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Project Paper 2

Theoretical and methodological framework on Early School Leaving

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Responsible institution: **CeMIS - University of Antwerp**

Authors: **Clycq, Noel**
Nouwen, Ward
Timmerman, Chris



With the contribution of:

Social Policy Research Centre: Louise Ryan, Alessio D'Angelo, Magdolna Lorinc & Neil Kaye (Middlesex University, United Kingdom)

Stockholm University: Alireza Behtoui & Kasja Rudberg (Sweden)

Centre for Research in Education: Helena Costa Araujo, Antonio Magalhaes, Cristina Rocha, Eunice Macedo & Alexandra ciie Oliveira (University of Porto, Portugal)

Citizenship, Migration and the City: Maurice Crul, Elif Keskiner, Malin Grundel & Talitha Stam (Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands)

Faculty of Education: Hanna Tomaszewska & Paulina Marchlik (University of Warsaw, Poland)

Centre on Education, Migration and Childhood: Sílvia Carrasco, Abel Beremenyi, Jordi Pamies, Marta Bertran & Laia Narcisco (Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain)

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1. Introduction

Policy makers, members of society and scholars alike are challenged by the finding that over the past decades social stratification in education systems throughout Europe tends to persist and not disappear; despite, in most cases, fundamental reforms related to the financing, structures and/or content of these systems. One of the most salient symptoms of this is the phenomenon of Early School Leaving (ESL), the end-result of a process already starting early on in life, but also a phenomenon that to some extent transcends the level of the individual (Elffers 2011; Finn 1989). Moreover, seeing as research repeatedly reaffirms that specific social categories in society - primarily children and families with a lower socio-economic background - are overrepresented in ESL-rates, the question rises: what can be done to counter this reproduction of inequality? This is the central research question underlying the RESL.eu-project¹. In this project paper, which clarifies our theoretical framework, we discuss the existing academic literature addressing this issue of social reproduction in educational attainment, in particular in its relation to the process of ESL. This will lead to the reformulation of this initial overarching research question into a series of sub-questions relating to the multilevel, multidisciplinary and multimethod approach of this project.

Since the 1960's (e.g. The Coleman Report 1966) and 1970's (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Jencks 1972) research has repeatedly demonstrated that socio-economic status (SES) remains the main predictor of differences in educational attainment indicators such as grade retention or ESL. Notwithstanding this preponderance of SES, an intersectional approach of educational differences paints a more complex picture, taking into account demographic variables such as gender, ethnicity, immigration background, religion or native language (Driessen 2001; Yuval-Davis 2010).

At the same time, many scholars point not only to an intersectional approach, but also to a multi-level and multidisciplinary approach of educational phenomena. Explanations and profound understanding of these processes is not found solely on the micro-level of the pupil and individual agency², but also on the meso-level of social institutions (school, family, peers) and macro-level of the education system, the labour market and broader society. To achieve this, input from various disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, psychology and economics is necessary, and a multi-method approach (survey, ethnographic and document research) can provide the specific tools to reveal the (underlying) mechanisms.

The RESL.eu-project aims to complement the existing academic literature and theory development, inform civil society, in particular policy makers, and construct tools aimed at reducing ESL by designing and executing a research project that incorporates various viewpoints and research traditions.

¹ Resl.eu stands for Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe. See for more information: www.resl-eu.org.

² Commonly conceptualized as the potential and capacity of individuals - although some also refer to, e.g., the agency of social groups - to act in social reality (Archer 2002).

2. Early school leaving: the (de)construction of a concept

Early School Leaving (ESL) is a central concept in EU policy documents, especially since reducing ESL became a policy target under the Lisbon Strategy (2001). Although the concept has been used for over a decade, EUROSTAT recently made a small adjustment to the concept's label (but not to the content of the indicator) and now focuses on 'early leavers from education and training' instead of 'early school leavers' (Eurostat 2012). This concept still refers to *all persons aged 18 to 24 who have finished no more than a lower secondary education and who received no education or training in the four weeks preceding the survey*. While EUROSTAT recognizes that this operationalization is not all-encompassing, as each education system has its specificities, others express the need to deconstruct the concept of Early School Leaving itself (Trueba and Spindler 1989). As it is mainly a policy-oriented concept necessary for constructing benchmarks, measurement tools and designing policy, it imposes a specific perspective on the interpretation of educational processes and outcomes, and as such can influence the construction of social reality in itself. However, since Resl.eu is inherently a policy-oriented academic project, to a large extent it uses these policy driven concepts (see WP2), while at the same time leaving room to discuss and reconstruct the concepts applied in the course of the research process.

Various scholars have already discussed the power of policy constructed concepts to influence social reality by providing 'new' conceptualizations of this reality (Bourdieu 1997), as is the case for the construction of education-related categories such as 'at-risk' pupils or 'early school leavers' (Swadener and Lubeck 1995). A danger with these labels is that they come into existence before (new) pupils enter education and that they are imposed on specific categories of pupils and also in the minds of educational staff, therefore potentially affecting, for example, teacher expectations or pupils' educational aspirations, and as such can even become self-fulfilling prophecies (Pica-Smith and Veloria 2012).

In these notions of educational failure, a rational choice and/or meritocratic perspective on ESL often points to the individual responsibility to remain in or retreat from education disregarding structural and contextual factors (Valencia 2010). However, as human beings are fundamentally *social* agents, actor's decisions should be seen as the result of a "bounded rationality". Individuals are not socially atomized, since relationships and interactions enter at every stage in their life course. Membership in different groups (from families to civic organisations) extends and constrains our actions, choices and decisions. The RESL.eu project tries to complement existing, rational choice-oriented theories by acknowledging human beings as rational but simultaneously bounded in their agency as they interact with and within social and structural opportunities and constraints (see, e.g., Crossley 2001; Evans 2007). Consequently, their lives are (in)formed by the relations of power inherent to the social locations they live in, the bernsteinian 'sub-voices' (Bernstein 1997)

3. Reproduction of educational differences: breaking the cycle

It is well established that specific categories of youngsters have a higher ESL rate than others and similar results are found across the partner countries involved in the RESL.eu project (Nesse 2010). The question is rather why e.g., a low SES, belonging to an ethnic minority and having a non-native mother tongue are risk factors for ESL. By themselves, these risk factors do not explain the processes occurring in the different contexts and leading to ESL. At the same time, one cannot solely study contexts and disregard the overall social position, the actions and perceptions of individuals, be they pupils, parents, teachers, principals or peers. Therefore, at the root of our theoretical framework lies the structure-agency dialectic. Since reproduction of social, cultural and economic difference and stratification seems omnipresent and of an almost deterministic nature, one has to incorporate the potential of individuals to make a difference through their actions (Freire 1997, Stoer & Araújo 2000; Macedo 2012). Consequently, the conceptual model of the Resl.eu-project has to consider the standpoints of the individuals involved as well as their embeddedness in various contexts and the influences of social institutions and structures.

We therefore adopt a rather classic tripartite or All-factors) approach, which addresses the individual, institutional (including family, school and community related factors) and systemic/structural levels (see also Reay 2004; Battin-Pearson and Newcomb 2000; Lamb 2011; NESSE 2010). Adopting such a middle ground perspective shows that one cannot merely apply a structural or contextual approach towards ESL by framing contexts, or specific elements therein, as pull- or push factors (Creten et al. 2004; Bradley and Renzulli 2011; Lamote et al. 2013), since which factors are push- and which are pull-factors also depends on the individual. For instance, in specific circumstances and for some individuals (but not for all) the labour market can be a pull-factor, pulling the pupils out of school early, while in other circumstances it might be a push-factor, pushing individuals back to education/training. At the same time, such a pull/push paradigm might overlook the importance of human agency and the ability of individuals to overcome obstacles and push/pull-mechanisms. We will therefore study the educational trajectories retrospectively and prospectively, both quantitatively and qualitatively, also focussing on alternative learning arenas, the labour market and broader society. The emphasis is placed both on crucial decision points in the school career and on crucial school contexts. This includes school retention, switching between schools and tracks, and the concentration of certain groups of students in certain tracks, school classes and schools (see Crul et al 2012; Crul 2013). However, the educational system is an institution incorporated in broader society and with strong interaction patterns with, for example, the home and community environment. The tripartite or all-factors approach guarantees a broad and in-depth study of the various analytical levels and social domains.

In most cases ESL is the result of a long-term process developing from (early) negative social and educational experiences that generate boredom, withdrawal of interest in learning, and short absences which gradually increase until the event of leaving education (Bautier and Terrail 2003; Dolignon 2005; 2008; NESSE 2010). Such an approach to ESL presupposes that characteristics and causes need to be sought and studied long before the actual school leaving (Ferguson et al. 2005). The most important background and demographic variables predicting ESL, often similar

across countries, are known. However, less information is available on how these variables play out in real life and everyday interactions. It is one thing to know that specific socio-demographic variables (such as sex, age, ethnicity/race, languages spoken, income, level of education, ...) are (in)directly related to ESL. It is something else to understand why these relations are present and what the underlying mechanisms are, which explain why specific groups are commonly overrepresented in these figures (Rumberger and Ah Lim 2008).

3.1 The dialectic of reproduction and transformation in a multilevel approach

Various scholars criticized these perpetuating differences in educational outcomes and stratification processes as a problem of underlying mechanisms and power differences between specific social groups. To a large extent, dominant groups have the power to organize the education systems and other important social institutions, and consequently have more power to define what is perceived as valuable and relevant in a specific field (Bourdieu 1989; Hannerz 1992).

Many of these reproduction theories were grounded on a fundamental criticism of capitalist economic theorizing - that it imposes its paradigms onto non-economic domains such as education. Economic differences (often defined as monetary differences) between social groups were reformulated into class differences, which were in turn identified as the main explanation for social inequalities (e.g. Bowles and Gintis 1976; 2001; 2002). Yet, for some, these 'economic accounts' were too mechanical and based on a too strict rational choice approach and focused mainly on economic differences (Foley 2010). Other theorists applied a more open, social class-approach, studying specific elements of reproduction such as the relation between class and various forms of capital (Bourdieu 1990) or the relation between class and language codes (Bernstein 1971). Some researchers studied the implicit incorporation of these class differences into educational practices, such as teacher-pupil interactions and the curriculum (Anyon 1980), while others incorporated even more elements into the equation and studied the intersection of class with ethnicity and race (Ogbu 1990; 2003) or gender (Crespi 2004). In general these theories refer to a sorting of pupils according to their ascribed status and as such to a large extent hinder them from attaining a new and 'higher' status via education (Giroux 1980; Murray 1997).

However, grand theories such as social or cultural reproduction theories have been criticized for not passing the empirical – often statistical – test (Crespi 2004; Driessen 2001). One of the major criticisms is that these theories overgeneralize the influences of, mainly, class differences. Therefore, in contrast, a more intersectional approach taking into account the social location of individuals at the intersection of various important social dimensions such as gender, ethnicity and class has been put forward (Driessen 2001; Yuval-Davis 2010). Another major problem with reproduction theories is that they are deterministic in nature and tend to negate or ignore human agency. Several scholars stress the incorporation of more agency-centred approaches such as the idea of resiliency to overcome external labelling as a 'pupil at risk' (Catterall 1987).

The conceptualization of various forms of capital (economic, social, cultural and symbolic) offers a possible solution to link structuralist approaches with more agency-driven approaches. Within structured fields such as that of education, individuals 'possess' and can accumulate capital, which allows them to strengthen their social position in this field and help them to overcome specific barriers (Bourdieu 1990; Foley 2010). Furthermore, the advantages and power generated by capital

accumulation can be extended to other fields, since commonly similar groups (higher educated middle class white males) hold dominant positions in fields such as the economy, politics, religious networks and the media. We go more into detail on the specificities of social and cultural capital in section 3.2 but here we discuss the importance of capital accumulation and, consequently, holding a dominant position in the field of education.

Given that education systems are commonly defined or uncovered as middle class oriented systems, our research focused on how these social stratification processes remain stable over time and how educational attainment differences are explained. One crucial aspect of being in a position of power is that one tries to maintain this position, which to a certain extent explains the tenacity of social differences (Savage et al. 2005). This was elaborated on by Bourdieu (1990) in his conceptualization of 'habitus'. The dominant group in a specific field has more power to define which resources and which capital is valuable or better said, valued, in a specific field. The dominant habitus - their internalized dispositions with respect to all kinds of cultural artefacts or emblems such as language or religion - is put forward as the norm or the standard that others (and their habitus) are measured against. One's, or a group's, symbolic capital - based on the accumulation of the economic, cultural and social capital - gives the power to define what is valuable and what is not, the power to problematize or to justify, the power to pathologize or to normalize, and thus to place others in locations of subordination, lack of power and of recognition (Applebaum 2005; Bourdieu 1992; Ratner 2000; Baker et al. 2004). It is common for groups with more symbolic power - often but not always middleclass ethnic majorities - to impose their vision of social reality as neutral and self-evident in such a way that not only the dominant group perceives this status quo as 'normal' but often also subordinate groups. It is within this framework that critical scholars studied the common sense explanations given for educational inequalities and revealed processes of subtractive schooling/acclulturation (Gibson 1998; Roosens 1998; Valenzuela 1999), culturalization (Brumann 1999), the construction of language ideologies and hierarchies (Palmer 2011) and the concept of linguisticism (Bourhis et al. 2007).

A common viewpoint with regards to the educational 'underperformance' of specific groups is to see the meritocratic ideal of the education system as 'the great equalizer' and thus, to focus on the responsibility and ability of the individual pupil to be (or not to be) successful within this democratic and meritocratic system (Anyon 2006; Valencia 2010). School systems, however, differ a lot in the extent to which they realize the meritocratic ideal, and school system factors often disguise deep-rooted stratification processes in more or less subtle forms. An important example is early tracking, which can negatively affect the educational opportunities of children from disadvantaged families.

When discussing differences in educational outcomes, dominant perspectives tend to forget that they can benefit from structural advantages or more implicit advantages related to the language of instruction or the content of the curriculum transmitted to pupils (Yosso 2005; Lukes 2005). Moreover, these advantages also interact with, e.g., the structures of education systems; as early tracking and/or a hierarchical tracking system is particularly unfavourable for lower SES and/or minority groups (Trautwein et al. 2006; Kelly 2009; Stevens and Vermeersch 2010).

To summarize, the Resl.eu-project acknowledges the dialectic between agency- versus structure-oriented approaches and therefore applies a multilevel approach in combination with theoretical underpinnings stressing implicit power differences between (groups of) individuals. An individual pupil is not solely responsible for his educational trajectory; his success is determined neither by

his background features alone, nor simply by contextual factors such as macro-economic structures or educational policies. The Resl.eu project studies the interplay between various analytical levels (individual - social institution - systemic/ structural) and focuses on the interactions between individuals in the second analytical level (e.g. pupil-teacher, teacher-parent-pupil, pupil-peer interactions on the intersecting contexts of home-school-community). At the same time, it acknowledges the importance of the macro-economic structures and educational policies that create opportunity and/or structures of constraint for each of the individuals involved. As explained above, various (more or less grand) theories have been designed to explain reproduction in education. Specific categories of pupils tend to 'underperform' and are overrepresented in ESL rates while others are not. In various studies, similar groups are singled out as being 'at-risk' for ESL and these patterns suggest that ESL should not be approached primarily as an individual problem, a problem of individual responsibility, but rather by addressing the deeply social nature of the problem (NESSE 2010). However, individuals always have a role in these processes as they interact with others and their surrounding contexts. At the same time, the potential of resiliency is probably age-dependent, -- most 10-year-olds, for example, probably have a different level of resiliency than 14- or 18-year-olds. In the next section we argue why a focus on social and cultural capital theory can help interlink the different levels discussed above.

3.2 Countering reproduction: a way out via social capital and cultural capital theory

As mentioned above, capital-theory offers the opportunity to focus on the strategic actions of individuals to use existing and acquire new resources to accumulate capital that allows them to achieve specific goals and strengthen (or maintain) their social position (Foley 2010). This approach, amongst others, profoundly discussed by Bourdieu (1986), allows for a more agent-oriented perspective on social and educational processes. Next to economic capital, Bourdieu distinguishes related capitals of social, cultural and symbolic nature, but for our purpose our focus will be on the ways that social and cultural capital can be utilized in order to successfully navigate the education system (Allard 2005). However, to understand how social and cultural capital becomes internalized or embodied, we first take a look at how socialization and identity theory can support our theoretical framework.

3.2.1 Socialization and identity theory

As an individual, one is always related to and 'member' of specific social groups, e.g., a family, a peer group, and/or a broader religious or immigrant community. To construct one's own unique identity one needs the input from these various social groups and their shared identities (Jenkins 2008; Turner and Reynolds 2001). Up until now, we mentioned several concepts such as habitus or theories such as subtractive/additive acculturation, which strongly relate to socialization and/or identification theories. For example, one's unique habitus is the internalization of dispositions to act in and to perceive social reality transmitted by others to the individual (Bourdieu 2005). An individual is socialized into - but not determined by - the cultural schemes, routines and dispositions common for and shared by members of a specific group (Jenkins 2008). As a consequence, an individual can strongly identify with a specific group - and several of its emblems or features - which to some extent also stimulates the act to differentiate oneself and one's group from others, known as the in-group 'favouritism' versus out-group 'hostility' mechanism (Turner and Reynolds

2001). Identification with a specific group logically entails the identification with specific forms of capital that is, or is felt to be, representative for this group.

When Bourdieu argues that a habitus needs to be adapted to a specific field to know how to 'play the game in that field' he refers to this process of socialization, internalization and identification. When the dominant group in the field of education (implicitly) relies upon processes of culturalization or subtractive acculturation/schooling to explain educational differences, they refer to processes of identification and socialization that they identify as problematic. A common finding characteristic for culturalizing processes is the idea that lower SES and/or minority parents do not transmit the proper values and attitudes to their children, or that they hold on to 'their' home language, culture or religion 'too much' (Clycq et al. 2013; Gibson et al. 2013; Carrasco, et al. 2011).

A middle class-oriented education system is based upon the dispositions with respect to taste, language codes, interaction patterns, curriculum and so forth that are prevalent among the middle class. It is oriented more towards these forms of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital shared by middle class individuals and families, than those common to working class and/or (specific) minority families. Yet this does not mean one cannot challenge the status quo or the network of hierarchical relations in a field. Several authors referred to processes of resistance (Willis 1977) or counter behaviour (Ogbu 1992), yet also stressing that the ones that benefit the least from this deployment of strategies are the pupils themselves. Others focus more on remodelling the education system to make it more inclusive, an issue we discuss more elaborately in section 3.3.

In the following paragraphs, we elaborate specifically on the issues of social and cultural capital, as these concepts form the link between the theoretical perspectives discussed above and the more observable and falsifiable processes examined in our empirical work packages.

3.2.2 Social capital

One of the most characteristic features of social reality is that individuals are part of and can rely upon different social networks, which are crucial for identity construction and for achieving specific goals. The resources (and their allocation) available in these networks are an essential aspect of this process. These resources, but also the people 'holding' them, can have informative, instrumental and emotional functions (Berg and Piner 1990; Thoits 1995). As Savage et al. (2005) argue, capital is concerned with the accumulation of resources that can be applied to people's advantage and that can be beneficial not only in a specific field or social domain but whose influence can also extend to other fields (see also Bourdieu 1986). Within the context of education, important social networks are pupils' family, their peers, their teachers (or other adults in the school), classmates and youth organizations. Some refer to more formal organizations as sports clubs and religious or community organizations as inducing pro-social behaviour and attitudes (Skinner and Pitzer 2012; Behtoui 2013).

While social networks can serve as protective and/or nurturing environments, they may also be risk factors with respect to educational performance and ESL (Portes 2000). Some networks can induce anti-school behaviour or even stimulate ESL (Ogbu 1992; Willis 1977). Coleman (1988) tried to capture this dialectical relation through his notions of bonding and bridging capital, arguing that bonding ties are important to help struggling in-group members 'to get by' on the group level, while bridging out-group oriented ties are necessary to 'get ahead'. Bonding ties tend to be strong and

inward-looking, reinforcing group identities but excluding others (Holland 2009; Ryan 2011). Bridging can link on both a horizontal and a vertical level; it is usually found in formal and informal networks between socio-economically different groups or people. This is related to the conceptualization of 'strong' and 'weak' ties by Granovetter (1973) stating that individuals (and communities) need weak ties, commonly via formal organizations or work settings, which help them to get in to contact with individuals with different social positions and resources.

Nevertheless, as argued above, whether a specific form of social capital - and the related resources - is considered negative or positive also depends on the match of what is commonly valued in that social network and what is commonly valued in the social field wherein one participates (Allard 2005). With respect to the education system and the (mis)appreciation of the resources and the capital that pupils and their parents bring into the school context, scholars point to 'minority community funds of knowledge' as being those networks, and the resources available therein, which can be very beneficial for pupils, but which can be perceived by the dominant majority as being disruptive (Gonzalez et al. 2005). An interesting example are the supplementary schools developed in many countries providing extra education for minority pupils by focusing explicitly and in an openly positive way on the ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background of minority pupils (Li 2006). Recent research shows these schools can have positive effects on the well-being of pupils, their identity development and self-worth, but also on their educational career in mainstream education (Piqueray et al. 2013). As mentioned, these 'alternative' networks can at the same time be too in-group oriented (Francis et al. 2009), however, they are often conceptualized as the reaction of minorities to a too in-group or middleclass-oriented mainstream education system (Reay and Mirza 1997).

What the discussion on social capital revealed is that social networks are important in and of themselves, but equally important are the (cultural or economic) resources present in these networks. By being involved in networks, individuals tap into crucial resources they can allocate to achieve specific goals. In the next paragraph we discuss the role of cultural capital more in-depth.

3.2.3 Cultural capital

Initially, the concept of cultural capital was coined by Bourdieu (1992) in a rather strict sense: the disposition to have a learning attitude and 'taste' for knowledge; the possession of 'cultural artefacts' such as books or painting, and the possession of certificates such as educational degrees. However, a more open conceptualization of cultural capital is needed (Foley 2010), taking into account the insight of concepts such as cultural repertoires (Lamont), frames of reference (Suarez-Orozco) and broader cultural schemes (Roosens). This allows for a more in-depth and nuanced analysis of the cultural resources pupils and parents bring into the school context, and relates more directly to theories of (family) socialization and group identification processes.

Cultural capital and cultural resources are tapped into through the social networks such as the family, peer group or school one is part of. White middleclass families have some dispositions with respect to cultural resources in common and these shared resources are also dominant in the middleclass education system. Those pupils' cultural resources - a shared use of or taste in elaborate language codes, music, books, or even religious background or overall native language - are valued more by mainstream education than similar resources from working class and or eth-

nic/linguistic/religious minority pupils and parents (Gibson 1998; Roosens 1998; Valenzuela 1999; Stoer and Araújo 2000; Macedo 2009).

Consequently, when discussing altering pupils' habitus and consequently also their dispositions with respect to learning and their aspirations with respect to their educational (or life) goals, this also entails altering the dominant habitus and, e.g., policy makers' and teachers' expectations of pupils' abilities and the value of their cultural resources (Agirdag et al. 2012; Clycq et al. 2013). Research showed that cultural capital³ positively influences the academic performance of disadvantaged youth through the mediating effect of habitus -- by altering students' opinion on their own academic abilities and the value of education in their life (Gaddis 2012). In a similar way, scholars point to the construction of a culturally relevant curriculum - in its broadest sense - to create an 'identity safe' school or education system (Markus et al. 2002; Zhou and Kim 2006).

Thus, as mentioned before, cultural and social capital concepts need to be deconstructed when they implicitly take a middle class perspective for granted and reconstructed to become more inclusive. The theories and findings discussed above show that focusing on social capital and cultural capital theory offers promising insights into how to alter social reproduction theories. Both concepts allow for an open-minded approach of social and educational processes, focusing not only on the individual (pupil/youngster, parent, peer, teacher, principal) but also on the meso-level of social institutions. Social capital theory, social identity theory and cultural capital theory are deeply interlinked because, among other reasons, participation in pro-social networks such as religious networks, youth groups, community organisations, sport clubs and, of course, the school can increase one's self-esteem and self-worth, one's engagement with education and one's motivation to succeed and achieve specific goals (Davalos et al. 1999; Skinner and Pitzer 2012). In the next section we discuss this further and focus on theories of engagement and resiliency.

3.3 Policy and intervention-oriented research building emancipation, empowerment and resiliency

The Resl.eu-project is a policy-oriented academic research project with a theory-driven approach that entails gathering new empirical data with the aim of altering the current processes of reproduction of inequality. This implies a belief that our project needs to be relevant for the stakeholders involved and particularly needs to create opportunities for those who are negatively affected by problems surrounding early school leaving to express their ideas and beliefs. The need for a critical approach to social reality and the objective to uncover deep-rooted mechanisms with regards to education was already expressed by scholars such as Paulo Freire, Michael Apple and Pierre Bourdieu.

Constructing education systems that become more inclusive and appeal to all pupils would be crucial to countering the reproduction of inequality in education. Booth and Ainscow (2002: 3) recommend the following strategies to restructure education, suggestions that are in line with the bulk of theories discussed above: viewing the differences between students as resources to support learning, rather than problems to be overcome; restructuring the cultures, policies, and practices in schools so that they respond to the diversity of pupils in the locality; valuing all students and staff

³ In this quantitative study measured by participation in 'high-art', such as museum visits, attending plays, time spent reading.

equally; fostering mutually sustaining relationships between schools and communities; recognising that inclusion in education is one aspect of inclusion in society (see also Banks and Banks 2010).

It is clear that concepts such as social and cultural capital are central to this conceptualization of inclusive education: the restructuring of dominant habitus and the appreciation of differences as resources to build upon rather than 'things' to block out of the education system. Scholars stress in particular the construction of networks between social institutions such as the school, the family and the community. These community funds of knowledge or resources found in minority or working class families and communities can be applied as learning tools to foster engagement and increase achievement (Raffo and Dyson 2007).

Related to this are theories of engagement and resiliency which focus on the individual and its cognitive, behavioural and emotional/ affective orientations (Skinner and Pitzer 2012). Features of resilient pupils and youngsters are a strong sense of belonging, a high self-esteem, social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy and a sense of purpose and future (Benard 1991; Davalos et al. 1999). Programs and interventions aimed at raising resiliency therefore heavily invest in the social networks of individuals and on building supportive networks with various amounts of resources and care (Benard 1991). These networks can be found outside or inside the school. As mentioned above, community networks can be protective factors but a school can also provide safety for pupils: it can potentially provide not only physical safety from a violent environment, but it can also be an 'identity safe' space, open to the diverse backgrounds of its pupils (Antrop-Gonzalez et al. 2010; Creese 2009; Creese et al. 2006).

Again social network theories interact with identity and cultural capital theories as pupils' resiliency, sense of belonging and (academic) self-concept is built up by developing networks in which they feel safe and respected. Research therefore also suggests that quite straightforward strategies can help counter negative perceptions, processes of stigmatization and disengagement (Inzlicht et al. 2011; Benard 1991). Peer helping and cooperative learning gives pupils a renewed sense of worth by developing the sense that their input and resources are valuable and can make a difference. Making pupils depending on each other for completing tasks makes them appreciate each other more, but also shows teachers and parents a new perspective on the competencies of their pupils and children (Benard 1991).

4. A multilevel approach: interlinking individuals, social institutions and structures

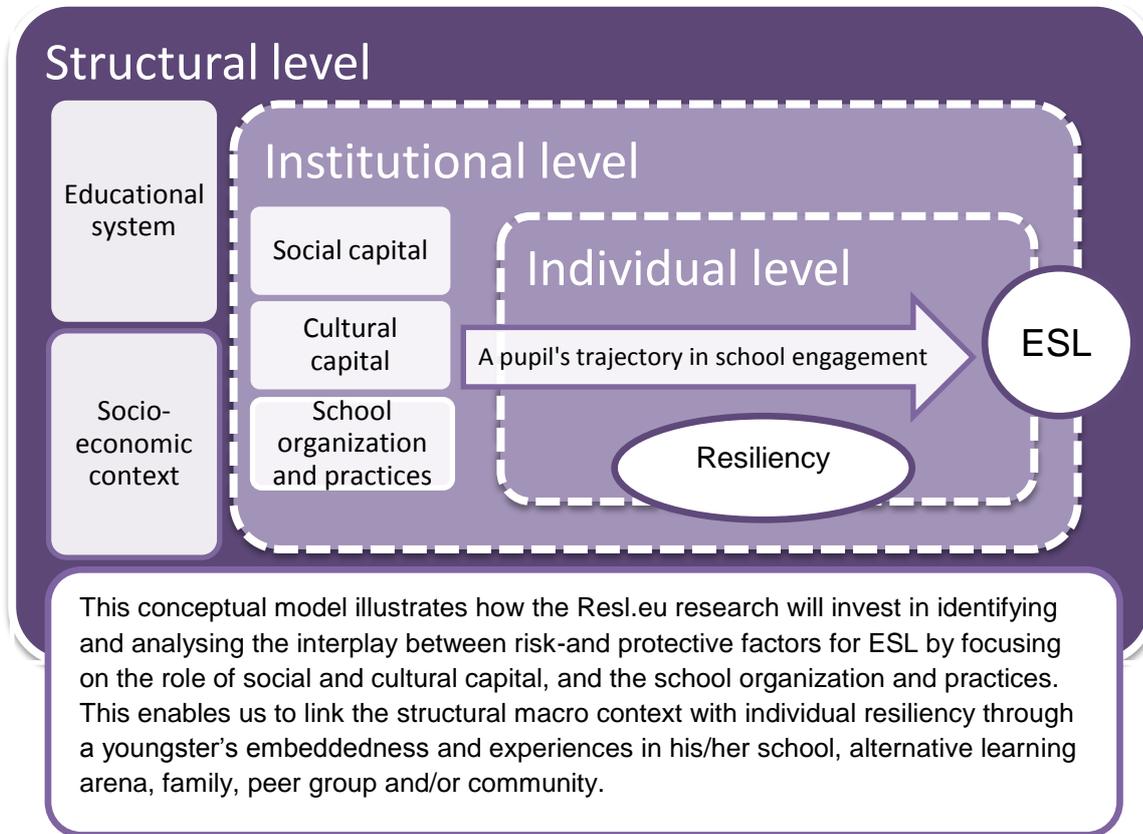
The Resl.eu-project studies the process of Early School Leaving on three intersecting levels - the individual, the social institution and the structural/systemic - which can be called an all-factors framework or a tripartite approach (NESSE 2010; Lamb et al. 2011).

The theories discussed above mainly focused on the relations between the individual level and the level of the social institutions, with less attention to the systemic or structural level. Nevertheless, this macro-level is important as it delineates the broader fields and structures wherein institutions operate and individuals navigate themselves. Therefore, several scholars make a starting point out of these structural contexts – educational policy and structure, labour market and economic (evolutions), neighbourhood structures – wherein pupils and their significant others construct and realise their educational and broader life trajectories. Although a rather mechanical and rational choice approach is often underlying these studies, there is no denying that macro-level elements and processes such as overall economic growth, the level of economic development, and youth and adult unemployment rates do influence ESL rates (De Witte et al. 2013).

The education system is a highly structured field; important institutional factors in relation to early school leaving are the availability of pre-school or the start of compulsory education, early or late selection in secondary school, school segregation, the age at which school transitions take place, and the way internships are organized (Crul et al. 2012). Research showed that systems characterized by (early) tracking can be particularly vulnerable for processes of stigmatisation, educational disengagement and lower levels of pupil well-being, as these systems generally contain some form of explicit or implicit status hierarchy between tracks (Trautwein et al. 2006; Kelly 2009; Stevens and Vermeersch 2010). In a strongly segregated and hierarchical system such as Flanders and the Netherlands, the vocational track in particular is often perceived as the 'waste basket' of hierarchical education system, comprised of pupils who are not capable or sufficiently motivated for the other tracks (Clycq et al. 2013; Stevens and Vermeersch, 2010). Negative teacher perceptions of these pupils proved to be an important intervening variable in explaining educational outcomes that, in the long term, are linked to ESL processes (Van Houtte 2004; 2006).

As already argued above, when analysing the process of Early School Leaving, middle range theories such as social and cultural capital theory and identification (and stigmatization) processes can help bridge the gaps between the systemic or structural level and the meso-level of the social institution and the micro-level of individual agency. In the following section we elaborate on the research questions related to each analytical level.

5. Conceptual model



6. Research questions

To recapitulate, the main rationale of the RESL.eu-project is to find a more in-depth understanding of the process of early school leaving and the persisting reproduction of educational inequalities apparent in education systems throughout Europe, and to find the 'good practices' that would counter these processes leading to ESL. The main question we aim to answer is: how do we intervene at the structural/systemic level, at the level of social institutions, and at the individual level, in order to prevent youngsters from leaving education without a qualification? This general question is subdivided into many questions, all related to one of the three levels mentioned above. The final aim of the Resl.eu-project is to refine existing theories on ESL by incorporating new empirical data and new insights at the end of the RESL.eu-project. The research questions below are divided into two categories: one focusing on an in-depth understanding of the process of ESL, the other aiming at gathering information supporting actions in the tackling of ESL by analysing various preventive, intervening and compensating measures.

1) How does the complex and often subtle interplay of factors on a macro, meso and micro level predict early school leaving?

→ On a macro/ structural level:

In what way do macro-structures and systemic processes such as educational structures and policies, relevant legislation, political governance and the economic context influence ESL rates?

→ On a meso/ institutional level

To what extent, and how, does access to social and cultural capital, in different social environments, influence the process leading to ESL?

→ On an micro/ individual level:

How do individual characteristics, educational trajectories, psychological traits and strategies influence school engagement and the process of ESL?

2) What prevention, intervention or compensation measures can be identified as successful in reducing ESL, with a focus on keeping 'a pupil at risk of ESL' in school, helping a pupil return to school, in guiding him/her to an alternative learning arena or perhaps in leading him/her to alternative pathways to obtain ISCED 3 level qualifications?

Each of these questions will - during the course of the research - be broken down into more specific subquestions and falsifiable hypotheses.

7. Work package description

To answer our research questions raised above and to relate insights to on the one hand the existing academic literature but on the other hand also to the non-academic stakeholders involved, seven different work packages (WPs) were designed -- each with specific goals and methods but all intertwined and building upon each other. These WPs are divided into a descriptive, an analytical and a normative part.

The descriptive part of the Resl.eu-project

Work Package 1

Work Package 1 elaborates on the theoretical and methodological insights provided by each of the partners involved in the Resl.eu-project and designs an operational framework linking concepts, theories, methods and data collection. This WP is mainly founded upon a study of the existing academic literature. At the end of the project the new insights gathered throughout the project will be incorporated into a refined theoretical framework.

Work Package 2

Work Package 2 aims to answer these research questions related to the macro- or systemic/structural level. As elaborated on in section 5 these are issues related to the definitions of ESL and the impact of educational and other policies on the process of ESL. To answer these questions, a desk review of a broad range of policy documents (with a focus on relevant legislation, educational structures, political governance, resistance to policy and existing good practices) is combined with in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with stakeholders at the European, national, regional and local level.

The analytical part of the RESL.eu-project

Work Package 3 and Work Package 4

Work Package 3 and Work Package 4 aim at the collection and analysis of new data and provide insights for these research questions mainly related to the meso-level of social institutions and the micro-level of the individual. It provides both a broad and an in-depth analysis of the process of ESL that takes into account context variables as well as personality traits and individuals' strategies. WP 3 focussed on the statistical analysis of ESL while WP4 applied a more ethnographic approach to this issue.

The normative part of the RESL.eu-project

The final part of the RESL.eu-project has a normative, forward-looking conclusion wherein all project results will be bundled.

Work Package 5

Work Package 5 involves the discussion and evaluation of the good practices found in each of the research areas dealing with ESL and answers the research questions related to the individual and institutional risk and protective factors for ESL and to the identification of the events, actions or factors leading up to ESL, or on the contrary, preventing and compensating for ESL.

Work Package 6

Work Package 6 aims to transfer the knowledge obtained from the project's results to policy makers, politicians, NGOs and professionals in social work and education.

Work Package 7

Work Package 7 is concerned with a cost benefit analysis of ESL and studies the costs associated with the design, the implementation and the continuation of the proposed policy measures based on the good practices studied in WP5. It answers these questions with the broader framework taking into account macro-levels structures and societal costs of ESL, including those towards broader society and the labour market.

The Resl.eu-project studies the processes of Early School Leaving from an All-factors perspective searching for new insights on various levels (macro, meso and micro) and applies various methodologies (document review, survey, ethnographic research) to generate broad and in-depth comprehension of this complex issue. At the same time, 'good practices' in order to reduce ESL and help pupils and youngsters will be studied and evaluated. These findings will be disseminated to the wider public and to specific target groups in particular. More information on the project, its design, its strategies and its progress is available on our website: www.resl-eu.org.

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