relationships with peers or with teachers are considered to have great impact on the intention to leave school early (Schwab, 2018). As already mentioned, this is one of the more common factor for explaining students' expectations, aspirations, self-esteem and educational engagement. Most part of the academic literature that identifies this pattern has been inspired by the so-called Pygmalion effect, or of internalization of low expectations (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), and those from minority or lower socio-economic backgrounds are particularly vulnerable in this way (Doyle & Keane, 2018). In addition, student disengagement can partly be explained by schools' organisational characteristics: the more bureaucratic and hierarchical the school, the more depersonalized the social environment (Lyche, 2010).

Academic literature has emphasized the role of bulling (and other situations of violence) in terms of reducing emotional engagement and increasing chances for dropping-out (Momo, Cabus, de Witte, & Groot, 2019). Indeed, a qualitative study (interviews to young adults, n=12), carried in Portugal identified that frustration with bullying seemed to be a constant issue in the trajectories of young early leavers of education (Santos et al., 2020).

Cognitive engagement is frequently seen as the highest predictor for ESL, as often systematic reviews on academic literature had highlighted (Lyche, 2010). According to Rumberger and colleagues, educational performance, academic achievement and attainment (i.e. the promotion from one grade to another) are highly correlated to ESL (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Also, according to De Witte et al., academic achievement is the student-related factor more associated with ESL (and, particularly, one of the strongest predictors of early school leaving is grade retention) (De Witte, Cabus, et al., 2013). For instance, a qualitative study in Portugal identified that many young adults identified lack of purpose related to schooling (and its competences and knowledge): i.e. 'school has a lot of unnecessary things', disconnected from 'real life' (Santos et al., 2020). Likewise, in a quantitative study in Spain, Bayón and colleagues analyze the strong relationship between early school leaving and scholastic performance (i.e. results from previous educational stages, inferred through data at CCAA level: School life expectancy at 6, suitability rate at 15, Graduation rate at compulsory secondary education, and scores on PISA) -with gender and regional differences as mediating variables (Bayón et al., 2021).

Still, cognitive engagement is not independent on the social background, on the contrary: often studies identified that students with the lowest socio-economic status or ethnic minorities are the ones with the lowest sense of futility and the lowest confidence in their possibilities to succeed in school (Agirdag, O., Houtte, & Van Avermaet, 2012).

Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that 'although the correlation between failure in school and dropout is clear, not all dropouts are poor educational performers (Lyche, 2010, p. 16).

In terms of **behavioural engagement**, there are a series of actions that academic literature often analyses in parallel to ESL processes. For instance, irregular attendance and absenteeism are considered to be a factor increasing the odds of leaving school (Momo et al., 2019). Also, disruptive or deviant behaviours (e.g. drug and alcohol use, juvenile delinquency, teenage parenting) may also impact negatively on ESL processes (Keppens & Spruyt, 2018; Lyche, 2010; Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

The aforementioned study of Tarabini and colleagues, based on a qualitative methodology carried in Barcelona, with a representative sample that include multiple techniques (interviews with teaching staff, n=47, and students, n=54, as well as focus

groups of teachers, n=5, and students, n=6), it was identified several aspects that may impact on the different dimensions of educational engagement. In terms of behavioral engagement, the involvement of the students in diverse activities (at various levels: classroom, extracurricular, non-academic or volunteer, etc.), as well as schools' efforts schools' efforts in managing students diverse and specific needs, are both considered to be key elements. In terms of emotional engagement, the opinions of teachers (e.g. as accessible and attentive to their needs, emotionally supportive beyond their strictly academic function) and schools (e.g. with a sense of belonging and of being cared) was considered of great importance. And, in terms of cognitive engagement the results were inconclusive. In conclusion, school contexts were the key factor mediating young people engagement. Those school context were constituted by organizational practices, teachers expectations, but also schools' social composition and students' socio-eco-nomic and cultural background.

4. Quantitative evaluation: questionnaire

The results of the questionnaire (n=25) indicated a general satisfaction with the course.[8] The questionnaire included some basic information, such as nationality or profession; Specifically, 8 Hungarians learners, 7 French, 5 Danish ones and also 5 Catalan ones answered the survey. The main professions included Teacher in a regular school (at any level: primary, secondary, VET) (the 58% of the total), and professional of an educational institution working with youths (but not into a regular school) (21%), followed by administration worker, psychologists and family therapists, volunteers on NGOs.

In general, **the course was chosen by the learners in order to strengthen and acquiring new skills** (58% of the total answers to the questions 'For what reasons did you participate in this course?').

In general, the **organization of the course was positively valuated** (particularly the general organization, skills of the trainers and the clarity of content, more than 4 out of 5); still, the articulation of presential and online sessions was the lesser valuated item (only 3.6 out of 6) (Figure 2).

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[8] The course contains 10 modules : EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING; INCLUSIVE EDUCATION; IDENTIFICATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN DIFFICULTY; ACCOMPANIMENT AND STANCES; EDUCATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL ORIENTATION, GUIDANCE; SOCIAL SKILLS, AUTONOMY, CRITICAL THINKING; LINKING NON FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING; COLLABORATION WITH FAMILIES; COLLABORATION WITH ASSOCIATIONS (COMMUNITY); COLLABORATION SCHOOL FAMILIES COMMUNITY. The modules include: Research contributions to the issue addressed (study of excerpts from documents during course time with or without prior preparation, excerpts from articles, flipped classroom model, etc.); Implementation (work on videos, good practices, tools, exercises, analysis of existing systems); Evaluation (individual self-evaluation in groups or collectively, reflective workshops, problem situations to be solved, role plays).

Figure 4. Average degree of satisfaction* with the general organization of the course
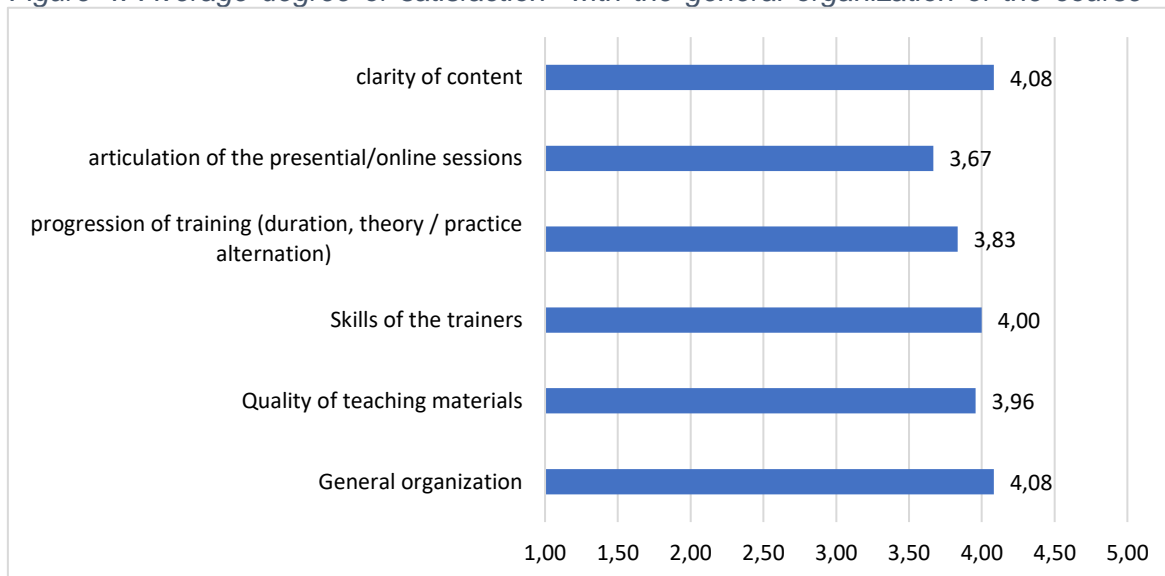
Source: own elaboration. Note * = scale from 1= very dissatisfied to 5=very satisfied.

However, **many learners considered that the training did not meet their high initial expectations, and consider that it was not always in line with the realities of their organizations** (Figure 3). One of the possible explanations is at the beginning of the training course there was not clearly set up an initial expectation exposition from all participants.

Figure 5. Average degree of satisfaction* with the initial expectations of the realities of learners' professional lives
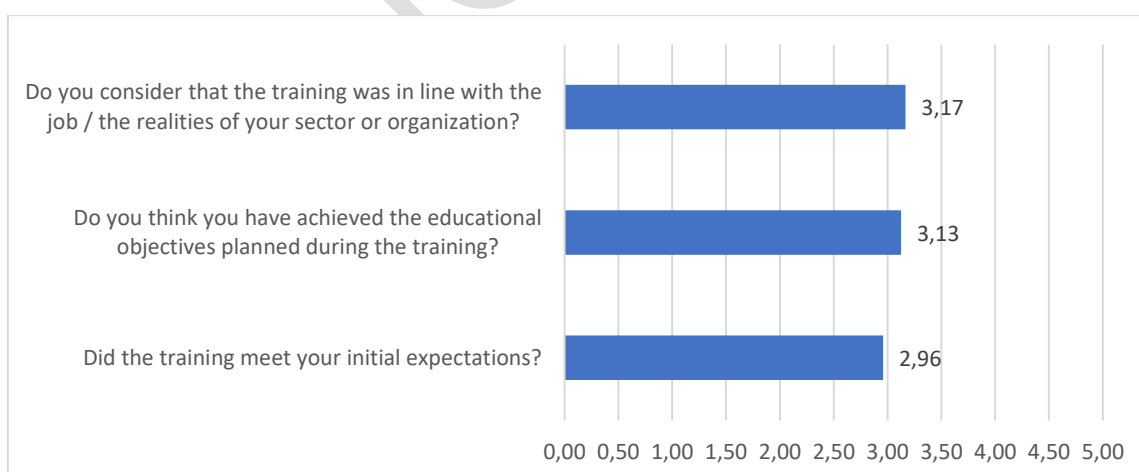
Source: own elaboration. Note * = scale from 1= very dissatisfied to 5=very satisfied.

In general, **for many learners the course had a relevant impact: they highlighted the importance of coordination with external partners, and the training course provided better understanding of ESL processes and the specific difficulties that**

unequally affect learners (e.g. economic or cultural differences) that impact on learners (more than ¾ explicated changes in those aspects). In contrast, learners considered that it has less impact changing their positions in relation to parents (only ⅓ had put in place actions for parents, and about ½ had changed their posture with the parents) (Figure 3).
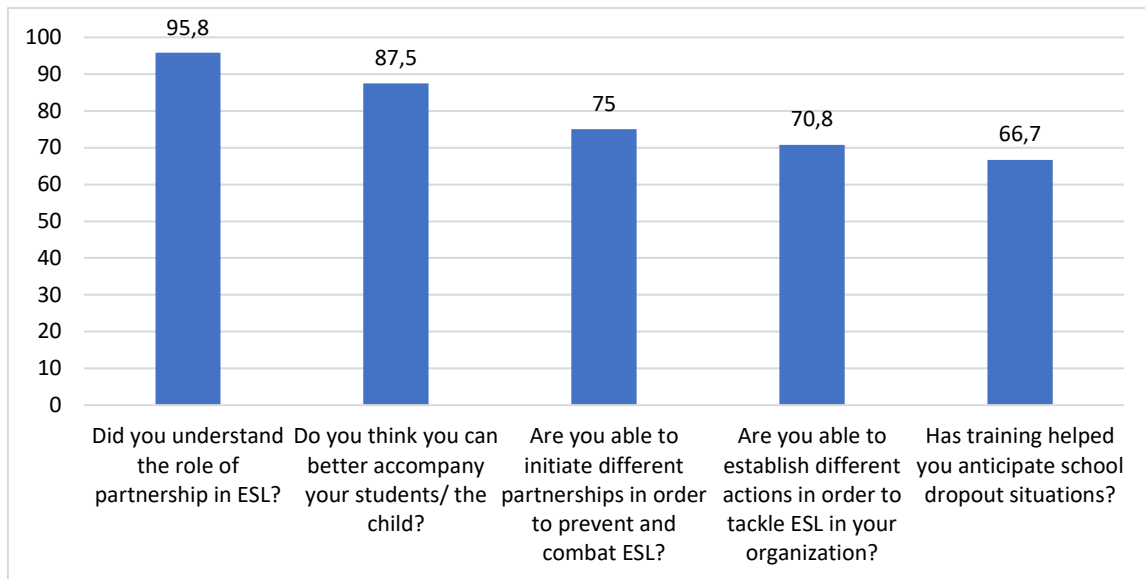
Figure 6. Results of the training
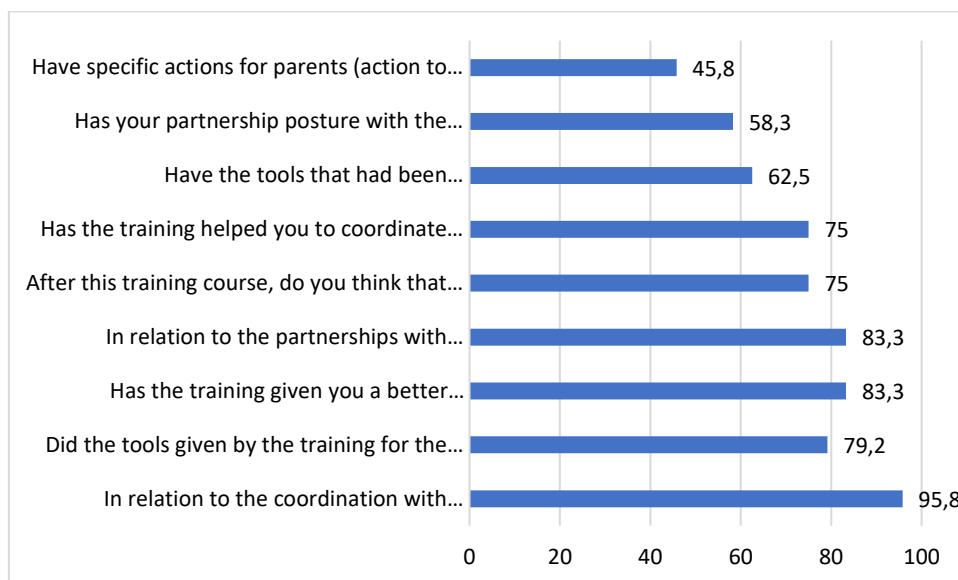
Source: own elaboration

For most learners **the objectives of the course have been achieved**, such as the **comprehension of ESL processes (the role of partnerships, how to accompany learners in those processes)**. Some minor difficulties appear to achieve skills to anticipate the emergence of ESL processes or to establish different actions to tackle drop-outs in learners' organizations (Figure 4).

Figure 7. Assessment of the content of the course

A bar chart with the following values:
- Did you understand the role of partnership in ESL? — 95,8
- Do you think you can better accompany your students/ the child? — 87,5
- Are you able to initiate different partnerships in order to prevent and combat ESL? — 75
- Are you able to establish different actions in order to tackle ESL in your organization? — 70,8
- Has training helped you anticipate school dropout situations? — 66,7

Source: own elaboration

The most **positive aspects of the course** included:

- **Sharing experiences, discussions and debates with learners and partners**, about different topics (i.e. educational systems, professional profiles, and good practices). For instance, learners considered that positive aspects included: 'Exchange of knowledge between different professionals in the world of education, with different responsibilities and methodologies of working with learners in an Early School Leaving situation'; 'See in action methodologies and projects, as well as to speak directly with the agents and professionals involved'; or 'To have a space for reflection and multi-professional debate'.

- **Specific contents of the course and of the conferences**. Specially, the knowledge of other educational systems, as well as of good practices, has been considered by many learners as source of 'inspiration', thus 'broadening' their 'perspective' on the matter. Similarly, the consolidation of the idea that the community involvement, as well as coordination among (non)educational professionals, are key points in tackling ESL processes were other goods aspect of the course. Although less quoted, some learners referred to the fact that the training has enabled them to gain more academic-focused perspective, critical thinking and analytical skills in order to reinterpret their day-to-day professional lives.

- **Possibilities of future, further connexions, 'networking' among learners, and partners**.

In contrast, **negative aspects of the course** included:

- **Lack of course time**, which implied occasionally superficial approaches to complex problems. Also, especially for many non-academic learners, it was considered excessively tiring, e.g.: 'It was tiring sometimes so I couldn't pay attention at the last presentations of the day'.

- **Structure of the content of the training**. There is a tension between general/abstract/theoretical approaches of ESL processes versus the specific/concrete/practical good practices against drop-out. Among learners, there is no consensus on which one should come first. For instance, some student argued: 'I think the focus was more on the theoretical part, and less on the concrete practices: I would have preferred more practical examples, insights into lessons, classes, workshops'. In contraposition, an answer to the most negative aspects of the course was the 'Lack of a contextual introduction to ESL that allows concepts to be agreed upon by all partners'. Indeed, learners present confronted views regarding this trade-off, as it will be developed in the next section.

- **Absence of a common, shared, consensual definition of ESL processes**, which, in addition, led to an excessive focus on topics surrounding or causally contributing, but not constituting ESL processes, such as absenteeism or school failure. Occasionally, it was considered that the training excessively delved in off-the-topic elements, e.g. 'I enjoyed this training, and I think it was very instructive in the sense that I could see how another country's educational system works. But the subjects that were covered during the program weren't relevant to my volunteering experience because the community I work has very different problem than those communities who were represented during the course'; and also 'I work with Roma children who have different kind of problem than that was touched upon in this program'.

- **Communication and linguistic problems of trainers and learners**: lack of skills in English, lack of fluid communication and coordination, etc. E.g.: 'Une traduction en Français aurait été appréciée lors de conférences et présentations à l'étranger. De même pour les modules écrits envoyés'; 'It would be good to give professionals who do not have language skills, but are otherwise good, a headset in which to listen to lectures in their mother tongue'.

- **Difficulties in applying the results of the training in the future professional lives of the learners**. This was specifically considered to be a problem for many French learners. E.g.: asked about how to tackle ESL processes, a student stated

that 'I don't know because I am not authorized to do this work in my school', and another 'It is difficult to implement it even if there are many interesting practices and devices'; and the last one 'Very enriching training but difficult or even impossible to put into practice in our French system. This creates frustration, however, it has allowed me to be better in my work, especially in relation to the learners'.

- **Complications derived of the online sessions, imposed by Covid-19 restrictions**.

The **aspects to improve** include:

- **Better communication and coordination strategies between national groups, as well as between trainers – learners**. This includes solving linguistic problems (e.g. providing materials in diverse languages), and tackling difficulties during online sessions. E.g.: 'Documents in French language and more communication between our organizers and us'; 'Prepare projects upstream or during training, lack of connection with our hierarchy'.
- **More detailed national and contextual information**: e.g. consensual definition of ESL, more systematic descriptions of national educational systems, etc.
- **Implementing coordination spaces for participants of the course, both formal and informal**, facilitating future interactions among them and after the course has finished.

After the course, the learners would take the following **actions in order to support and accompany students in risk of school leaving**:

- To implement new plans and protocols against ESL.
- To contact, listen and coordinate all actors involved in the process: e.g. families, educational professionals (e.g. special education teachers), social services, broader community (e.g. associations, NGOs). E.g 'doing coordinated work with different professionals inside and outside the school and doing close monitoring and support with the young person and his family'; 'Listening them and communicating with all the partners'.
- To focus on broader aspects of educational processes, including social, emotional, psychological, cultural aspects of education, and creating new inclusive, personalized and caring environments, more prone to generate well-being, self-esteem, self-knowledge among young people.

Overwhelmingly, the learners considered that **participating in the training has enabled them to gain self-confidence, improve the quality of their work, improve as professionals and develop new skill**s (more than ⅘); still, as it will be discussed in the focus groups, not so to put those new skills into practice (Figure 5).

Figure 8. At the end of this training, do you consider that this training enabled you ...
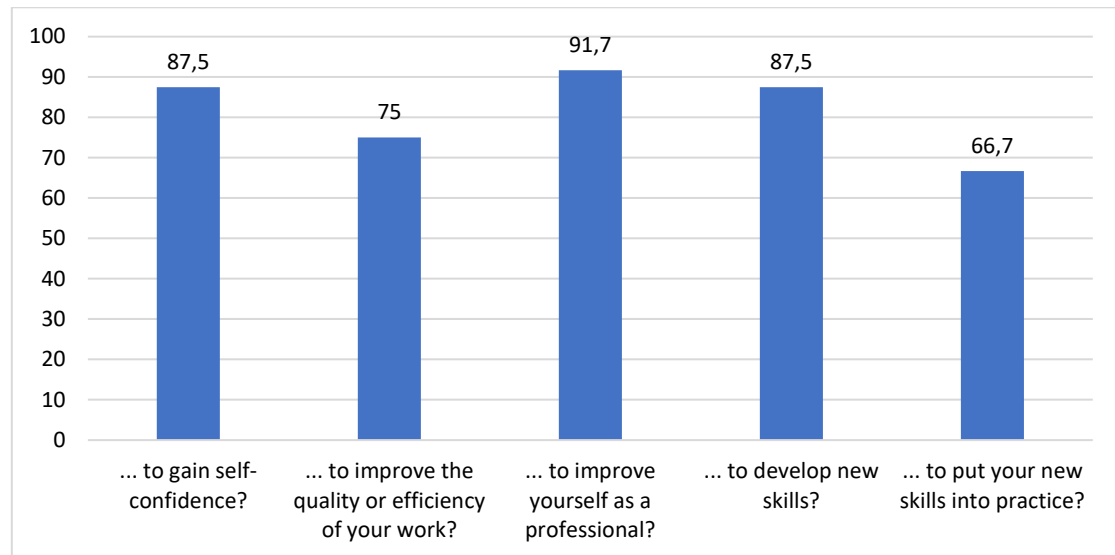
Source: own elaboration

5. Qualitative evaluation: focus groups

In the next pages, the results of the focus groups are presented. In order the structure the results, the main analytical categories used are: first, the curriculum and the content (e.g. structure, relation between theoretical and general content versus concrete examples), pedagogies (conferences and ordinary sessions, online classes, etc.) and evaluation and continuity of the course.

First, regarding curriculum (i.e. the structure, calendar of the content) the opinions were in general very positive, although some main dilemmas appeared.[9]

The first dilemma is related to the **structure of the content of the training**. As already noted analysing the results of the questionnaire, there is a trade-off in the relation between general/abstract/theoretical approaches of ESL processes versus the specific/concrete/practical good practices against drop-out.

Indeed, the balance between practice and theory, concrete and abstract content, was difficult to establish. The next quote shows a preference for a more general content:

> We prepared a session in the mobility, it was about inclusion. I thought that a more general or theoretical approach would be ok, but they [the other learners] wanted more concrete details. There was a lack of concordance of what we did and what they expected.
>
> [Danish focus group]

In addition, the **sequence of the argumentation** (from the local cases, the particular experience, to the general, systemic analysis of ESL) was, occasionally, considered to be unbalanced. The next quote illustrated a preference for beginning with more general approaches:

> The last session [of the conference in Catalonia], that of Aina Tarabini, should have been the first. The materials were good, very practice-oriented, very grounded in our day to day life. And they [the organizers] let us know

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[9] It is worthy to mention that the training included: face to face sessions in national contexts, online sessions because of covid situation and the activities of learning and training (so called mobility) in Denmark and Spain.

what we [the learners] were doing [professionally]. But there was no general idea of what exactly early school leaving was.

I would have changed the course structure. I would change the general picture of the course: begin with an introduction on ESL. It would have been nice to have identified early school leaving in a more systematic, contextual, structural way from the beginning. We went from particular problems to the general picture.

[Catalan focus group]

The more abstract content was also criticized, given the alleged lack of coherence between theoretical modules and sessions, as the next quotes show:

In our group we didn't discuss nothing, not between the modules, or between mobilities…

We did not know the topics of the classes in advance or anticipation, it was pure miscommunication. Also, the modules were completely disconnected of the classes: you read the module 2, but the class was about the module 3, or about something completely different! It was not only miscommunication, but also disorganization.

There was always a difference between the topic and the reading and, on the other hand, the presentation.

[French focus group]

Nevertheless, learners recognized the **different values of each type of knowledge**, which were compatible. In this sense, general or abstract knowledge provided a more systematic overview of the concepts of the course, as well as of the specific settings of each national context. In parallel, practical knowledge was considered to be more easily applicable, "real" examples to be almost-directly implemented in learners' professional practices. The following quotes illustrate how specific examples were considered to be inspirations, since provided more 'tools':

We want more resources. We found concrete, specific examples when we talked with teachers, about how to change the classroom mood, how to change the spacing of the classroom, the walls. Those were inspirations.

That's why we loved mobility: it is more concrete, more tools.

Thanks to the Danish mobility we found examples of how to involve, engage students with the local community. It has not a direct relationship with the academic subjects but if the students are happy and with a good mood they will be better at the university. We learned a lot about well-being, it was an inspiration.

[French focus groups]

In general, learners valued the **great diversity of approaches (theoretical, practical) and settings (national, international)** that the training covered. Those diverse approaches were, overall, considered to be both challenging and enriching, since the quotidianly, routine, day-to-day of professionals facilitates inertia, thus a great factor when enrolling to the training.

> You are in a County Council, always looking at your navel, and suddenly
> you see other ways of working.
>
> [Catalan focus group]

> We enrolled to the course because in the daily work you have blind spots:
> places that you don't see, that never see. You need, sometimes, eyes in
> different angles, different point of views, for seeing what you are not even
> aware that exists.
>
> [Danish focus group]

Nevertheless, this theoretical and contextual variety was also potentially challenging, since it **required a great deal of knowledge about each national setting, which occasionally learners considered to be not the case**, as the next quotes illustrate:

> It was interesting to compare different educational systems. But we didn't
> explain our system: not Hungary or France were explained.

> We did not bring anything to the course. Catalans and Danish bring
> something to the course, but we? We felt a little bit useless. Is a pity that we
> couldn't bring more, but it was either our choice.
>
> [French focus group]

Still, this is not to say that participants assumed that a direct transference from other points of views, practices, etc. was nor possible neither desirable. On the contrary, although getting in touch with new scenarios, good practices, etc., was illustrating for them, participants on the course assumed that **direct translation, transferences of such inherently contextual practices were impossible and undesirable.** The **lack of contextual knowledge about national educational systems exacerbated this problem** (exacerbated in the French and Hungarian case):

> There are no educational projects that you can simply transfer. Still, this
> course gives you the tools to think critically, to decide what to take from
> each experience.

> Good practices are taken, but you don't copy the whole system.
>
> [Catalan focus group]

There are a lot of things that you lose in the [linguistic] translation, so yes, language is barrier. But there are also deeper barriers, because you do not really know the context, it is difficult the compare.

We do not know about what happen in Catalan schools, what are the competences of the central or the regional administrations, their degree of school autonomy, or how teachers are trained. This lack of contextual knowledge was a limitation of the training

We do not know nothing about the systems of Hungary and France!

A lot of energy is spend only thinking how this may "feet" in Denmark.

It was good to know a little bit about another European countries. At the end, you'll end only knowing about US and UK educational systems.

[Danish focus group]

Indeed, **the unsolvable, significant structural (socioeconomic, educational) differences among national systems was considered to be sometimes frustrating**. Nevertheless, having more resources was not equal to solving the problem, as it was commonly admitted.

And sometimes it's frustrating, because you would like to copy all their economic system. In this course we all have the sufficient critical thinking to see that we are very different countries, that our GDP per capita is super different, that the multicultural situation is diverse.

You got a little jealous when you saw the resources some had.

[Catalan focus group]

In Denmark we spend a lot of money combating ESL, more resources than other countries, but we did not solve it. Maybe it is not about spending more and doing the same, but about being more ambitious and innovative. Not more of the same.

[Danish focus group]

However, the presentation of the good practices and examples was occasionally criticised, because not always is clear its impact:

There is, in the course, a problem, which is the lack of focus on evidence of the practices. You miss whether the practices, the examples had any real impact on students.

[Danish focus group]

Specifically, the **interdisciplinary nature of the course increased the diversity of professional profiles, thus facilitating more diverse, rich exchanges**.

> You talk with various actors: county councils, schools, people from the university, etc. That's a rich variety of profiles, it's good for the course.
>
> [Catalan focus group]

Although undoubtedly something positive, the differences of professional situations of the participants of the course, their heterogeneity, implied that some specific elements required certain adaptation:

> They [the teachers of the training] teach you to look at families differently. But at the same time, I have to do it differently - it's not the same thing to do when you look at families when you're in vocational training and your students are older than when you're in ESO [lower secondary compulsory education, typically 12 – 16 years old] and they're younger.
>
> [Catalan focus group]

In conclusion, the participants of the course highly appreciated the combination of theory and practice, of general knowledge and best practices examples. The **key messages of the content were considered to be: the importance of partnerships and community, as well as of educational and social factors in tackling ESL processes**. However, it was considered that it was easier to identify the problem (e.g. early identification of drop-out processes) than of solving it.

> The problem of early school leaving must be addressed globally, from within and outside the school.
>
> [Catalan focus group]
>
> We get [during the training] some [new] ideas about ESL, about monitoring and guidance, begin in early ages, with a different role for VET programmes (maybe shorter, less academic).
>
> We all talk about education, education, education, and I think that not all solutions may be about education. Working-based solutions can be useful too: school, job and education.
>
> [Danish focus group]
>
> It is easier to identify problems than to find solutions.
>
> [Catalan focus group]

In pedagogical terms, the **conferences/trips were considered to be one of the best spaces of the training**, for two main reasons. They provided a practical, located, 'real'

knowledge, and provided ample opportunities for identifying examples and good practices. They allowed, too, a kind of sensible knowledge that goes beyond what is written in official documents. In addition, they facilitated informal spaces, allowing the emergence of many, significant experiences for participating learners, and created a sense of community and internal cohesion among learners.

> Seeing other experiences in person, feeling and touching them, when you visit and see another reality, is much richer than just reading a report.
>
> The paper holds everything, especially the official documentation. If you tell me something, it's not the same as if I see it myself, it's harder to hide things from me [when seeing it for myself].
>
> You have a lot of time on your visits, and there is space to talk, without being eaten by the activities.
>
> There are many informal moments that allow you to talk about everything: flight hours, lunch hours ... you end up networking, these are more personal spaces.
>
> [Catalan focus group]

Both conferences/visits (Denmark, Catalonia) were organized in a very different way. In Denmark, it was organized with a higher number of activities, and covered a broader range of topics (occasionally criticized for focusing excessively on absenteeism and school failure). In Catalonia, more time was devoted to informal activities, which as considered to be both alleviating and also more conducive to networking. Although both structures have their positive and negative dimensions, it was often perceived as a

> In Denmark we were in the hotel all time, so we have more time shared with different groups. We worked more in small sessions with mixed groups. There were more time for informal encounters. We also even shared a lists with our names and photos, because at the end of the day you forget about faces -but the it wasn't shared by other groups.
>
> In Denmark there were sessions for all countries, small mixed groups, lectures, visitations and time for reflection.
>
> [Danish focus group]

In Catalonia there were les conferences -which was generally considered alleviating. In parallel, in Denmark, it was more occupied with sessions,

> There was a lot of activity in Denmark, it was hyperactive. It was given content all the time, with too much focus on absenteeism and school failure.
>
> [Catalan focus group]

Pedagogically, a common criticism was the **excessively magistral and expositive, academic-oriented materials and ordinary sessions, particularly exacerbated in case of non-academic participants**. In addition, due to the lack of time and of sessions, there was considered to be an excessive quantity of content. Those criticism contrasted with the possibility of a **more informal spaces, open debates and horizontal learning during conferences**.

> It was too much content. For example, the relationship with the families was done in just one session, and it is impossible to fit all the content in such a short time. Time was running out constantly.
>
> The explanatory sessions were a teacher just writing on a blackboard. You weren't allowed to do no nothing. We lacked spaces for reflection, dynamics of participation - and when they were there, they were too forced, unnatural. Instead, it was the informal spaces, the lunches, the visits, where the questions came out: "Oh, so you do that or this?"
>
> [Catalan focus group]

> The material was too academic. Three hundred pages of academic work, in English? We are not prepared to.
>
> We are not academy!
>
> Non-academic participants bring something different to the project: practice experience, inter-departments collaborations. We work in the same topic and the same objective but from very different point of view [than academics].
>
> [Danish focus group]

In addition, the use of English as language of instruction and as of relationship among learners carried massive implications, given the limited linguistic abilities of many participants.

> Because of linguistic difficulties you ended up just scratching the surface, you don't really deepen the conversation.
>
> There are a lot of things that you lose in the [linguistic] translation, so yes, language is barrier.
>
> [Danish focus group]

Also in pedagogical terms, the **organization of the course had to be radically altered by the Covid-19**. Although not a major problem for many, it inevitably make participation more difficult for learners, as the next quotes exemplify:

> Everything has been normally adapted, as has been in all other areas of our professional and personal life. We missed being there in person, with more people, being in situ, which would be more enriching. But we have been able to adapt.
>
> When you are in person in a session you participate much more than when you do it online. And you participate even more when you're in person in informal spaces, when you're, for instance, at lunch.
>
> [Catalan focus group]

> Online classes were difficult. It is impossible to stay six hours concentrated! Also, discussions were not natural.
>
> [French focus group]

When evaluating the course, **the majority of learners expressed that it had a positive impact on them**. For instance:

> The training had an impact. Absolutely: a concrete change. You have a more detail-oriented, more open-minded approach [after the training]

A particular side-effect of the training is that it facilitated the **emergence of contacts, networking**, etc., for future occasions, beyond the training itself. Different profiles of future collaborations emerged: bilateral agreements between partners; school to school exchanges (e.g. practitioners, scholarships); academic collaborations; etc. Both quotes exemplify those processes:

> We interacted with other partners, yes, and the training has worked as platform for creating, other, easier Erasmus-like projects. One Erasmus like this, with so many partners, is huge, too complicated. We'll find way to visit students in another way.
>
> [Danish focus group]

> The visits were useful, and we've continuing speaking with partners, we have a good relationship. We want that young teachers make stay in Demark, or Catalonia, to share pedagogy, to get some concrete examples to apply in the classroom.
>
> [French focus group]

However, although participants changed their perceptions, visions, understanding, etc., on ESL processes, those **changes do not always can be immediately applied into their professional lives**. So, paradoxically, the **professional evolution can be simultaneously enriching and frustrating** -

given the difficulties of importing the lessons learned. Participants were aware and conscious of this situation, as was discussed in the next quote:

> I can only change small things in my classroom. I can not convince anyone there: how can I convince the inspector, the Ministry of Education.
>
> When I proposed two small actions in a municipality of my department, in a little village, they looked at me as if I was crazy, with the eyes wide open! [laugh]
>
> Ok: we change the teachers, we become more open minded, but: it is enough for changing the system?
>
> We are not together in [country of origin], we are not a team. We work alone. It is very difficult to translate anything when you work alone.
>
> In [country of origin] education, administration, social services, psychological services work separated, there are no links among us. We are alone in our place. Training is rich, yes, and we found beautiful people from different countries. But is it useful? Maybe not. Yes, sure, we change as teachers, but it is also frustrating, useless if you can't change your environment.
>
> We have a very bureaucratic, centralized educational system, it is difficult to change it.
>
> [French focus group]

6. Evolution of ESL in the European Union

During last decades, **ESL processes has been prominently placed as an educational, economic and political 'problem', both in academic circles and political institutions**. In this sense, **ESL has been a central component of the European Union (EU) educational agenda**, and unsurprisingly indicators of ESL have been often used in order to elaborate educational objectives in the European arena.[10]

The European Commission (EC) gave a fundamental step in 2008, when, framed in the *strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training* (the so-called *Europe 2020 Strategy*) considered ESL reduction as a priority area and adopted a benchmark to be achieved by 2020: the objective of reducing the European Union (EU) average for early school leaving to less than 10% by 2020. This was ambitious objective since -as it will be described in the next pages- the ESL level in the EU-28 countries was of 14,7% in 2008.

During the period 2008-2021, the European institutions published a series of communications, in which ESL occupied a central place. Those publication combined different educational strategies and school approaches aimed to reduce educational inequalities -aimed particularly to reduce ESL. For instance, the communications *Progress Towards the Lisbon Objectives in Education and Training: Indicators and Benchmarks 2009* (EC, 2009), *Europe 2020— A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth* (EC, 2010), the *Council Recommendation of 28 June 2011 on policies to reduce early school leaving* (European Council, 2011), *Reducing early school leaving: Key messages and policy support* (EC, 2013), *A whole school approach to tackling early school leaving. Policy messages* (EC, 2015), *Declaration on promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non- discrimination through education* (European Council of Education, 2015), or the publication of the website *European Toolkit for Schools Promoting inclusive education and tackling early school leaving* - among others.

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[10] Not only EU has been extremely interested in ESL. Also OECD has been keenly interested on dropping out prcesses, as noted by the extensive literature review *Taking on the Completion Challenge - A Literature Review on Policies to Prevent Dropout and Early School Leaving* (Lyche, 2010). In parallel, the importance of ESL in the European agenda is, however, not to diminish the importance of other educational topics on it. For instance, the transitions between compulsory and post compulsory levels are of great importance in the European agenda (Tarabini & Jacovkis, 2020); similarly, in recent years, European strategy placed renewed interest on mental health (particularly after the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on young people's mental health) (Downes, 2018).

Recently, and despite the success of most European countries tackling ESL (in 2019, the EU-28 countries reduced its ESL to only 9,9%), early school leaving has remained a key element of the European educational agenda. Indeed, the Council approved in 2021 the *Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)*, which sets a new EU-level target: the share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 9% by 2030.

Those communications **framed and conceptualized ESL as educational problem, but also as economic issue**. It is often argued that EU perspective on ESL processes tend to excessively focus on ESL as economic problem (e.g. its impact on productivity, economic competitiveness and growth), on which education and training are mere investments in human capital (Gillies & Mifsud, 2016; Grimaldi & Landri, 2019), while neglecting other facets of ESL processes.

Still, more than the European arena, **the national settings are the privileged spaces for analyzing ESL processes**. On the one hand, because despite apparently homogeneous framing of ESL, national settings are still fundamental in recontextualizing them.[11] And, on the other hand, local educational systems in Europe present extreme variations in terms of structure, schools organization, pedagogical practices, teachers' training, academic outcomes or drop-out processes. In order to compare the prevalence of ESL in different European countries, **the definition of Eurostat provides a common ground for comparing European countries**:

---

[11] Nevertheless, it is also important to note that each national context selectively adopted specific versions of this general European conceptualization of ESL as a problem. For instance, based on a critical historiographical perspective, it was identified how different Italian governments adopted this European vision, in different ways (e.g. for implementing policies addressed to 'revitalise the Italian welfarist tradition of pedagogic innovation and local experimentalism') (Grimaldi & Landri, 2019). Similarly, a qualitative study in Greece, based on in-depth interviews to key educational actors, identified that while the European discourse tend to explore sophisticated technologies (e.g. comparative statistics, statistical assessments, benchmarking tools), in contrast, the Greek government -in a postcrisis scenario- tend to focus on austerity measures, and compliance to communitarian goals as a matter of political realism rather than commitment to European convergence (Zambeta, 2019). Also, a qualitative study in Spain identified the interaction between the European Commission and a sample of educational authorities in Spain, and found that, despite shared meanings, there are overlapping and disparate theories of change regarding ESL processes (i.e. EU recommends an encompassing approach, focused on prevention and de-segregation policies, in contrast Spanish authorities adopt a much narrower perspective: diversification of school tracks, strengthening the role of principals) (Rambla, 2018). Because of that, it is argued (in relation to Catalan context, but generalizable to other settings) that the conceptualization, theory of change and policies to reduce ESL processes are very different according to diverse public administrations (Tarabini et al., 2018).

"Data on early leavers are derived from the EU's labour force survey (LFS); the data shown are calculated as annual averages of quarterly data. (…)

Early leavers from education and training denotes the percentage of the population aged 18-24 having attained at most lower secondary education and not being involved in further education or training.

The numerator of the indicator refers to persons aged 18-24 who meet the following two conditions: (a) the highest level of education or training they have completed is ISCED 2011 levels 0, 1 or 2 (ISCED 1997 levels 0, 1, 2 or 3C short) and (b) they have not received any education or training (in other words neither formal nor non-formal) in the four weeks preceding the survey.

The denominator is the total population of the same age group, excluding respondents who did not answer the questions 'highest level of education or training successfully completed' and 'participation in education and training'."

(source: Eurostat)

$$ESL = \frac{\text{Population } 18 - 24 \text{ attained at most lower secondary education and not currently studying}}{\text{Persones aged } 18 - 24}$$

Nevertheless, the Eurostat definition has proven to be an almost consensual definition of the phenomenon. The consolidation or Eurostat definition has facilitated the inclusion of ESL in the global educational agenda and the establishment of collective benchmarks. Still, the limitations of the indicator (Dale, 2010), and also the lack of data of certain individuals characteristics (socioeconomic background, migratory situations) makes the analysis of the statistics inherently limited.[12]

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[12] Although widely used, this definition is not consensual, and has been contested and criticised by some relevant scholars; for instance, according to Roger Dale:

• The focus on 18-24 years olds means that it is a retrospective measurement. The US measurement of status and event drop out and the Canadian cohort measurement are more robust and specific. Measurement of who drops out, when and with which level of qualification should be the aim if measurement is to more successfully contribute to policy.

• The EU ESL measure on its own does not tell us about those who have successfully completed lower secondary education and those who have dropped out of schooling at ISCED 0 or 1.

• The numbers of individuals with lower secondary education tells us nothing about the quality of attainment achieved at that level. There is a gap between the EU ESL and Upper Secondary Education indicators: the indicators make it difficult to take account of the range of different education and training offers beyond compulsory schooling which are an extension or development of lower secondary skills.

• The Labour Force Survey focus on a four week period prior to the survey can seriously underestimate the amount of relevant education and training which individuals will have undergone but which will still not mean that they have achieved a qualification higher than ISCED 3c short.

Acknowledging that all comparisons may risk the possibility of oversimplifying educational complexities, in the next pages it is described the evolution of ESL in European countries during the last decades, using Eurostat data, and emphasizing two main variables: gender and degree of urbanisation.

The most salient result is that, during the last decades, **ESL in Europe has decreased dramatically: from 21,6% in 1996 to 9,9% in 2020** (Figure 2).

Figure 9. ESL in European Union*, 1996 – 2020
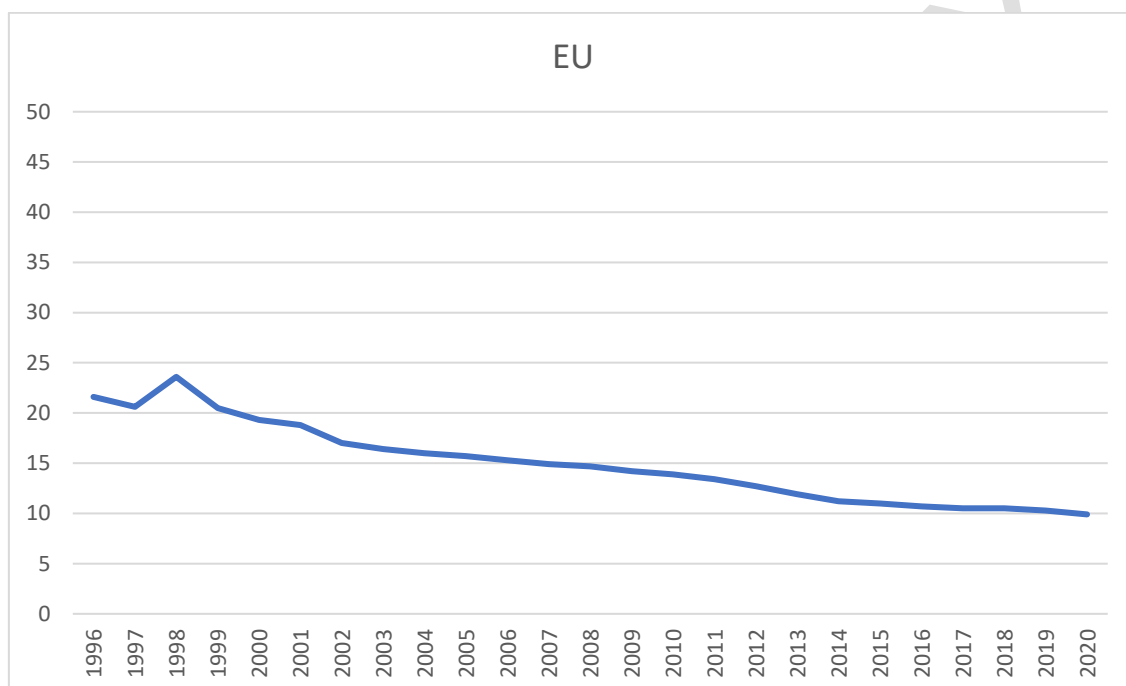
Source: Eurostat. * = European Union - 15 countries (1995-2004), European Union - 28 countries (2013-2020), European Union - 27 countries (from 2020). In the next figures, this definition of EU is used.

However, and as it has been extensively acknowledged, there are wide disparities and great internal variety in terms of ESL in the European Union. While some countries have extremely reduced ESL levels, inferior to 5% (such as Croatia, Montenegro, Greece, Switzerland, Slovenia), some other **countries have excessive ESL levels, superior to 10% (United Kingdom, Cyprus, Hungary, Bulgaria, Italy, Iceland), or even to 15% (Romania, Spain, Turkey)** (Figure 3).

• The definition of what counts as education and training in the EUROSTAT measure is so broad that it tells us very little about the extent to which there has been a meaningful increase the in the level or quality of learning" (Dale, 2010, p. 14)
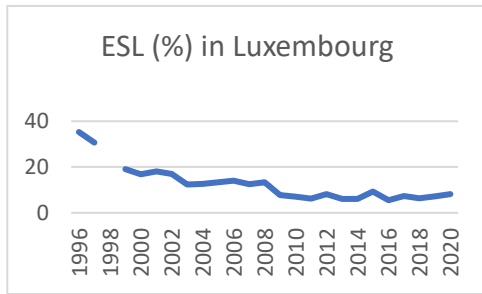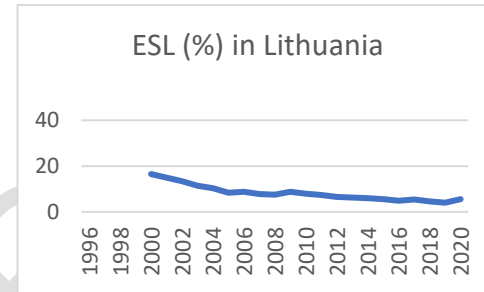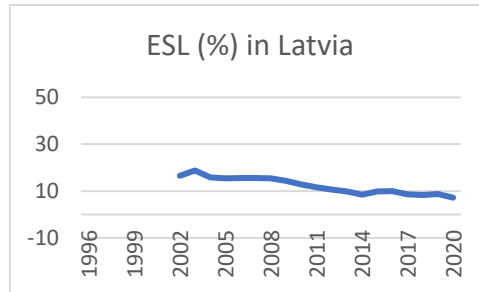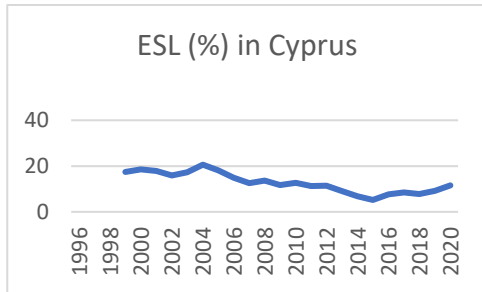
Figure 10. ESL in European countries, 2020
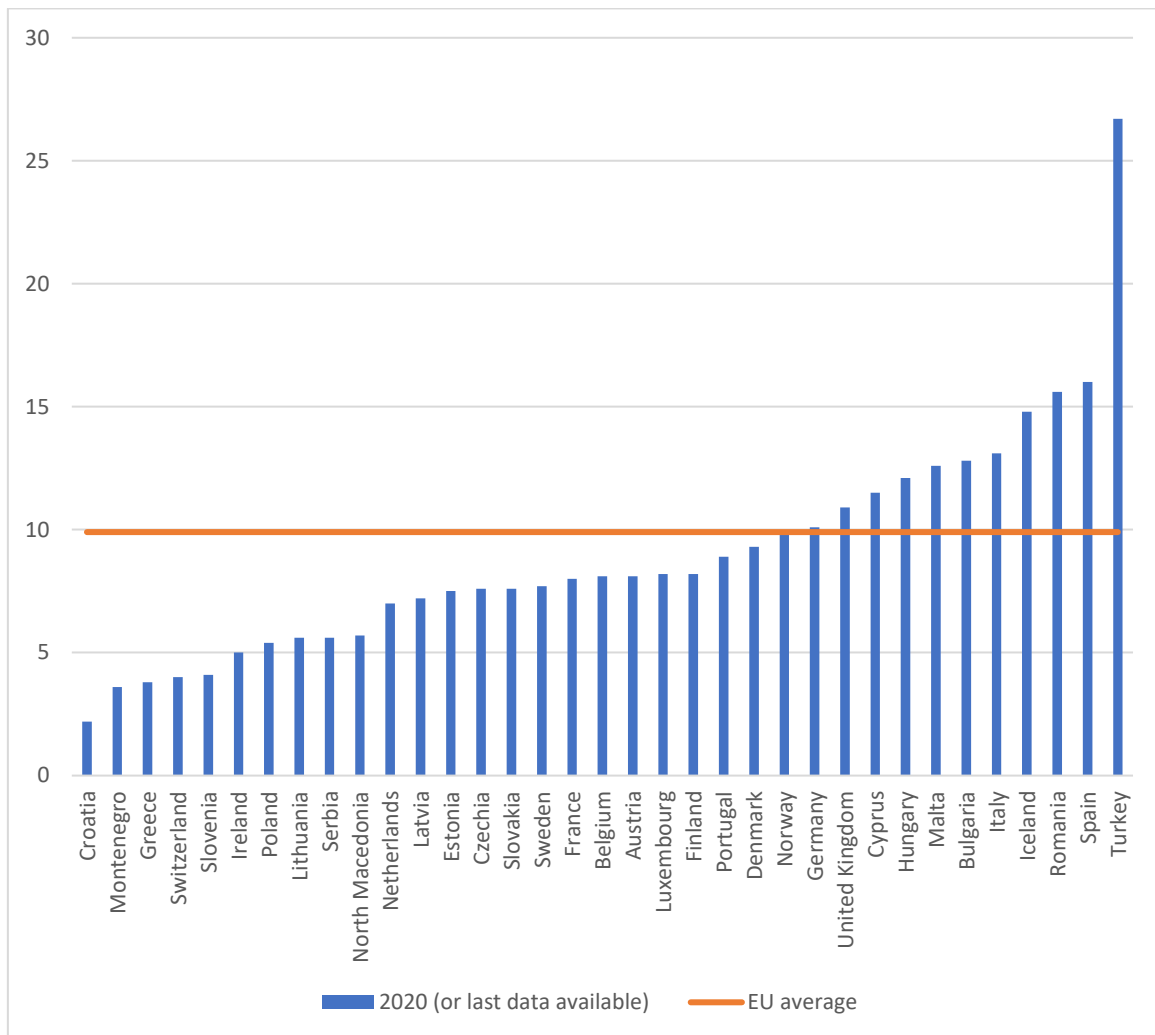
Source: Eurostat

Still, it is of particular interest to note the **generalized positive evolution of ESL in all countries** -but unsurprisingly more marked in those countries in which ESL was superior. In the next pages, the historical evolution of ESL in most European countries is illustrated. It is shown how s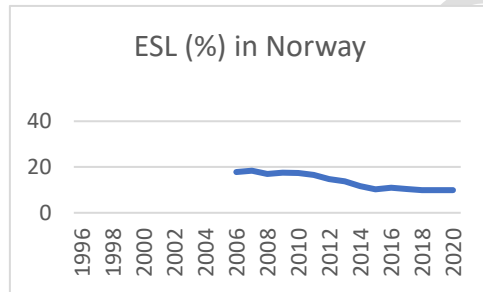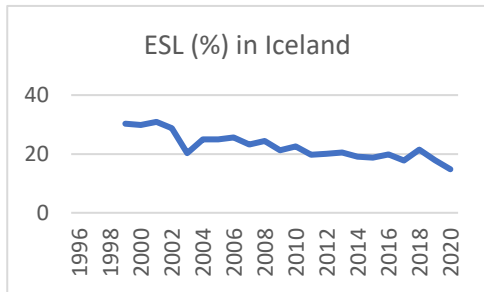ome countries has a low and stable level of ESL (Slovenia, Croatia, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Lithuania), while others have high but declining levels: Portugal, that shown a decline from 34,9% in 2008 to 8,9% in 2020; Spain, that went from 31,7% in 2008 to 16% in 2020; Malta, 27,2% in 2008 to 12,6% in 2020; or Italy that went from 19,6% to 13,1% during the same period.

ESL (%) in Belgium

ESL (%) in Bulgaria

ESL (%) in Czechia

ESL (%) in Denmark

ESL (%) in Germany

ESL (%) in Estonia

ESL (%) in Ireland

ESL (%) in Greece

ESL (%) in Spain

ESL (%) in France

ESL (%) in Croatia

ESL (%) in Italy

ESL (%) in Cyprus

ESL (%) in Latvia

ESL (%) in Lithuania

ESL (%) in Luxembourg

ESL (%) in Hungary

ESL (%) in Malta

ESL (%) in the Netherlands

ESL (%) in Austria

ESL (%) in Poland

ESL (%) in Portugal

ESL (%) in Romania

ESL (%) in Slovenia

ESL (%) in Slovakia

ESL (%) in Finland

ESL (%) in Sweden

ESL (%) in Iceland

ESL (%) in Norway

ESL (%) in Switzerland

ESL (%) in the United Kingdom

ESL (%) in Montenegro

ESL (%) in North Macedonia

ESL (%) in Serbia

ESL (%) in Turkey

In addition, **on average male young people tend to be more frequently in ESL situations, in comparison to female young people** (Figure 4).

Indeed, the difference between ESL percentage in male versus female young people remains relatively stable, of 3,8 percentual points in 2020 (scarcely better than the 4,0 percentual points of difference in 1996) (Figure 5). In the next pages, the difference of ESL by gender (males minus females) in most European countries is illustrated.
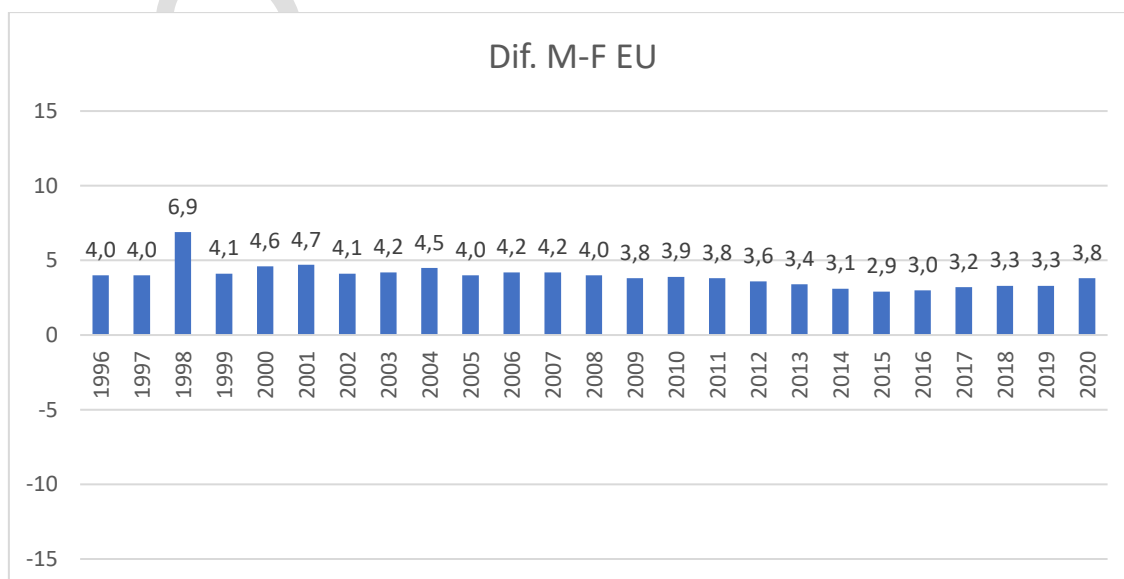
Turkey remains the most persistent and significant exception to this trend, where ESL of female students is much higher than those of males.

Figure 11. ESL by gender in European Union, 1996 – 2020
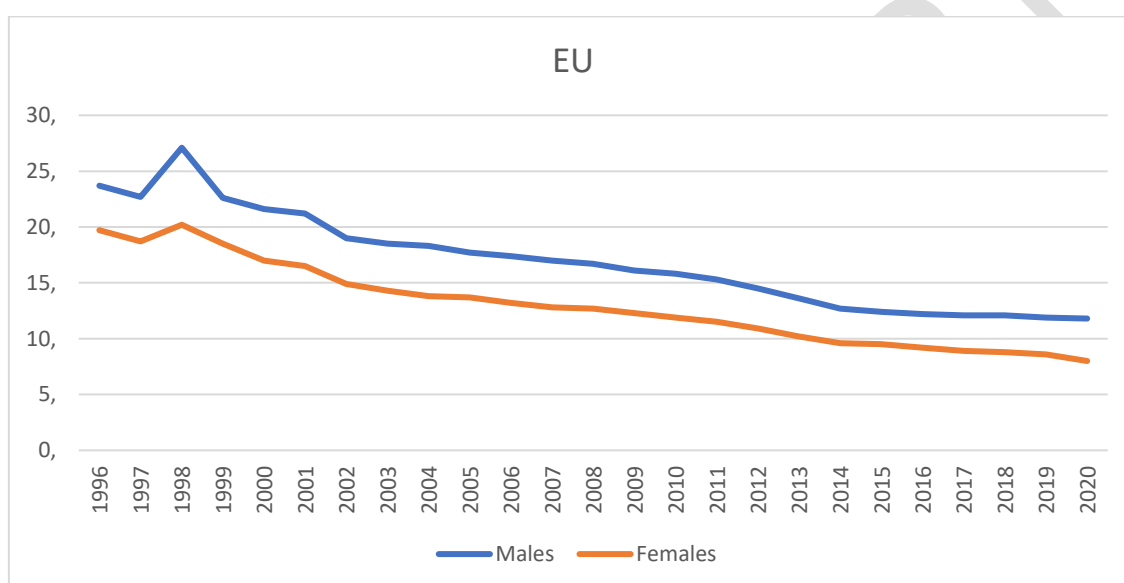
Source: Eurostat

Figure 12. Difference in percentage points of ESL by gender (males ESL % minus females ESL %) in European Union, 1996 – 2020

Source: Eurostat

Dif. M-F in Belgium

Dif. M-F in Bulgaria

Dif. M-F in Czechia

Dif. M-F in Denmark

Dif. M-F in Germany

Dif. M-F in Estonia

Dif. M-F in Ireland

Dif. M-F in Greece

Dif. M-F in Spain

Dif. M-F in France

Dif. M-F in Croatia

Dif. M-F in Italy

Dif. M-F in Cyprus · Dif. M-F in Latvia · Dif. M-F in Lithuania · Dif. M-F in Luxembourg · Dif. M-F in Hungary · Dif. M-F in Malta · Dif. M-F in Netherlands · Dif. M-F in Austria · Dif. M-F in Poland · Dif. M-F in Portugal · Dif. M-F in Romania · Dif. M-F in Slovenia

Dif. M-F in Slovakia

Dif. M-F in Finland

Dif. M-F in Sweden

Dif. M-F in Iceland

Dif. M-F in Norway

Dif. M-F in Switzerland

Dif. M-F in the United Kingdom

Dif. M-F in Montenegro

Dif. M-F in North Macedonia

Dif. M-F in Serbia

Dif. M-F in Turkey

In parallel, ESL is significatively different according to the degree of urbanisation. **In general, urban areas tend to suffer less ESL than in rural areas (but it is a quite inconsistent trend)**. In 2020, the ESL average in cities in the EU was of 8,6%, compared to the 10,5% of rural areas. Still, in the last decades, both cities and urban areas have experienced a significant decrease of their ESL levels (Figure 6).

Nevertheless, there is crucial internal variety. In some countries, such as Malta (15 percentual points of difference), Austria, Turkey and Belgium, and to a lesser extent Germany, Serbia, Switzerland, Italy, Slovenia and Ireland (which are located on the left of the Figure 6), the rural areas outperform the cities. On the contrary, there are some countries on which rural areas are particularly disadvantaged, such as Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria -with differences of more than 14 percentual points (located on the right of the Figure 7).

Figure 13. ESL in EU by degree of urbanisation, 2000 – 2020
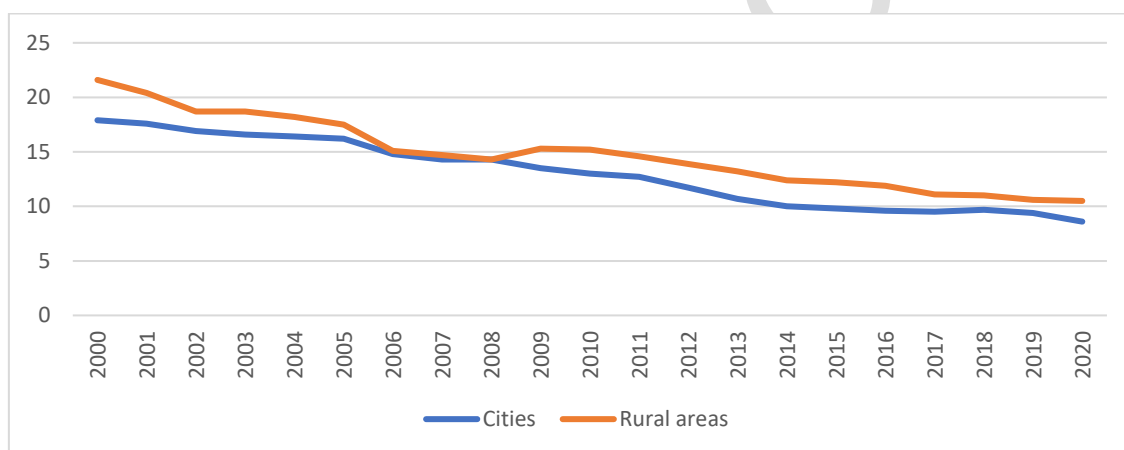
Source: Eurostat

Figure 14. Difference in percentage points of ESL by degree of urbanisation (rural areas ESL % minus urban areas ESL %) in European Union*, 1996 – 2020
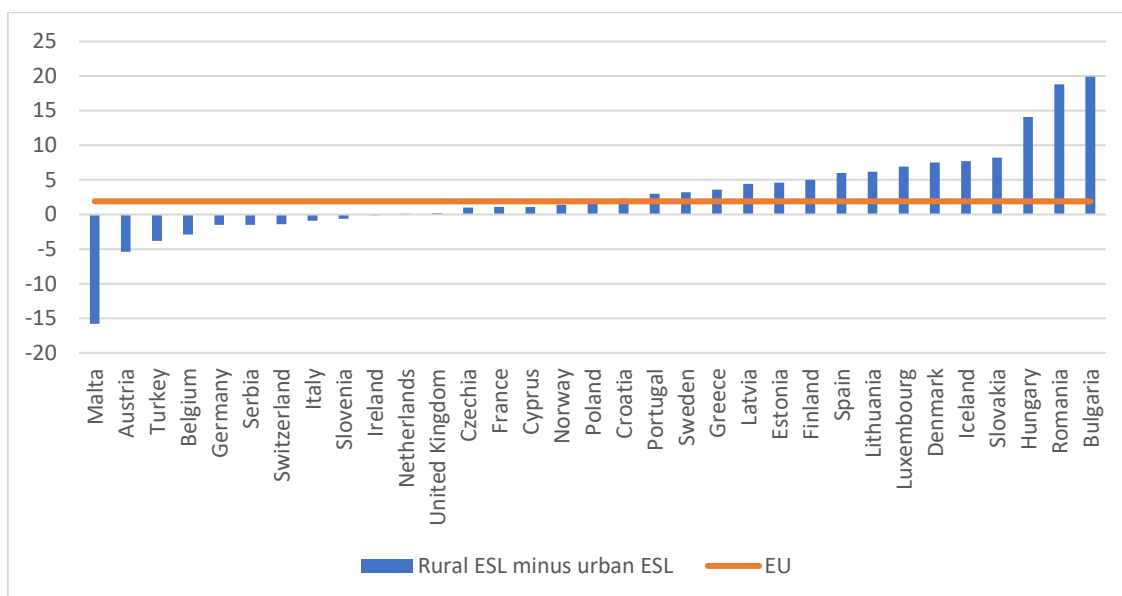
Source: Eurostat

Finally, it is too soon to quantify the **the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on ESL**. Due to the closure of education facilities, billions of children and students had to continue their studies from home (United Nations Children's Fund 2020), in a context on which schools and parents were unprepared, and were the digital divide was rampant. In that context, United Nations launched the document Education in the time of COVID-19 and beyond Policy Brief, according to which:

> "The COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of education systems in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries and all continents. Closures of schools and other learning spaces have impacted 94 per cent of the world's student population, up to 99 per cent in low and lower-middle income countries. The crisis is exacerbating pre-existing education disparities by reducing the opportunities for many of the most vulnerable children, youth, and adults – those living in poor or rural areas, girls, refugees, persons with disabilities and forcibly displaced persons (…) The ability to respond to school closures changes dramatically with level of develop- ment: for instance, during the second quarter 2020, 86 per cent of children in primary edu- cation have been effectively out of school in countries with low human development – compared with just 20 per cent in countries with very high human development (…) In addition to the learning loss, the economic impact on households is likely to widen the inequities in education achievement. Should millions be pushed into severe poverty, empirical evidence shows that children from households in the poorest quintiles are significantly less likely to complete primary and lower secondary education than those in the richest quintile; this divide can be greater than 50 percentage points in many sub-Saharan countries, as well as in Haiti, Jordan, Nepal, and Pakistan."

(UN, 2020, pp. 2, 5, 9)

In conclusion, this chapter illustrated that, since the European Union included drop-outs as a central point of their political agenda (including the establishment of collective quantitative benchmarks), **ESL processes have historically declined in almost all European countries**. In addition, this constant, persistent declining of ESL processes in all countries has been **more marked in countries on which ESL was more prevalent, such as Portugal, Spain, Italy or Malta**.

Because of that, those results shown an **improvement in terms of efficiency** of the different educational systems.

Still, **in terms of equity, more betterments are required, because ESL processes continues to disproportionately affect certain social groups**: particularly boys, and, in some cases, certain territories.

7. Recommendations and good practices on ESL

> "Improving the nation's high schools, particularly those that are low-performing, is a task whose challenges are much easier to catalogue than to surmount"

> (Fleischmann & Heppen, quoted in Lyche, 2010)

Although the previous quote is completely applicable to surmount ESL challenges, this report makes an attempt to describe some of the political initiatives and educational actions that may be used in order to prevent and reduce drop-out processes.

Still, it is important to note that there are no universal solutions, or magic bullets, for reducing ESL prevalence: drop-out is a multifactorial, processual phenomenon and, therefore, students leave school early for a myriad of interconnected reasons. Because of that, it is unrealistic to expect that one single policy -despite how ambitious it may be- may significatively reduce the prevalence of ESL processes in any given context.

In parallel, it has been widely shown that the factors that led to ESL processes are diverse (from individual characteristics to family situations, or also educational engagement, etc.) and, therefore, the specific profile of dropping-out students are extremely variegated. Because of that, different profiles of students require diverse educational solutions (one-size-fits-all kind of solutions must, consequently, be carefully avoided).

Nevertheless, it is also important to note that there are potential undesired effects, as well as occasional tensions and trade-offs in the policy initiatives tackling ESL processes. One of the main tensions is about the focus and scope of the educational policies: targeted policies versus universal actions, between unified versus personalized models of educational devices. Although in general, a more personalized, focused, targeted approach is welcomed and more adapted to each young people's needs, there are also risks, particularly the stigmatizing effects of certain (e.g. remedial) policies.

This chapter classifies the recommendations and good practices in three sequential stances: diagnosis and prevention; intervention; and compensation. This sequential logic is the same as that used by the Barcelona Provincial Council, advised by Aina Tarabini and Marta Curran (Tarabini & Curran, 2019).

Common definition and shared diagnosis

Despite its centrality in political agendas, and the fact that it is universally recognized as one of the most prevalent educational problems, ESL processes are differently conceptualized, defined and quantified in different national settings. Indeed, as context-sensitive concept different countries attribute leaving school early to different years or stages of schooling, or the specific level of education which is considered to be the minimum bar for being considered to be early school leavers. This variety of definitions is evident in reviews of academic literature regrading drop-out (Dale, 2010; Lyche, 2010; Rumberger & Lim, 2008).[13] Because of that, it is important to agree on **a consensual definition** that captures the different parts of the phenomenon: drop-out, early school leaving and NEET.

In the EU, the current official definition has been crucial: in terms of quantification of the phenomenon by Eurostat (in a historical, comparative way) and of creation of common benchmarks, which has had enormous impacts on national political agendas.

Nevertheless, we still lack information about ESL processes at national and school levels. It is not only a matter of quantifying macro trends on ESL processes but, moreover, to **collect reliable data on the risk factors leading to drop-out, to trace the trajectories of the students at the end of the compulsory education. This data should be available for public administration and at school level** for the effective implementation of early preventive measures and selective interventions (Lyche, 2010, pp. 7–8).

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[13] Furthermore, this is a very contextual, historical level, since it greatly depends on the average level of general education of a given society in a particular time. In this sense, a systematic literature review on ESL on Africa and Asia included many studies that considered ESL when young people leave school before completing primary education (Momo et al., 2019). In contrast, a systematic review carried on OECD countries (on average, greater enrollment) identified ESL and drop-out from upper secondary as the more general way to identify ESL (Lyche, 2010).

Similarly, linguistic variety is also great. For instance, in a comparative study of ESL in European countries (Denmark, UK and Hungary), Schmitsek had to adapt to different terminologies: in Danish, *der falder fra en eller flere ungdomsuddannelser* (for drop-outs), *der forlader grundskolen med eller uden prøver og ikke får yderligere uddannelse, ekskluderende* (for early school leavers); in English, early school leavers and Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET); and in Hungarian *lemorzsolódás* (drop-outs) and (*korai iskolaelhagyás* (for ESL) (Schmitsek, 2022).

Early and proactive prevention

The prevention of ESL processes requires multiple actions, but they need to be done in early educational stages and with an almost-universal targeting. Then, it is of upmost importance the **early identification of situations of lack of (emotional, behavioural, cognitive) engagement**, since from young ages (i.e. at least primary education). Indeed, as academic literature has highlighted, the preventive actions should start earlier, and include broader targets (not only on-risk students). As the OECD systematic review states:

> Preventive measures to reduce early school leaving should start early. The earlier the prevention begins, the broader the target will be. The later the intervention, the more targeted it needs to be. (…) Early identification enables broader, less costly measures to be set up earlier and leaves the more costly one-on-one measures for later stages of education to the remaining at risk students that have not yet been picked up.
>
> (Lyche, 2010, p. 30)

Furthermore, policy solutions with simplistic conceptualizations of ESL processes may risk being counterproductive. For example, a study of the conceptualization of educational policies in Western Australia (a qualitative study, based on semi structured interviews to 14 professionals with young people considered of being 'at risk' of ESL processes) stated that:

> The overarching policy logic of compulsory education is that more school is economically and socially better. In prosecuting this claim, new categories of young people and conceptual divisions between engaged/disengaged and completers/non completers are created. Engaged completers are the normative standard against which all other forms of behaviour and attitudes are measured. Disengaged non-completers are the problem group that are watched, worried over, and intervened in. The strategic elaboration of the policy constructed NEET subjectivities and its functional overdetermination created risks it cannot and perhaps does not intend to manage. (…) a binary between school completers and non-completers emanated from a context about a crisis in falling retention and early school leaving, myopically focusing on NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) subjectivities as both the cause and solution to the policy objectives. Consequently, the policy apparatus is productive of the very circumstances it seeks to address, and therefore it recursively cycles around a problem it does not solve.
>
> (Hodgson, 2017)

Because of that, educational actions aimed to tackle ESL processes need to be specifically **avoid the so-called 'deficit model'**. However, this is not always the case,

specially at school level. For instance, a qualitative study taken in Portugal (semi-structured interviews with principals, teachers and other staff and young people, n=28) identified that, in general, while mainstream education tend to focus on individual-oriented views of ESL (in the alleged 'deficit' of young people), in comparison, alternative education offered more comprehensive anti-ESL measures, focused more commonly on wider institutional, systemic and structural issues and inadequacies (Nada, Santos, Macedo, & Araújo, 2018).

Taking into account those previous considerations, in order to tackle ESP processes is important to **increase the accessibility of all education levels**, in particular the early ones. It is considered that reducing the directs costs of education may be of particular benefit of socioeconomically disadvantaged students; this reduction of direct costs may be achieved, e.g., making compulsory education fully free or, also, through scholarships in others education levels. Also important are indirect costs; for instance, the introduction of dining scholarships may be also beneficial in terms of reduction of drop-out processes.

In addition, it is considered that it is important **facilitating enrolments in Early childhood education and care (ECEC)**, since it has great positive effects effect on long-term cognitive, social and emotional development of the child (Lyche, 2010). Indeed, Early childhood education is a vital stage in ensuring the right to education, and is a right recognized by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (art. 28) and the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (General Comment 7/2005). Early childhood education is very important, both in terms of socio-psychological development and of academic performance (OECD, 2006, 2011b). The impact of early childhood education is, at the same time, particularly positive on the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children, making it a key device in terms of social equity, equal opportunities and the prevention of social inequalities. as noted in its European Commission *Investing in Children recommendations* (European Commission, 2013).

Facilitate school – family's interaction and dialogue, providing time, spaces, and communication strategies (including linguistic ones) able to include different profile of families, independently of their socioeconomic background, migratory situation or ethnic identity. There are multiple examples of strategies and good practices on that regard, but it is interesting for our topic and scope, for instance, in the case of Hungary, the Gandhi Secondary School, that was created in order to facilitate school – families interaction, particularly of Roma families (Katz, 2005).

In parallel, without being exhaustive it is possible to list some examples encouraging cognitive, emotional and behavioural engagement: Both aimed at increasing cognitive skills, but also focused on interpersonal and emotional skills, **provide ample opportunities for support programs, guidance programs and mentoring devices, either through peers or external tutors** (Lyche, 2010). Indeed, a comparative study in five countries (Spain, Portugal, Romania, Germany and the UK), based on a qualitative methodology with an impressive amount of fieldwork (focus groups to a total of n=711 actors), identified that orientation and tutorial actions, particularly based on an individual basis, are the key mechanisms to reduce ESL processes (Olmos & Gairín, 2021).

Given the important gender bias of many educational processes, it is also important to facilitate the creation of new opportunities for different profiles of students, for instance, **provide STEAM courses with gender perspective** (Lyche, 2010).

In terms of emotional engagement, **encouraging the development of pro-social bonds, for instance to school staff or to positive peers,** is of great value too (Lyche, 2010). Again, there is not a single silver bullet to improve school climate: positive peer relations can improve young people's social behaviour, and kind teacher – student relations may facilitate co-operative environments (Schwab, 2018). Also, given the negative impact on **bullying** in emotional and behavioural engagement, all policies aimed to the "creation of violence-free and secure learning environments, enhancing socio-emotional support and encouraging the emergence of relationships of care; and providing meaningful education by ensuring the school content is aligned with students' motivations and needs" are welcomed (Santos et al., 2020).

In order to emotionally engage students in education, is of particularly useful to **incorporate the young peoples' voices in all schooling processes**, since students are typically the most disenfranchised members of the school community; the participation and representation of students in school is, then, a more legitimate form of educational democracy as well as a convenient way to reduce ESL processes (Cefai et al., 2016).

It is important to note that emotional engagement is particularly important in specific social groups, for example those with special needs, or with mental health problems. For instance, a study that followed 493 French-speaking adolescents from low-socioeconomic-status secondary schools in Montreal (Quebec, Canada) found that

interventions targeting students' mental health and negative self-perceptions may particularly be of great impact in preventing dropout (Quiroga, Janosz, Bisset, & Morin, 2013).

In terms of behavioural engagement, academic literature has highlighted the importance of **facilitating the participation of different (volunteer, extracurricular, etc.) activities**, since they greatly increase emotional engagement, psychological well-being and moderately enhance academic learning (González, 2016). This is particularly relevant in contexts on which there is scarcity of extracurricular places; for example, a study taken in Barcelona identified the irregular territorial distribution of extracurricular activities, which suggested an unequal access to extracurricular activities and thus a process of educational segregation (Termes, 2021).

Also, the **community involvement in educational processes** is also a prerequisite for emotional and behavioural engagement (Lyche, 2010). Actually, the cooperation between schools, local authorities, parents and pupils in order to reduce early school leaving is one of *t*he 12 key measures of the document of *Reducing early school leaving in the EU*, the European Report of the Ministers of Education (2013).

Finally, given the gradual, processual nature of ESL, plans and **programs aimed to reduce absenteeism** are also of great utility.

In parallel, there is an important branch of academic literature that focuses on the great relevance of **specific pedagogical approaches**, to eliminate or, at least, to mitigate ESL. The basic idea of those approaches is that often schools reproduce the so-called 'pedagogies of indifference', which tend to reproduce social disparities, generate new educational inequities -including the unequal prevalence of drop-out processes among social groups. In order to overcome this, Bob Lingard proposed the so-called '*productive pedagogies'*: more equitable, based on elements of social justice (i.e. redistribution, recognition and representation) (Lingard & Keddie, 2013; Lingard & Mills, 2007). A systematic review on ESL identified that schools acting as 'sanctuary' can potentially increase students' engagement:

> schools which provided a sanctuary for students increased student engagement. Schools were sanctuaries when they offered physical, emotional and psychological safe spaces; fostered a sense of community; enabled students to affirm their racial/ethnic pride and employed flexible behavioural supports. (…) Schools may promote student retention by encouraging a culture of care for learners. School activities can cultivate a

> strong sense of community. Through exploring culturally relevant
> perspectives, teachers can infuse this knowledge into their classroom
> practices and interactions with students. Furthermore, behaviour support
> should con-sider the individual needs of students. Rather than unilaterally
> enforcing rules, students appear to benefit from an opportunity to explain
> their circumstances and negotiate agreements with staff regarding
> consequences. Staff could benefit from developing specific skills to
> disengage from conflict and instead connect with reluctant students.

(O'Gorman et al., 2016, p. 548)

An example of alternative pedagogical approach is provided based on a current experience in Ireland. In a qualitative study (in-depth qualitative interviews) to staff working in a school engagement program aimed at preventing early school leaving as well as to young people who have left school early and who are now participating in an alternative education setting in Ireland, it is suggested that 'productive pedagogies' may overcome certain educational barriers, and re-engage young people with education, since they place equal emphasis on student wellbeing and formal learning, highlighting the importance of caring and respectful staff–learner relationships in engaging and reengaging disaffected young people in learning. (Banks, 2021). Still, those 'productive pedagogies operate outside mainstream education, scarcely integrated, and because of that have little impact on broader, mainstream school practices (Banks, 2021).

Those **pedagogical solutions are necessary, but not sufficient** to overcome the processes leading to ESL processes. Often, those pedagogies are particularly well suited to provide social, psychological, emotional support and caring, but not always to offer the intellectual demands and cognitive achievements also required for academic success:

> The research found very supportive and caring teachers, who practised an
> almost social worker version of teachers' work – a conception of teachers'
> work as therapeutic care. We believe that teachers should be praised for
> this care, for their commitment to social support for students, and particularly
> for students living in poverty. However, such care, while necessary, is not
> sufficient to maximise pedagogical effects so that schools make a
> difference. Indeed, the absence of intellectual demand, connectedness, and
> working with and valuing difference carries significant social justice
> implications.

(Lingard & Keddie, 2013, p. 438)

Managing in-school heterogeneity is a challenging aspect for many educational professionals. In general, it is considered that a lower student-teacher ratio, diversification programs -characterized by more globalized subjects, or other curricular practical orientation may be useful in this regard. Yet, there are three main aspects that

may be avoided in order to manage in-school heterogeneity: repetition, ability grouping and educational segregation.

On the one hand, **reduce the prevalence of repetition in many educational systems**. As already stated, repetition is considered to be economically costly, with scarce educational benefits, and particularly inequitable -since it aggravates educational disparities (OECD, 2012; Save the Children, 2016). Indeed, grade retention is greatly correlated with ESL process (Momo et al., 2019). Nevertheless, there is a potential backlash of implementing this recommendation: it is also stated that although reducing repetition may reduce drop-out and provide to the young students an earlier transition towards post compulsory education, at the same time, repetition may provide to those young students the skills necessaries to succeed during transitions to post compulsory education (De Witte, Cabus, et al., 2013).

On the other hand, given the fact that early tracking is ineffective, and it negatively impacts on most vulnerable students, and increases educational inequality (Hanushek & Wößmann, 2006; UNESCO, 2015), **early student selection should be eliminated or deferred to upper secondary education while reinforcing comprehensive schooling**, as stated by the OECD. Indeed, it is considered that the elimination or deferring of ability grouping would be particularly beneficious for migrant students (OECD, 2015, 2020).

> Early student selection has a negative impact on students assigned to lower tracks and exacerbates inequities, without raising average performance. Early student selection should be deferred to upper secondary education while reinforcing comprehensive schooling. In contexts where there is reluctance to delay early tracking, suppressing lower-level tracks or groups can mitigate its negative effects. Limiting the number of subjects or duration of ability grouping, increasing opportunities to change tracks or classrooms and providing high curricular standards for students in the different tracks can lessen the negative effects of early tracking, streaming and grouping by ability.
>
> (OECD, 2012, p. 10)

Still, in order to create more cohesive environments, is important to reduce school **segregation**. Given the local nature of educational segregation, and its correlation with residential segregation, policies tackling school segregation require a local nature; there are few examples of de-segregation policies in Barcelona (e.g. limiting school choice, favoring proximity, etc.) that are potentially extrapolable in different regions (Bonal, Zancajo, & Scandurra, 2019, 2020; Scandurra, Zancajo, & Bonal, 2021).

In parallel, it is considered that the **extension of the compulsory school-leaving age** is beneficial for reducing ESL processes, since it may reduce the number of pupils leaving secondary education without qualifications (Simmons, 2008). In a comparative study of educational institutional settings in European countries, it was identified that the extension of compulsory education tended to diminish the levels of ESL processes (De Witte, Nicaise, et al., 2013). However, it is a policy that may have both pros and cons: while lower compulsory-leaving age (e.g. 15 years old) may push disengaged young people outside of educational tracks earlier, on the other hand, higher compulsory-leaving age (e.g. 18) implies also pedagogical challenges in dealing with disengaged young adults (Santos et al., 2020).

The **transition from compulsory lower secondary education towards post-compulsory upper education is a particularly challenging point**. Because of that, new and better **orientation programs and guidance devices, both for families and students,** are essential (Lyche, 2010; Olmos & Gairín, 2021). Also, it is argued that increasing the flexibility and permeability of education pathways may facilitate smooth transition between education levels (Santos et al., 2020) In this regard, the **role of vocational programs** has also been highlighted in academic literature, since they may diminish the prevalence of drop-out (e.g. CEDEFOP, 2016). Because of that, this action could potentially reduce the number of drop-outs; this is particularly the case of local context in which VET programmes are scarce, such as Catalonia (Termes, 2022). Still, the provision of high quality VET-tracks as a real alternative to non-engaging academic tracks (Lyche, 2010) is challenging, giving the unequal prestige attributed to both tracks (Tarabini et al., 2018; Tarabini & Jacovkis, 2020, 2021; Termes, 2022).

Consistent and persistent compensation policies after drop-out occurred

As academic literature has emphasized, **direct interventions on students who already had dropped-out can also make a change**. For instance, facilitating the **reincorporation of young people through programs that may combine academically oriented training, or vocational programs, with labour insertion programs**. Of particular interest are also **second-chance educational programs** also have some effectiveness. Those are programs that typically operate with new educational curricula and teaching pedagogies, thus supplementing the traditional school system, and "facilitate young people to return to the field of knowledge and

acquire skills in an environment from which they have been alienated (Schmitsek, 2022); see, for instance, the effectivity argued in the cases of Australia .(S. Ross & Gray, 2005; Savelsberg, Pignata, & Pauline, 2017) or of Sweden (Nordlund, Stehlik, & Strandh, 2012).

8. Conclusions and discussion: an assessment of the project

ESL processes are one of the most central elements in any educational systems, since they have **great negative impacts in terms of students' trajectories and educational systems**.

Obviously and more directly, ESL impacts on the acquisitions of skills, competences and academic self-confidence (Marchesi, 2003). Also, ESL processes impacts on several dimensions, such as: economic and labour inclusion (ESL processes are often associated with reduced labour opportunities, long-term unemployment, precarious and low-paid jobs and poverty); health (bleak health); and social or community dimension (political and social apathy, higher participation in crime) (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006; De Witte, Cabus, et al., 2013). According to Roger Dale:

> Individual ESLers are more likely to be unemployed, to be in precarious and low-paid jobs, to draw on welfare and other social programmes throughout their lives, and to encounter difficulties in gaining a place in vocational training. They are much less likely to be "active citizens" and to become involved in lifelong learning. (…) The wider "economic" costs in terms of lower productivity, lower tax revenues and higher welfare payments, are huge. (…) ESL generates very large "social" costs (it has been shown to lead to later social breakdown, increased demand on the health system, and lower social cohesion). It perpetuates the cycle of which it is part. In the long-term, ESL constitutes a tremendous waste of potential, for individual, social and economic development.
>
> (Dale, 2010, p. 5)

As consequence, often is argued that the prevalence of **ESL processes has negative consequences not only for individuals suffering it, but also for the society as a whole**. For instance, following the economic argument: society experiences a loss of productive workers (and the earnings and tax revenues they would have generated) plus the higher costs associated with increased incarceration, health care and social services (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Because of that it is argued that the policies that reduce the prevalence of ESL may, in fact, represent societal benefits and administration savings (higher than the cost attributed to ESL-related political initiatives) (Levin, 2009). Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the importance of ESL beyond a utilitarian point of view:

> we critically discuss the underpinning assumptions and rationale for this policy focus, challenging the association that is made between early school

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> leaving, economic growth and employment. We suggest that ESL is
> important, not because it is inhibiting growth or that it is responsible for high
> levels of youth unemployment, but because it helps to sustain and
> reproduce inequalities. (…) All young people need to advance as far as
> possible through the educational system, not because this will necessarily
> ensure their place in the labour market, or because it will contribute to the
> overall prosperity of society; but because if offers one way of addressing
> social exclusion, division and inequalities.This should be the acid test of the
> success of measures to address early school leaving.
>
> (A. Ross & Leathwood, 2020)

Accordingly, **ESL is an educational problem that occupies a prominent position in the political agenda, a cornerstone in terms of educational equity and social justice**. Since education is a human right, and one of the most important factors for success in life, then the unjustified prevalence of drop-out processes in certain social groups is therefore a serious impediment of the fulfilment of those achievements. Hence, the conception of ESL as 'educational problem', 'student failure', 'schools' shortcomings' may not capture the full dimension of the phenomenon, and a broader focus is required:

> Perhaps the focus should not so much be on dropping out as a problem of
> perceived or actual failures of pupils, schools and the costs associated to it,
> but on dropout as an indication and origin of fundamental inequities
> (Smeyers & Depaepe, 2006). This perspective shifts the focus towards
> school attendance and completion as a right of citizens that is to be
> safeguarded in any democracy (Dorn, 1996) and calls for a more nuanced
> view on the many determinants ofdropout (cf. Dorn, 1996).
>
> (De Witte, Cabus, et al., 2013)

In this sense, ESL is a political concept, shaped by various drivers and rationales (Dale, 2010; Santos et al., 2020). As described previously, drop-out occupies a prominent place in international organization agendas, such as the EU, OECD and UNESCO; still, not always this broader focus has been taken into account.[14] Indeed, the definition of the phenomenon, as well as its importance within political agenda has an **intrinsic historical and contextual nature** (Perrenoud, 1990; Tarabini, 2017): the consideration of academic failure or success, as well as (in)valid and (il)legitimate knowledge depends on the historical moment (e.g. the establishment of the age of compulsory schooling), contextual-national (i.e. education systems) or micro-institutional (e.g., criteria for promotion, repetition, or course graduation at school level).

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[14] It is often argued that EU perspective on ESL processes tend to narrow the problem to an economic problem and of a lack of productivity, on which education and training are mere investments in human capital (Gillies & Mifsud, 2016).

As the previous literature review has identified, **ESL processes are inherently multifactorial**, on which individual, societal, educational and political factors tend to simultaneously combine generating complex, historical, dynamics. Indeed, drop-outs are the end of long processes, often initiated on early ages of schooling. The delicate balance between individual, collective and institutional factors is never easy to achieve. However, it is essential to include the 'context' in any agenda of research on ESL processes (Thrupp & Lupton, 2006). Although any partial focus on a small number of de-contextualized factors may represent a simplification of drop-out processes, a particular and excessive focus on individual factors may risk responsabilizing the most vulnerable groups (namely, disadvantaged young people) of their failures -thus, occulting the role of families, schools and broad communities in this process.

As already noted, **ESL processes tend to disproportionately affect particular groups of young people** (i.e. people with special needs, males, with economic difficulties, ethnic minorities or migrated persons). Indeed, all academic difficulties (not only ESL) are diversely and unjustly distributed among social groups: repetition, grade completion, academic results, absenteeism and, also, drop-out and ESL. Therefore, the **perspectives that tend to over-emphasize young peoples' roles for their academic success or failure may result in simplistic individualisms, occulting the structural nature of the phenomenon, which politically may promote 'blame-the-victim' approaches** (Tarabini, 2017). While young people have certain responsibility (desire, will or capacities may be required for educational success), those elements are framed within a structural context of individual background, social class and schooling systems. This argument has key consequences for the meritocratic ideology, that assumes that intelligence, desire, will o competences are the main factors conditioning educational trajectories and, moreover, are independent on any social context (Tarabini, 2017).

> The reduction of ESL goes through interventions framed in the perspective of systemic social justice: acting not only in individuals and groups of risk, but preventively in the structures that generate risks, in order to challenge the individualistic and meritocratic discourses.
>
> However, the policies against failure and the ESL in Spain and Catalonia are characterized by acting only on individuals and groups at risk, and conceiving the problem individually; e.g., academic reinforcement and compensatory education, curricular diversification, professional initiation measures, etc.
>
> (Tarabini, 2017, p. 25, original in Catalan)

Last, **education is a positional good** because its access and possession is limited, and its value relative (i.e. positional goods are those goods whose value derives from their scarcity). For instance, if everyone has a secondary level diploma (or a PhD), its value would be very greatly reduced (Robertson & Dale, 2013). This positional character of education intensifies competition among different social groups (e.g. different fractions of middle class families) through credentials, in order to maintain or reproduce their social positions within and throughout the education system (Di Stasio, Bol, & Van de Werfhorst, 2016; Tarabini & Jacovkis, 2020; Woods, Bagley, & Glatter, 1998). Those educational competitions may generate the so-called credential inflation, according to which the more the number of students having a credential, the less its relative (or positional) value the credentials has (Brown, Power, Tholen, & Allouch, 2016; Van De Werfhorst & Andersen, 2005). Within this context, the paradox is, then, the more minority a phenomenon (such as ESL processes), the more pernicious it is for those who go through it. For instance, the universalization of tertiary education may have disturbing impacts on those few with only secondary education or, moreover, those who have dropped out.[15] **The current expansion of education, and the subsequent credentials inflation and has, as consequence, increased the so-called educational minimums** for social inclusion has increased (e.g. international organizations place these minimums at the end of post-compulsory secondary education) (Tarabini, 2017) and, also, **worsened the relative position of those who had dropped-out**.

Taking into account those general conclusions, what is the specific contribution of this specific training to the rich debate on drop-out processes?

- **The training combined different dimensions (theoretical and practical, national, educational and institutional contexts), settings (conferences, classes), and professional backgrounds (different profiles of teachers and participants).** Indeed, the training facilitated cross-national knowledge and international perspective for most learners; indeed, as part of an Erasmus project, Alliance 3 had an undoubtable added value of (international) cultural learning, through the exchange of ideas, best practices, and conceptions about different

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[15] About education as positional good: the general expansion of education in the most part of the population in Hungary after the communist collapse post-1990s impacted positively on most young people; nevertheless, for the segments that didn't participate into this expansion (such as Roma young people, persistently facing discrimination) it meant a relative worsening of their conditions (Hajdu et al., 2014).

national educational systems. This was often considered positive, but although at times a challenge too (showed by the linguistic difficulties, translation or transference obstacles, etc., maybe more profound and more unsolvable than anticipated).

- Specifically, **the training combined national, contextual, educational differences of the cases (France, Catalonia, Denmark, Hungary), which is both illuminating and demanding**. Those differences obliged to the participants of the course to understand the general dynamics of ESL processes in diverse educational systems (e.g. structure, funding, etc.). Given this national diversity, the **good examples or best practices worked only as sources of inspiration, but direct transference was impossible to achieve**.

- **The training provided a nuanced, complex, multifactorial understanding on ESL processes, and offered a variety of strategies, programs and devices in order to prevent and reduce it**. Both course materials[16] and conferences provided useful insights to understand ESL processes, with its multifactorial, processual, longitudinal nature. In addition, the **solutions provided by the training are in general targeted interventions aimed to prevent, from early ages, ESL processes**, and also policy recommendations linked to many relevant educational topics, such as educational (emotional, behavioural) engagement; community involvement in educational processes; managing of pupils heterogeneity; orientation programs and tutoring devices; etc. In that sense, Alliance 3 curriculum and materials seems aligned with current academic trends (see, for instance, the chapters of Mar Beneyto-Seoane, Jordi Collet-Sabé and Mila Naranjo-Llanos, Eric Mutabazi and Nathanaël Wallenhorst, or Albina Khasanzyanova's).

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[16] Alliance 3 materials and training emphasized the multifactorial nature of ESL processes, with a particular emphasis on context elements and community spaces, thus 'taking school contexts seriously' (Thrupp & Lupton, 2006). This include, for instance, the description of community involvement and the importance of: decompartmentalizing of education, by Albina Khasanzyanova (*Strengthening the learning capacity of pupils with difficulties: bridging formal, non-formal and informal learning*); the importance of extracurricular activities for young people in terms of learning, self-esteem and personal development, by Jesper Nielsen entitled (*Collaboration between schools, families and associations in Denmark: early intervention and interdisciplinary approach*). In parallel, Alliance 3 materials engage often in the situation of ethnic minorities, in particular of that of Roma children. Specifically, the chapter *The role of the local community in school integration: A case study of Roma people from a Hungarian settlement*, by Déri András analyses (through the lens of intersectionality and empowerment) the shared prejudices between educational professionals and Roma families in Hungary. Beyond general considerations, also specific devices were described, such as the Nyborg model in Denmark, the SAVIO device in France, the Enxaneta project in Catalonia, or the Cognitive Profile Test in Hungary. In addition, it is of great interest the critical revision of Mar Beneyto-Seoane, Jordi Collet-Sabé and Mila Naranjo-Llanos, that analyzes different devices for young pupils in difficulty (e.g. orientation devices, repetition, compensation strategies or adaptation of teaching methods), which identifies a worrying lack of self-criticism from teachers, educators and support staff and their methods, as well as exclusionary support practices, or lack of consideration for the specific characteristics of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

- This multifactorial perspective was parallel to a **specific emphasis to the idea of cooperative work, collaborative networks, and alliances between schools, families and broader community**. This focus was done with remarkable constancy and coherence, as was noted by participants -see questionnaires and focus groups results. This is probably the *leit motiv* of the training, and runs through all of the materials of Alliance 3. Consequently, participants to the course expressed how those elements has been incorporated in their understanding on ESL processes.
- The Alliance 3 materials have **undoubtable educational value and pedagogical quality, but they are extremely heterogeneous, and some of them do not fit academic purposes**. Indeed, the diverse composition of the participants of the course implied that many of them lacked basic academic skills in terms of research background, which was a struggle when dealing with the more academically-oriented materials. This is not, however, necessarily a problem, since the main focus of Alliance 3 materials is evidently educational.
- In general, students expressed **high levels of satisfaction with the training and expressed achieved relevant learnings** (e.g. in understanding ESL processes, in identifying ways to involve the community, etc.). However, **occasionally the difficulties in applying the training learnings into students' professional contexts was a motive for frustration.**

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