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Theoretical and methodological considerations when studying early school leaving in Europe

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About the RESL.eu project

The RESL.eu project aims to provide insights into the processes influencing early leaving from education or training. In addition, RESL.eu intends to identify and analyse prevention, intervention and compensation measures that aim to keep pupils in education or training until attaining at least an upper secondary education qualification. Its aim lies in the development of generic conceptual models based on research to predict and tackle early school leaving (ESL), and ultimately, to disclose these insights to various target audiences at the local, national and EU level.

The project's focus is on the development and implementation of education policies, and the transferability of country-specific good practices. RESL.eu also seeks to understand the mechanisms behind, processes leading to and trajectories following ESL through focussing on actions, perceptions and discourses of all youngsters (ESL and not-ESL) as well as those of significant others (family, peer group, school staff). The project builds on existing practices to tackle ESL and intends to develop innovative approaches for regular schools and in alternative learning arenas.

How and where the project operates

In nine EU member states (Belgium, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Portugal, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Hungary and Austria), two local urban research areas were involved in a comparative policy analysis of ESL policies on the EU, national/regional and local levels.

New survey data were collected in two waves among at least 1500 youngsters in each country across two different urban research areas (except in Hungary and Austria). In each country, school staff and school administrators were also surveyed.

Qualitative data were collected across seven member states (Belgium, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Portugal, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain). At least two bio-interviews were conducted with 24–32 youngsters per country. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions with students and staff also took place across 28 schools and 24 alternative learning arenas that were carefully selected based on the first wave of the students' survey data and the field descriptions of local educational landscapes.

Content

Introduction

Policy makers, civil society and scholars are challenged by the persisting social inequalities in education systems over the past decades in Europe. One of the most salient outcomes of these social inequalities and ways to even reinforce social inequalities in society is the phenomenon of Early School Leaving (ESL), more recently addressed as Early Leaving of Education and Training (ELET) in EU policy directives. Although most EU member states have seen a decline in the number of youngsters leaving education and training without an upper secondary education diploma in the last decade, there remain sharp inequalities between and within European countries in ESL rates, unequally distributed across social categories (e.g., low SES families or families of immigrant descent, Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Dale, 2010; Eurydice & Cedefop, 2014). Hence, given the persistence of ESL rates across decades and the unequal distribution of ESL rates across social categories, the following question arose: What can be done to reduce the number of early school leavers (hereafter ESLers) in Europe and how can countries and European systems learn from each other? This was the central research question underlying the RESL.eu-project.[1] In the initial phase of the RESL.eu project, we developed a theoretical and methodological framework for the research project (see project paper 2, Clycq, Nouwen & Timmerman, 2014). In this publication, we revised our initial theoretical and methodological framework after doing five years of research on early school leaving and evaluating intervention, prevention and compensation measures to tackle early school leaving (see overview publications and project papers of the RESL.eu project). We discuss how our findings can be situated amongst the existing literature addressing this issue of social reproduction in educational attainment, in particular its relation to the processes of school disengagement and early school leaving. Based on the findings of the RESL.eu project, we formulate some directions for future research.

In a first section we present our conceptual model which is a classic tripartite multilevel approach to the process of ESL. We discuss the three main levels commonly distinguished in the academic literature influencing ESL: the macro-level of the structural and systemic features and policies, the meso-level of the institutional context such as the policies and capital resources in school, the alternative learning arenas and the family, and the micro-level, which focuses on the individual. However, these levels interact with and influence each other. With this model we aim to embed the process of ESL in a broader conceptual framework and to move beyond a sole focus on the traditional socio-demographic risk factors related to ESL in order to grasp the underlying processes that lie at the basis of ESL and contribute to gradual processes of school (dis)engagement.

In the following sections, we discuss the macro-, meso- and micro-level factors and processes separately. We start with a reflection on the importance of the macro-level and in particular focus on the impact of structural features, such as the effect of the socio-economic context and educational systems. We then critically discuss classic reproduction theories and incorporate new approaches offered by social justice theory, among others. Following this we focus on the meso-level and, in particular, on the school climate and culture and its relation to social and cultural capital theory. In the next section, we aim to understand how individuals navigate through the various contexts of their

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

lives, how they engage with opportunity structures and obstacles, by paying attention to their agency, and how this agency is embedded and can be strengthened within a particular context.

After this refinement of our initial conceptual and theoretical framework developed at the start of our project in 2013, we elaborate on some of the main methodological challenges we experienced during this multilevel, mixed-method, multi-phased, and multi-sited research project. In this methodological section, we discuss the decisions the project team had to make and the implications it had on the potential research findings. Many of the challenges we were confronted with were not only related to the dynamics of multidisciplinary and international teams, but also related to the different structures of national and educational systems and the fact that one cannot study an educational outcome without considering it in its entire (micro-, meso- and macro-) context.

In a final section, we depart from our research expertise build up in the RESL.eu project and suggest some new directions for future research. On each of the three main levels involved in our conceptual framework, we discovered new and interesting data which can still be studied further. At the micro-level, for example, the processual nature of ESL challenged the typical academic and policy approach of categorizing and monitoring individuals in research and policies. The impact of this changing educational status requires further research. At the meso-level, the role of the family and other social networks remains difficult to incorporate and thus often escapes the focus of research. Furthermore, the impact of the local context and of institutional contexts can be analysed more in-depth. Finally, also on the macro-level, the concept of social imaginaries or grand narratives on education can be informative, even though it remains an impact more difficult to grasp, while a more concrete comparison between structural and systemic features is a crucial element to understand the playing out of meso- and micro-level processes.

A Conceptual Model to Understand Processes of School (Dis-) engagement leading to Early School Leaving

In scientific literature, early school leaving is commonly referred to as a result of a process of gradual disengagement from education (Christenson et al., 2008; Finn, 2006). Moreover, ESL is often addressed as a social phenomenon that also transcends the process of student disengagement of an individual and should be studied in relation to push and pull factors in students' contexts (Doll et al., 2013; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). 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. In this publication, updating the initial RESL.eu theoretical framework, we will first present an adapted conceptual model that links structural (macro), institutional (meso), and individual (micro) level risk and protective factors that add to a better understanding of the social phenomenon of early school leaving.

Our initial theoretical framework included theory and *grand narratives* on structural reproduction of inequalities, social capital available in social institutions, as well as individual agency. Individuals are perceived as actors embedded in socio-cultural contexts and opportunity structures – e.g. educational systems and socio-economic contexts – that are embodied by institutional arrangements such as school policy, culture and practices, as well as the social, economic and cultural capital available in students' families, peer groups and neighbourhoods.
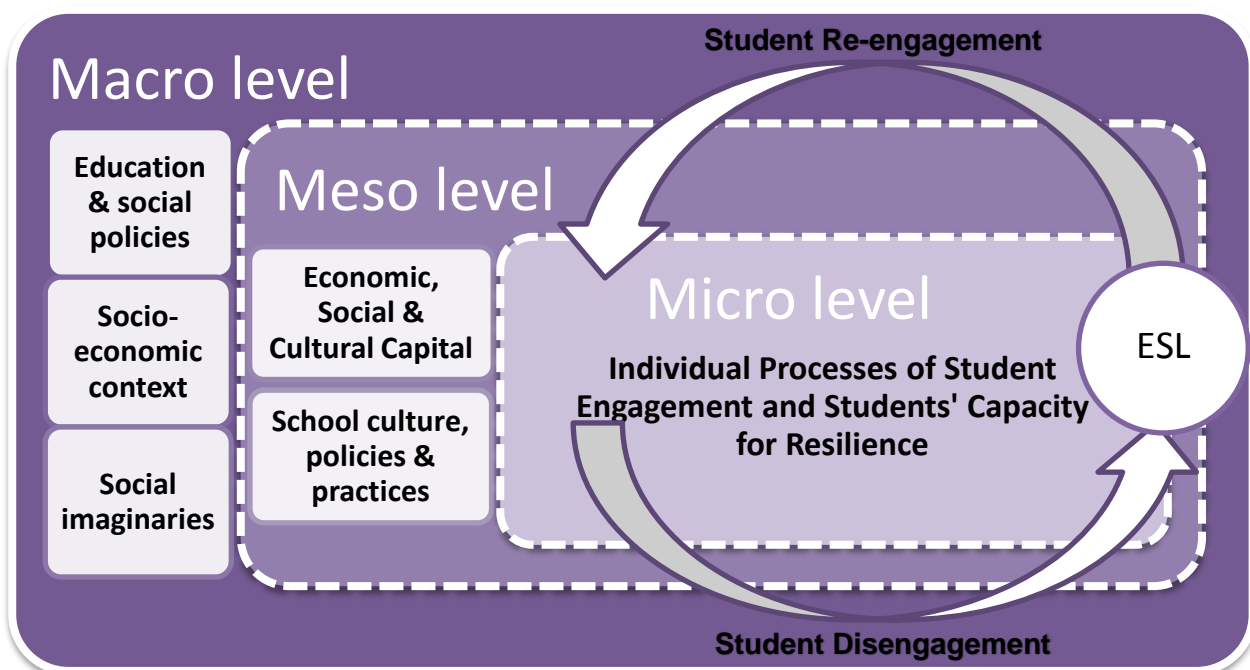

Figure 1: An updated Conceptual Model for Linking Macro, Meso and Micro Level Risk and Protective Factors to Processes of Student Engagement

We therefore studied the process of student (dis-)engagement within a classic tripartite approach or all-factors approach focusing on the micro-, meso- (including family, school and community related factors) and macro-level(s) (see also Reay, 2004; Battin-Pearson & Newcomb, 2000; Lamb & Markussen, 2011). We would like to stress that these are merely the contexts in which youngsters find themselves, and in which human agency should not be neglected. Moreover, the focusing on human agency and social support is crucial to understand how individual traits (e.g., academic self-concept) and social support and networks influences students' capacity for resilience to overcome push/pull-mechanisms.

The updated conceptual model presented in figure 1 shows that the tripartite approach of intersecting levels is maintained as well as the key role of theoretical concepts, such as social and cultural capital, student engagement and other risk and protective factors on the macro, meso and micro level. The main adaptations to our initial model concern a more circular rather than linear approach to the process of student disengagement that can lead to leaving school early and also the fact that the concept of early school leaving is not a static one. A second addition to our previous model entails the embeddedness of these processes into a broader ideological framing. The underlying factors that lead to processes of school (dis)engagement and how students' approach education and educational qualifications. Interpretations of educational success and failure in society should be understood by looking at the prevailing grand narratives or social imaginaries (e.g., the meritocratic ideals that prevail in educational systems). It was mainly the findings of the qualitative fieldwork in the RESL.eu project that showed us that 'early school leaving' should be approached from a more processual point of view and that many students that have experienced a process of school disengagement and potentially ESL can be re-engaged in education and training through their capacity for resilience that in itself is affected by meso-level support and macro-level opportunity structures. The linear conceptualization of ESL as a final endpoint after a process of disengagement from school has thus been re-imagined based upon our research findings, which show that individuals considered 'at risk' based on socio-demographic background characteristics and prior experiences of educational failure can fight against the odds when provided with the right support and opportunity structures. This encouraged us to further explore the notions of risk and protective factors and in particular the concept of resilience.

Risk Status and Students' Capacity for Resilience

The overrepresentation of socially disadvantaged groups in statistics on early school leaving can be found throughout international literature on early school leaving (e.g., Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Eurydice & Cedefop, 2014). Risk status factors that strictly relate to socio-demographic characteristics of students, like gender, social class or having an ethnic minority background have been found to be reproduced over time (Finn & Rock, 1997; Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). Although systemic modifications to the educational system and government policies that target social and ethnic inequalities could alter the overrepresentation of specific socio-demographic groups in ESL rates, in practice, some of these systemic features do not always include sufficient room for individual schools to fully tackle school disengagement and ESL. Rather, many systemic characteristics of very strictly organized educational systems, like tracking systems and grade retention, mostly transcend the influence of individual schools and households, and are frequently considered as rather fixed risk factors. Even more challenging is the creation of a social imaginary (see next section) that appeals to all students and that allows them to realize their ambitions (Timmerman, 2000; Timmerman et al, 2016).

In efforts to understand early school leaving, research tries to move beyond such socio-demographic factors and to explain more of the variance within groups of students that are considered 'at risk'. Studies on risk and the capacity for resilience (regarding early school leaving) have started to concentrate more on alterable protective factors of ESL, such as the support provided in the school, peer and family context (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). The RESL.eu project has built on state-of-the-art research regarding 'at risk groups', the predictive value of the concept of student engagement and its relation to the social support and other resources available in the school, family and peer networks. In doing so, the RESL.eu project tried to uncover protective factors at the micro, meso and macro levels that can support students' capacity for resilience to go against the odds of being considered at risk of early school leaving based on mere socio-demographic and educational background characteristics, often captured by national administrative or large-scale survey data (e.g., the EU Labour Force Survey).

To this end, the sampling methods in the RESL.eu project aimed to recruit schools in urban areas with high youth unemployment levels and, consequently, had an overrepresentation of socio-ethnically disadvantaged groups. This enabled us to further explain the variance within known 'at risk groups' and to disentangle the specific relations between students' risk status, contextual protective factors, personal attitudes and behaviour. This partly explains why we also find less variation with regard to these sociodemographic variables in our quantitative analyses (Kaye et al., 2017). Our study also devoted specific attention to how educational system characteristics, such as tracking, grade retention and school segregation can influence students' risk status, contextual support mechanisms, self-perceptions and disengagement or re-engagement in education.

Taking into account the Macro-level: Confronting Structural Reproduction of Inequalities in Education

The relevance of macro-analyses has been advocated by many authors. For instance, it has been proposed that adopting an eco-systemic framework is necessary in order to develop a critical understanding of social phenomena, such as early school leaving. Several authors apply an (adapted) tripartite approach and generally distinguish three intertwined levels: the macro- meso- and micro-level (Feinstein et al., 2004; McLaughlin et al., 2001). The macro-system, in particular, refers to the layer consisting of political, social, economic and cultural patterns, and as such, has a 'cascading influence' throughout the interactions of all other layers (Singal, 2006). Macro-variables, however, also relate to ESL in a circular way (or mutual interdependency). This circularity phenomenon has also been signalled as 'complementary and overlapping macro externalities' and can be illustrated by means of several examples, for instance: (a) when a higher level of education in general boosts the efficiency of other factors of production, (b) when more educated workers play the role of informal teachers vis-à-vis less educated co-workers, or (c) when more educated parents raise more highly educated children (Psacharopoulos, 2007). Perhaps one of the most striking references to circularity is represented by the following quote: "Ironically, one explanation why some early school leavers miss out on these high returns is that they lack the very same decision-making skills that more schooling would help improve" (Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2009, p. 0).

Among the macro-processes explicitly related to ESL, the following are commonly identified as the most important: (i) labour market characteristics, (ii) educational systems' structural characteristics, (ii) economic factors such as gross domestic product (GDP), economic growth and wage distribution, (iv) poverty rate, (v) migration rate, (vi) cultural barriers, (vii) health indicators and (viii) political and policy issues (Cabus & De Witte, 2013; De Witte et al., 2013; Dworkin & Stevens, 2014; Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2009, 2011; Psacharopoulos, 2007; Singal, 2006). It is also on this level that – often more implicit – general social imaginaries on the meritocratic and democratic society, on how to define success and achievement, and on the role of education therein, can be found (e.g., Clycq, Nouwen & Vandenbroucke, 2014). These shared narratives and practices are a sort of societal glue giving individuals a sense of what is generally valued in a societal context. Yet, at the same time they can also turn into hegemonic discourses concealing existing inequalities.

Although large differences in the rate of ESL can be observed across EU member states, it is possible to examine to what extent these differences correlate to the institutional context and also to policies on education and the labour market. De Witte et al. (2013) explored the variation over time and across countries, and focused on country characteristics to study whether differences in ESL rates between countries may be attributable to country specificities (in terms of education systems or influences of the labour market). With regard to the labour market, in particular unemployment might affect ESL in different ways. Firstly, adult unemployment may have a discouraging effect on students (who no longer see the point in staying in school when even qualified adults are unemployed). By contrast, students may also be encouraged to stay in school when they see how adults with a qualification more easily find their way on the labour market. Secondly, the current youth unemployment and the associated higher probability of unemployment for the early school leavers reduce the opportunity cost of further education, thus encouraging students to stay in school. Additionally, the impact of unemployment on ESL appears to be mostly relevant in times of economic crisis (particularly among young people).

Focussing on differences in education systems, De Witte et al. (2013) pointed out that it needs to be considered how strongly European countries differ in the way students are grouped together (e.g. (early) ability grouping versus the comprehensive (lower) secondary education system). Overall, the effects of tracking on achievement appear to correspond with the students' social background: children from low socioeconomic backgrounds seem to perform less well in countries with early tracking than those in countries with more comprehensive systems, while there is no effect for students with a higher SES. "This means that early tracking exacerbates social inequality in outcomes" (De Witte et al., 2013, p. 333). It has also been suggested, however, that a well-developed vocational education sector, typical of some tracked systems, may act as prevention of ESL. Arguments to support this make a case for more attractive labour market perspectives for the graduates of vocational education programmes that may encourage them to stay in education. Additionally, grade retention has been pointed to as one of the most powerful predictors of ESL (even when taking into account students' achievement). Moreover, the age of compulsory education appears as potentially related to ESL too. A rationale for this is that "the longer students stay in school, the higher the number who obtain a high school diploma" (De Witte et al., 2013, p. 333). Such a hypothesis has led to measures which, at first sight, seem to confirm each other: increasing the legal age of leaving school significantly reduced the probability of ESL, for instance in Portugal. However, this 'relative decrease' is not conclusive. Furthermore, increasing the age of compulsory education may also be expected to have some negative side-effects related to disruptive behaviour

in class as a result of forcing potential ESLers to stay in school. Finally, previous research has looked into the potential impact of public funding on ESL as well. The results of that investigation reveal that, for example, the expenditure per student has only a very small effect on the level of ESL. When further considering the relation between educational expenditure and student performance in general, there appear to be no effect. It may therefore be concluded that the amount of funding spent is not explanatory on its own. The way funding is spent may be a better predictor (De Witte et al., 2013).

Although educational system design matters, the major generator of social inequalities in early school leaving appears to come from the socio-economic context outside the school system, i.e. children of lower-educated parents are much more likely to leave education early when poverty is high (being parents' education and poverty level two different though mutually related factors, according to previous research, see Kaye et al., 2017). In other words, the social inequalities in educational attainment are not just a result of the way the educational system is implemented but, moreover, the result of socioeconomic inequalities outside the direct reach of schools (Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2016). These are additional arguments to advocate for a macro-level, system approach of ESL. Additionally, this may serve as a warning not to over-estimate the capacity of the education system to attenuate social inequalities (Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2016). At the same time educational policy is in most EU countries considered to be an important policy lever to – amongst other finalities such as tackling youth unemployment and fostering economic competitiveness – address and decrease existing social inequalities (Araújo et al., 2013; Macedo et al., 2015; Magalhães et al., 2015).

Within the RESL.eu project, we studied how the education policies and political instruments dealing with ESL after the Lisbon Strategy (2000) and building towards achieving the targets of the EU 2020 Strategy (2010) were developed and implemented in the RESL.eu partner countries. We did this by taking into account the interactions of supranational, national and local institutions involving the reconfiguration of educational governance and regulation within the globally structured agenda for education (Araújo et al., 2013). The analysis has shown that the definition, steering and implementation of policies and public action is informed by the international setting and involves increasingly more stakeholders, with the state in a multiple scale governance (super-national, national and sub-national). The analysis also showed that Europeanization takes place on the basis of countries' diverse interpretation and implementation of a common grammar, by means of the national policy and under the framework of programs of cooperation, support, research and development set by different international organizations and with EU funding, evaluation systems and soft law. Moreover, the analysis of the 'drivers' underpinning education and social policies related to ESL suggests that the economic concern prevails over educational and social goals in some of the member states involved in the RESL.eu project (e.g. UK and the Netherlands), while in other member states such as Poland, Austria and Belgium, this driver is more nuanced, as social and educational concerns could also be identified. When looking at the level of local stakeholders, the picture is even more nuanced. Here the educational concern with youth development and empowerment becomes more visible. This might be explained by the educational stakeholders' and other actors' individual contexts and their proximity to the field. However, even at this level, tensions between drivers could be signalled, reflecting actors' roles and commitments. The RESL policy analysis and field description also revealed that the current socio-political and economic crisis, including austerity in education policies, together with migration processes and the labour market

volatility, have reshaped the ways in which different countries address educational problems and ESL (Araújo et al., 2013).

Going beyond the classic risk factors approach

Despite the strong variation in youngsters' individual trajectories throughout education, specific categories of youngsters have a higher ESL rate than others. Similar patterns of groups of youngsters that are more prone to leave school early are found across the partner countries involved in the RESL.eu project (Dale, 2010; Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Eurydice & Cedefop, 2014). Risk factors of ESL, such as living in a low SES family, belonging to an ethnic minority and having a non-native mother tongue, do not necessarily explain the processes occurring in the different contexts and leading to ESL; they are more likely to be associated with particular attitudes, social positions, actions and perceptions of individuals. The interaction between these background variables and a particular educational and wider socio-economic and socio-cultural context could contribute to processes leading to ESL. While the reproduction of social, cultural and economic difference and stratification seems omnipresent in the prevailing literature, it is important to recognize the potential of individuals to make a difference through their actions in research as well (Freire, 1997, Stoer & Araújo, 2000; Macedo et al., 2015). Hence, in the conceptual model of the RESL.eu project, we included the influence of social institutions and structures, (hegemonic) ideological frames and social imaginaries of meritocracy and democratic education, as an overall context that further guides and structures individual agency within a particular context (see below).

As argued above, we adopt a rather classic tripartite approach or all-factors approach focusing on the individual, institutional (including family, school and community related factors) and a systemic/ structural levels (see also Reay, 2004; Battin-Pearson & Newcomb, 2000; Lamb & Markussen, 2011; Dale, 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 & Renzulli, 2011; Lamote et al., 2013); it also depends on the individual whether a factor is rather a push or rather a pull factor. We therefore studied both quantitatively and qualitatively the educational trajectories retrospectively and prospectively, also with a focus on alternative learning arenas, the labour market and broader society. The emphasis was put on crucial decision points in the school career and on crucial school contexts, which includes school retention, changing 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 the dominant ideological frames of the broader society that has 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 which develops from (early) negative social and educational experiences that generate boredom, aversion, withdrawal of interest in learning, and short absences which gradually increase until the event of leaving education (Bautier & Terrail, 2003; Dolignon, 2005; 2008; Dale, 2010). Such an approach of ESL assumes 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 are the underlying mechanisms explaining why specific categories are commonly overrepresented in these figures (Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

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 and what are the dominant narratives for explaining success and failure (Bourdieu, 1989). These hegemonic social imaginaries are often broadly shared narratives that become unquestioned representations of social reality (Taylor, 2004; Hannerz, 1992). In the domain of education the notion of meritocracy is paramount and the imaginary of education as the great equalizer providing opportunities for all to become successful independent of one's socio-economic, demographic and other such variables (Anyon, 2006). Yet, this framework is challenged by many scholars, in particular through reproduction and social justice theorists (see below).

Many of these reproduction theories were grounded on a fundamental criticism of capitalist economic thinking into non-economic domains, such as education. Economic differences, often defined as financial differences, between social groups were reformulated in class differences, which were identified as the main explanation for social inequalities (e.g., Bowles & Gintis, 1976; 2001; 2002). Yet, for some, these 'economic accounts' were too mechanical and based on a too strict rational choice approach, thereby overemphasizing 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, achieved 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, a more intersectional approach taking into account the social location of individuals on the intersection of various important social dimensions such as gender, ethnicity and class is put forward (Driessen, 2001; Yuval-Davis, 2010). A major problem with reproduction theories would be that it is too deterministic in nature and ignores or minimalizes 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).

A possible solution to link more structuralist approaches with more agency-driven ones is offered by the conceptualization of various forms of capital (economic, social, cultural and symbolic) and the role these play in educational processes. Within structured fields such as the field 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 as 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 later but here we discuss the importance of capital accumulation and, consequently, attaining and securing a dominant position in the field of education.

As education systems are commonly defined as or revealed as being middle-class-oriented systems, 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 in 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 upon by Bourdieu (1990) through his notion 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 against which others (and their habitus) are measured. 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, to explain failure and success, 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/acculturation (Gibson, 1998; Roosens, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999) culturalization (Brumann, 1999), the construction of language ideologies and hierarchies (Palmer 2011) and the concept of linguicism (Bourhis et al., 2007).

A common perspective found by dominant groups and often internalized by the whole society to explain the educational 'underperformance' of specific groups is to view the meritocratic ideal of the education system as 'the great equalizer' and the individual responsibility of the pupil to be (or not to be) successful within this democratic and meritocratic system (Anyon 2006; Valencia 2010; Clycq et al., 2014). School systems, however, differ a lot in the extent to which they realize the meritocratic ideal and school system factors often disguise in more or less subtle forms deep-rooted stratification processes. An important example is early tracking which in general negatively affects the educational opportunities of children of disadvantaged families disproportionately more than those of middle-class native families (Trautwein et al., 2006; Kelly, 2009). When discussing differences in educational outcomes, dominant perspectives in society 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). Nonetheless, we found in the RESL.eu

project that the belief in a meritocratic system equal to all is often also shared by students in disadvantaged situations (Clycq et al., 2014). Moreover, these advantages also interact with, e.g., the structures of education systems like early tracking; a hierarchical tracking system is particularly unfavourable for lower SES and/or minority groups (Trautwein et al., 2006; Kelly, 2009). These findings indicate the importance of the inclusion of social imaginaries and ideological frameworks of both individuals and those who prevail in society when studying and trying to understand processes leading to early school leaving.

To summarize, the dialectic between agency- versus structure-oriented approaches is crucial to be able to grasp the processes leading to early school leaving and school disengagement. Implicit power differences between (groups of) individuals cannot be neglected when studying ESL. Rather, the interplay between various analytical levels (micro-, meso-, and macro-level) and in particular the focus on the interactions between individuals (e.g., pupil-teacher, teacher-parent-pupil, pupil-peer interactions on the intersecting contexts of home-school-community) are crucial to understand and tackle ESL. At the same time, the importance of the macro-economic structures, ideological frames and educational policies which create opportunity structures and/or structures of constraint for each of the individuals involved should be acknowledged as well. As explained above, various (more or less grand) theories have been designed to explain reproduction in education, however, individuals always have a role in these processes as they interact with others and their surrounding contexts. At the same time, the potential for resiliency is probably age-dependent as, e.g., most 10-year olds probably have a different level of resiliency than 14-year-olds 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.

On the importance of ideological frames, social imaginaries and grand narratives

Beyond the socio-economic context and the educational system, it is also important to acknowledge the distinct but often overlapping or conflicting role of ideological frames, social imaginaries and grand narratives concerning 'education', which are representations of social reality that penetrate everyday life (Taylor, 2004; Hannerz, 1992). For the purpose of our research project, we argue that these frames often refer to hegemonic imaginaries and narratives on the role of education in current so-called 'knowledge societies' (UNESCO, 2005; Vällima & Hoffman, 2008). In particular in Europe, the idea of 'knowledge' as a resource to be developed and optimized in the near future is stressed in relation to the loss of the 'manual labour battle' to low-wage countries outside of Europe. In such a grand narrative on the importance of 'knowledge' the issue of early school leaving, which is often an issue affecting youngsters leaving vocational or part-time education becomes even more pregnant. What is the value of vocational competences in these social imaginaries of what is valuable and good? Do youngsters believe that these competencies will steer them to success and a good life?

Challenging the narrative of meritocracy: the agenda of equality of condition

More particularly, one of the grand narratives with regards to education is the belief in 'meritocracy for all' or, in other words, the belief that meritocracy carries the same effects for everyone. The relationship of beliefs about meritocracy to structural educational inequalities is evidenced by findings stemming from the qualitative part of the RESL.eu project. Indeed, the investigation reveals

that such ideological frames, although often overlooked, are an important factor that needs to be included for a deeper understanding of the dynamics of inequality. In response to certain hegemonic narratives, new theories were developed and in particular the theory of social justice, namely the agenda of "*equality of condition"*, provides insights and tools to further deconstruct these narratives and the processes leading to ESL. As already highlighted, the concept of equality has been a cornerstone in educational theories that attempt to extend educational rights to all individuals and groups. The contributions of Lynch and Baker (2005) and Baker et al. (2004, 2006), in which "equality of condition*"* shifts away from equality of opportunity, are interesting to explore the agendas of equality by considering that social inequalities and collective choices are informed by changing and changeable social structures that may be deconstructed/questioned.

The agenda of "equality of condition" (Lynch & Baker, 2005; Baker et al., 2004; 2006) contributes to highlighting how institutions like social structures can move towards a view of social justice. As "equality of condition" stands on the assumption that social inequalities and collective choices are informed by changing and changeable social structures, this perspective is useful to add to the theoretical framework of the RESL.eu project. "Equality of condition" provides the grounds to break the inequality reproduction cycle and extend educational rights to all individual and groups. It highlights the key dimensions of equality (Baker et al, 2004), which need to be addressed by diverse institutions: 1) respect and recognition – that incorporates the diversity that is present in (all aspects of) education; 2) redistribution of resources – that aims at satisfying basic needs and providing a net of human and material safety; 3) love, care and solidarity – that denotes to the provision of circumstances that open space for the construction of valuable human attachments, with a view of interdependence; 4) power – that refers to the individual possibility to engage in decision making about his/her own life and challenge power in other areas (family, economy, education, religion…); and 5) working and learning – that refers to the possibility to develop personal talents and abilities, and choose occupations that one finds satisfying and fulfilling. Moreover, this perspective emphasizes the influence of social factors on people's choices, actions, behaviours and so forth, so it helps to shift the responsibility from the individual alone to the diversified conjunctions between social conditions, the individuals and groups who live within. This allows us to rethink ESL as a process crossed by the (lack of) access to certain social, educational, economic conditions that are key for framing the educational trajectories.

The deconstruction of some of the grand narratives involving education is necessary to unravel some of the underlying mechanisms in educational inequalities. Showing that these hegemonic imaginaries for, e.g. success and failure, or for ESL, mask underlying structural and institutional inequalities that burden particular categories of people much more than others, will help to formulate strategies to address these obstacles. Moreover, it is important to note that these imaginaries are articulated in everyday interactions, par excellence in the school environment, and become institutionalized and normalized. Therefore, research needs to study these school policies and classroom practices, as they show how imaginaries influence school life.

The Role of Economic, Social and Cultural Capital, and School Culture, Policies and Practices at the Meso-Level

As pointed out in the previous section, various (more or less grand) theories have been designed to explain reproduction in education and why specific categories of pupils tend to 'underperform' and are overrepresented in ESL rates, while others are not. Macro-economic structures and educational policies are important to take into account in research as they create opportunity structures and/or structures of constraint for the specific individuals involved. However, as argued before, individuals always have a role in these processes as they interact with others and their surrounding contexts. Individual students are not solely responsible for their educational trajectory; but neither are they determined by their background features nor by contextual factors such as macro-economic structures or educational policies. In order to link the structural macro-context with youngsters' individual educational trajectories and processes of school disengagement and ESL, the RESL.eu project focused on the role of economic, social and cultural capital and school culture and practices, and studied in particular student-teacher, teacher-parent-student and student-peer relations and interactions in the intersecting contexts of home-school/alternative learning arena-community.

As mentioned before, capital-theory offers the opportunity to focus on the strategic actions of individuals to use existing resources and acquire new ones to accumulate capital that allows them to achieve specific goals and strengthen (or maintain) their social position (Foley, 2010). Amongst others, this approach, which was thoroughly discussed by Bourdieu (1986), allowed for a more agent-oriented perspective on social and educational processes. Economic capital refers to the capital that is immediately and directly convertible into money, manifested in e.g. the family income (Bourdieu, 1986). Economically advantaged families can – amongst other things – access 'higher quality' or more 'prestigious' schools or pay for private tutors or additional courses to support their children's education more easily than families with fewer economical resources. Moreover, high economic capital enables certain financial and material security. In the RESL.eu project, research was conducted in urban areas characterized by relative low economic capital (e.g., areas with relative high levels of (youth) unemployment) and where students and their families are not seldom faced with financial barriers that may obstruct a 'smooth' progress through education. Particularly the qualitative fieldwork with the youngsters showed how these young people sometimes have to negotiate staying in school with entering the labour market, holding often precarious and temporary jobs as a way to try to earn a living to provide for themselves or their families; indeed, not having the necessary financial means is often considered one of the main obstacles to achieve one's (educational and occupational) goals (Van Caudenberg et al., 2017). Next to economic capital, Bourdieu distinguishes related capitals of social, cultural and symbolic nature. In the RESL.eu project an important focus was on the ways that social and cultural capital can be utilized in order to successfully navigate the education system (Allard, 2005). To understand how social and cultural capital becomes internalized or embodied, we first take a look at how socialization and identity theory support our theoretical framework.

Socialization and identity theory in education

As an individual one is always related to and 'member' of specific social groups, *e.g.*, a family, a peer group 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 & Reynolds, 2001). Also, one's identity is always shaped by the context in which it is embedded. In the previous parts, we already 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 which is transmitted by others to the individual (Bourdieu, 2005). As such 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 of differentiating oneself and one's group from others, known as the in-group 'favouritism' versus out-group 'hostility' mechanism (Turner & Reynolds, 2001). Identification with a specific group logically entails the identification with specific forms of capital representative, or felt as representative, for this group.

When Bourdieu (2005) 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 as 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 would 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., 2014; Gibson et al., 2013; Carrasco, et al., 2011). In the RESL.eu project as well, we found that teachers and other school staff continue to perceive students' socio-economic and cultural background as one of the main risk factors of low school engagement and ESL, thereby situating the main causes of processes of school disengagement and ESL outside of the school's arena and remit (Kaye et al, 2016). This also refers to the hegemonic grand narratives of the meritocratic and democratic school: the system that is in place works, thus problems are not linked to the system but rather to the individuals that do not fit in the system, e.g., due to their personal, cultural, ethnic or socio-economic features.

As explained before, educational systems tend to be middle-class oriented system and consequently are based upon the dispositions with respect to taste, language codes, interaction patterns, curriculum and so forth that is common for 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 and making it more inclusive.

In the following paragraphs, we elaborate specifically on the issues of social and cultural capital, as these concepts – as argued before – allow us to link the macro-level discussed in the previous part with the micro-level of youngsters' processes of school disengagement and ESL discussed in the next part.

Social and cultural capital

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

However, social networks can be a protective as well as a risk factor 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 'get' struggling in-group members 'by' to 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). Bridging can link on both a horizontal and a vertical level (Ryan, 2016); 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 (1983), which states that individuals (and communities) need weak ties – commonly via formal organizations or work settings – that help them to get in contact with individuals with different social positions and resources. However, Ryan (2011; 2016) argues against a simple dichotomy between bonding and bridging. The capital inherent in different ties cannot be assumed and the flow of resources may be dynamic and multifaceted with diverse outcomes. In line with this, findings of the RESL.eu project show that youngsters sometimes referred to the influence of e.g. 'bad friends' who 'pull' them out of school. Other studies also demonstrate that youngsters who are friends with students considered to have a 'better profile' can benefit from it (Timmerman, et al, 2016). However, equally, if not more important in their engagement with school, seemed to be the youngsters' 'ties' with their teachers. Experiencing a good relationship with their teachers is considered crucial in their educational trajectories, and is primarily related to the youngsters' need to feel supported and cared for by teachers who show interest in them and motivate them (Van Caudenberg et al, 2017; Kaye et al, 2017; Timmerman, 2000).

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 is 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).

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., 2016). Also, educational frames of reference that are linked to student's regions of origin can strengthen their educational aspirations (Timmerman, 2000). As mentioned, these 'alternative' networks can at the same time be too in-group oriented (Francis et al., 2010), however, they are often conceptualized as the reaction of minorities to a too in-group or middleclass-oriented mainstream education system (Reay & 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 member of networks individuals tap into crucial resources they can allocate to achieve specific goals. Initially the concept of cultural capital was coined by Bourdieu 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 paintings, 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, 1992), frames of reference (Suarez-Orozco, 1989) and broader cultural schemes (Roosens, 1998). 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 one's family, peer group or school. White middle-class families have some dispositions with respect to cultural resources in common and these shared resources are also dominant in the middle-class education system. As such 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 ethnic/linguistic/religious minority pupils and parents (Gibson, 1998; Roosens, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999; Stoer & Araújo, 2000; Macedo, 2009).

School culture and practices

When discussing altering pupils' habitus and thus also their dispositions with respect to learning and their aspirations with respect to their educational (or life) goals, this also entails altering 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., 2014). Research showed that cultural capital[2] 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, 2013). Furthermore, research based on RESL.eu data shows that also the relationships and social capital provided via youngsters' interactions with amongst others school personnel play an important role in forming their educational expectations (Behtoui et al, forthcoming). Teachers' expectations of their students and relationships with them within school are an important aspect of the school culture. In the academic literature there is no clear definition on what 'school culture' actually entails; nonetheless, overall the concept refers to the conscious and

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

unconscious beliefs, values, expectations, habits, rituals, relationships etc., which impact the way a school functions (Van Houtte, 2005). The school culture permeates almost everything that happens in a school and influences the way that school staff, teachers and students think, feel and act (Deal & Peterson, 2016). While school staff, teacher, students and parents all contribute to the creation of a particular school culture, it is also influenced by other aspects such as the institutional history and ownership of the school, the community in which it is situated, and the school policies and broader educational context in which the school operates.

Research shows that the school culture – and particularly the interactions and the quality of interactions within the school environment – has an important impact on the students' educational achievement, and their sense of school belonging and well-being more generally (Deal & Peterson, 2016; MacNeil, Prater & Busch, 2009). Students will be more likely to succeed in schools with a positive school culture, in the sense that there is a shared sense of what is important, a shared ethos of caring and concern, and commitment to help students learn (Deal & Peterson, 2016), as well as a commitment to meet students' needs (Tilleczek et al, 2011), Moreover, the school culture is also reflected in whether and how a school deals with ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity. In this context, 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 & Kim, 2006). In line with this, the RESL.eu project found that a positive school culture, characterized by a safe school environment, positive student-teacher relationships, a more open and inclusive approach to involve parents from lower SES and/or ethnic minority or immigrant background, a more holistic approach towards the youngsters' needs and so forth, can be crucial protective factors against processes of school disengagement and ESL. However, our findings also show that it is often the alternative learning arenas – rather than regular secondary schools – that aim at re-engaging students in education after a period of ESL, and that are able create such circumstances. In that sense, these alternative learning arenas can serve as an inspiration for mainstream secondary education to increase its level of inclusiveness for students 'at risk' of ESL (Van Praag et al., 2016; Tomaszewska-Pękała et al., 2017).

To conclude, the theories and findings discussed above show that focusing on social capital and cultural capital theory, and school culture and practices offers promising insights in how to alter social reproduction theories. The 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 as, e.g., participation in pro-social networks such as religious networks, youth groups, community organizations, 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 & Pitzer, 2012). Before further discussing the micro-level by focussing on motivational development theory and processes of school (dis)engagement in the next section, we now elaborate on how social and cultural capital and school culture and practices can become alterable predictors of early school leaving. We therefore first highlight the role of school, family, and peer contexts in explaining school engagement and, ultimately, ESL.

Social/cultural capital and school culture/practices as alterable factors in reducing early school leaving

Research has studied a wide range of facilitating factors associated with school engagement and ESL, including family, peer and school context related factors. Rosenfeld et al. (2000), for instance, compared school outcomes of students' support from parents, peers, and teachers. The findings indicate that students who perceive higher support from all three spend more time studying; avoid anti-social behaviour; report higher school belonging, self-efficacy and engagement; and obtain better grades. Wang and Eccles (2012) examined the relative influence of adolescents' supportive relationships with teachers, peers and parents on school engagement and found that different sources of social support had diverse impacts on school engagement. All three support contexts are thus important to incorporate in studying contextual facilitators for school engagement.

With regard to family related factors, most studies initially relied on group status variables, such as socioeconomic status, parental education and family income. These studies, however, reveal little about how families influence students' achievement (Rumberger et al., 1990). Parental support in the role of socializers and through the involvement in their children's schooling is widely acknowledged as being an important predictor for academic achievement (e.g. Elffers et al., 2013; Eccles, 1983). Parental support – defined as the degree to which parents are involved in and promote their children's education – has shown to be able to facilitate school engagement and academic achievement (Brewster & Bowen, 2004). Nonetheless, which specific types of parental support are most protective against educational failure is a topic of debate around the world (Wang & Eccles, 2012). McNeal (1999) proposed that there are at least four types of parental support: parent-child discussion related to education, formal parental involvement in the parent-teacher meetings, parental monitoring of children's behaviour and direct parental involvement in educational practices. Of these four, the extent to which parents and children regularly discuss educational issues exercises the greatest impact on educational achievement. Here, the level to which the parents are familiar with the education system and processes seemed to be an important factor to understand the impact of parental school support (McNeal, 1999; Khattab, 2005).

The influence of peer groups on students' academic achievement and attitudes toward education has been widely acknowledged, particularly in early adolescence, an age period characterized by the highest conformity to peers (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Berndt, 1979). Because peer influence can be negative as well as positive, close peer relationships may well have both facilitating as well as impeding effects on school engagement (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Wang and Eccles (2012) showed that peer social support yields such a mixed predictive association between peer support and behavioural engagement. On average, they found a negative association between peer social support and school compliance. This relation, however, differed between those students who reported hanging out with antisocial or rather prosocial friends. Thus, the effect of peer support on behavioural engagement likely reflects the impact of different kinds of peers. Ream and Rumberger (2008), in a study among Mexican American students, found that academically disengaged students also tend to develop street-oriented friendships, whereas students who are involved in school tend to befriend others who also make schooling a priority. Thus, school engagement can also lead to self-selection and hereby influence the risk of early school leaving. Other research findings show a positive linkage between the individual sense of school belonging and school-based peer relations, especially for students who are confronted with a risk status (Elffers et al., 2012). This positive relation can, however, differ between ethnic groups and thus affect the degree to which school-based

friendships are reflected in a sense of school belonging among ethnic minority students (Faircloth & Hamm, 2003).

With regard to associations between teacher-student relationships and students' school engagement and achievement, results of a meta-study by Roorda and Koomen (2011) showed significant relations of both positive and negative teacher-student relationships with regard to school engagement and achievement. Another main finding was that the effects of teacher support increase overall throughout the student's educational career, but the effects of negative relationships, however, were stronger in primary than in secondary education. Research also showed that teacher support seems particularly pivotal for students' feelings of belonging (Faircloth & Hamm, 2003; Fall & Roberts, 2012). Elffers et al. (2012), however, found no direct relationship between the support from school staff and students' emotional engagement when controlling for students' perceived fit with the academic program, with classmates, and with the school climate. Nonetheless, the authors pointed out that social and academic experiences are strongly interrelated and that the strong relation between perceived academic fit, as well as school climate, and perceived support from teachers might nullify the effect of teacher support. Teachers might thus play a crucial role in students' perceived academic fit and school climate. Overall, positive relations between teacher support and school engagement are found to be quite consistent, also across different ethnic groups (Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Gillock & Reyes, 1996). The quality of students' relationships with teachers was also found to be one of the strongest predictors of students' school engagement within the RESL.eu project (D'Angelo & Kaye, forthcoming; Kaye et al., 2017).

Micro Level Processes of Student Engagement and Theories of Motivation

Zooming in on the micro level of the individual student, early school leaving or the dropout event is mostly diagnosed as the result of a long-term process which develops from (early) negative educational experiences that generate withdrawal of interest in learning and often short absences that gradually increase until the event of leaving education (Dolignon, 2005; 2008; Dale, 2010). This approach to studying early school leaving builds strongly on the concept of student engagement and assumes causes of early school leaving need to be studied long before the actual dropout event and implies that early signs of disengagement can be detected and acted upon by educational professionals (Ferguson et al., 2005). Although the student engagement concept is widely acknowledged for its explanatory power in studies on ESL, there is still significant debate about its specific dimensions and the relations between these dimensions (Appleton et al., 2008). Moreover, most scholars acknowledge that there is still a lot to be learned about how (dimensions of) student engagement relates to systemic risk factors and institutional level support mechanisms such as parental, peer and teacher support (Wang & Eccles, 2012; Ellfers et al., 2012). Within the RESL.eu project, we therefore further explored the predictive value of student engagement and its relation to macro level features and the social support available in students' contexts.

Student Engagement as a Processual and Multidimensional Concept

Student engagement is a prominent concept in theories explaining early school leaving. The engagement concept – although not labelled specifically as 'engagement' by early scholars – has its origin in Hirschi's Social Control Theory (1969) and was more closely linked to educational institutions in Tinto's mediation model to explain dropout from American colleges (Tinto, 1975). Both scholars place individual feelings of attachment and belonging to institutions central in explaining disengagement from social institutions like education. In ongoing interactions individuals have with educational institutions, the match between the institutional features and individual as well as family background characteristics play an important role in students' commitment toward education and – through this commitment – the goal-setting and engagement behaviour also develops accordingly (Archambault et al., 2009). Finn's (1989) participation-identification model of school withdrawal presented a similar processual approach to the theory of student engagement where engagement is defined by identification and participation processes at school. Here, identification refers to a sense of belonging and the perceived valuing of school education. Participation, on the other hand, comprises responsiveness to school requirements, participation in class-related initiatives and extracurricular activities. In Finn's participation-identification model, students that identify more with school will increase their participation, and reversely, a lack of participation predicts withdrawal from school. Mainly starting from these theories, the concept of student engagement has been further developed and has been at the forefront of theories explaining early school leaving ever since (Barry & Reschly, 2012; Christenson et al., 2008).

Nonetheless, as the student engagement concept gained importance, the literature generally also shows a lack of consensus about its definition, operationalization and measurement. As Appleton et al. (2008) have put it, myriad "conceptualisations of student engagement" have been developed, resulting in a need for a clear definition and delineation of the concept. A constant across these

conceptualizations is that student engagement is a multidimensional concept. There is, however, little agreement on the types of engagement dimensions (Appleton et al., 2008). While all definitions include behavioural aspects, there is variation in the extent to which it also contains the more covert emotional and cognitive components. Our main conceptualization of student engagement was initially based on the Fredericks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) multidimensional construct for student engagement that brings together different traditions in this field of research (e.g. cognitive, emotional and behavioural aspects) and provides an opportunity to study the dynamics and interactions between its sub-constructs. Behavioural engagement consists of the actions and practices students direct toward school and learning; both positive (e.g., paying attention in class, doing school work) and negative behaviour (e.g. truancy, misconduct). Emotional engagement represents a student's sense of belonging to school and valuing of education. Cognitive engagement refers to a student's self-regulated and strategic approach to learning. Essential to Fredricks et al. (2004) conceptualization is that these engagement components do not operate in isolation but are interrelated and dynamic. Fredricks et al. (2004) proposed that over time, behavioural participation, emotional identification, and cognitive engagement have reciprocal influence on each other and that these patterns of engagement have long-term effects on academic achievement and therefore on ESL.

Besides the process-orientation and multidimensionality of the student engagement concept, another consistent characteristic within the scholarly tradition of theories on student engagement is the role of support that is available in an individual's context. Gradual disengagement and (ultimately) school dropout is generally conceived as reflecting a complex interplay among the individual student, its family, school, and peer related risk and protective factors. Most of these contextual factors are considered to be alterable variables as opposed to more or less fixed risk status variables such as socioeconomic status, gender and ethnic background, which educational practitioners have little ability to change (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Finn & Rock, 1997). Christenson & Thurlow (2004) also indicated that "there has been a shift toward investigating alterable variables – behaviours and attitudes that reflect students' connection to school as well as family and school practices that support children's learning – because they have greater utility for interventions." Most of the student engagement theories discussed above, however, do not incorporate the relation with support provided in students' contexts and other students' self-system level variables such as academic self-concept and locus of control, which have been proven to be strongly related to students' participation and achievement in education (e.g., Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Within the RESL.eu project, we therefore made use of motivational development theory as a framework that allowed us to connect students' processes of school (dis-) engagement to the support students experience in their environment.

Theorizing Contextual Relations: Self-System Model of Motivational Development

In a literature review on the student engagement concept, Appleton et al. (2008) posit that the multidimensional conceptualization of student engagement (see above) is consistent with motivation theory building on fundamental human needs such as perceived autonomy, competence and relatedness (e.g., Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Although Appleton et al. (2008) propose academic motivation and student engagement to be separate concepts – but not unrelated ("motivation is necessary, but not sufficient for engagement") – the self-system model for motivational development provides opportunities to connect context, the more internalized or covert

emotional and cognitive dimensions, the externalized or overt behavioural engagement and educational outcomes. Appleton et al. (2008) acknowledged that motivation is central to understanding engagement and that it is important to view engagement within a motivational framework that includes both contextual as well as self-perceptions, attitudes and beliefs.

The Self-system Model of Motivational Development (SSMMD) theorizes that in order to feel motivated and show (behavioural) engagement in school, one needs to feel related to the school as well as sufficiently competent and in control of one's performances in education (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner et al., 2009). These internalized individual traits of self-efficacy, internal locus of control and sense of belonging – and thus externalized behavioural engagement – can either be enhanced or hampered by contextual facilitators such as family, peer and teacher support. The SSMMD therefore integrates contextual facilitators, internalized attitudes and beliefs with students' behavioural student engagement (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner et al., 1990; Skinner & Wellborn, 1997). Furthermore, according to this model of motivational development, student engagement – here limited to its externalized or behavioural dimensions – influences academic outcomes such as achievement levels and early school leaving. Student engagement is therefore considered to be the connecting piece in the relation between academic motivation and achievement. A large number of empirical studies supported the process model of motivation (e.g. Caraway et al., 2003; Connell et al., 1994; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Fall & Roberts, 2012). Fall and Roberts (2012), for instance, found empirical evidence to suggest that students' perception of teacher and parental support predicts students' self-perceptions (i.e., locus of control and identification with school), which in turn predicted students' behavioural engagement and academic achievement.

Within the RESL.eu project, SSMMD-based hypotheses were empirically tested and were for the most part confirmed based on the student survey data. The statistical analyses modelled students' contextual support (i.e., parental, teacher and peer support) and personal traits (i.e., perceived school belonging and valuing of education, academic self-efficacy and self-regulated learning) to explain behavioural indicators of school (dis-)engagement in terms of the levels of truancy, compliance with school regulations, attentiveness in class and study behaviour. Due to the limited number of early school leavers retained by our longitudinal survey design, we had to make more cautious claims with regard to the explanatory power of the model towards the educational outcome of early school leaving. Nonetheless, the relations revealed through our analyses did largely support the hypotheses based on the theoretical assumptions described in this section. Our analysis of the quantitative data collected in the RESL.eu student survey confirms a strong and significant correlation between perceived levels of support and the overall level of student engagement reported by students in secondary schools. However, this broad trend hides a great degree of complexity and variability, which we were able to explore through the RESL.eu data. For instance, there seems to be a clear 'hierarchy' with regard to the role played by different types of support in relation to overall levels of student engagement, with perceived / reported level of teacher support being the strongest predictor of engagement, followed by perceived parental support. Perceived peer support on the other hand, appears to be much weaker than the previous two. These complex relationships between different types of perceived support and student engagement were further investigated through the more nuanced, personal experiences emerging from the in-depth interviews with individual young people (Kaye et al., 2015; D'Angelo & Kaye, forthcoming; Van Caudenberg et al., 2017).

Methodological challenges of a multilevel, mixed-method, multi-phased, and multi-sited research project

General methodological framework

The process of early school leaving is, as argued above, a process that cannot be studied from a single perspective, nor only by focusing on a few variables. While from an academic or policy point of view it is possible to construct a specific definition of early school leaving (ESL) – in this case, youngsters not attaining an ISCED 3 level qualification – research shows that across European countries (or educational systems) the ESL rates can vary dramatically. Moreover, such an operationalization of ESL always reduces the complexity of social reality. This became particularly apparent when conducting in-depth interviews with youngsters whom we had previously categorized as 'ESLers' based upon our survey research but who in reality often switched between various categories and, equally important, who did not necessarily categorize themselves as ESLers. The complexity of this issue has not only challenged our thinking in all too rigid categories but has also shown that it is imperative to design a broad while at the same time fine-grained methodological framework to grasp these phenomena. In this section we discuss these underlying assumptions with respect to the issue of ESL and how this was translated into concrete methods that in turn were challenged by various unforeseen circumstances and findings.

When designing our overarching conceptual framework we started from a rather classic tripartite approach to the issue of early school leaving. Thus, the macro-level of the socio-economic context, general educational structures as well as the policy and the broader institutional context seems to make a difference and therefore needs to be incorporated. However, at the same time ESL rates also vary across different schools within one specific educational system, urging researchers to study the meso-level of specific school policies and practices, as well as the micro-level of the interactions between individuals and their allocation of resources. Moreover, as we define ESL as a process, the element of time needs to be included to understand how it unfolds, preferably in the sense of various measurements over a period of a few years. Finally, to be able to grasp the general patterns emerging as well as the individual interpretations of ESL, a fine-grained methodological framework needs to be designed, applying different data collection methods. Knowledge and understanding of these (educational) processes needs to be retrieved by applying various methods. Broad ranging surveys allow us to better grasp general patterns which can be more readily compared taking into account contextual differences and similarities. These comparisons are crucial as they can show how certain recurring patterns emerge in different contexts and thus reveal the impact of factors that remain rather constant across different educational systems. Moreover, comparisons can also show how in some educational systems different structures and factors are present and consequently may produce different outcomes. However, these patterns rarely reveal how individuals perceive, experience, and give meaning to their lives, and in particular their educational trajectories and (potentially) early school leaving. To this end, the use of individual in-depth interviews can reveal from the points of view of the individuals involved what they are confronted with and which strategies they develop. Additionally, the use of focus group discussions (FGDs) can reveal how, e.g. certain aspects of school life, can be discussed and be given 'new' meaning in the context of a group conversation. Such FGDs lift the data from the individual in-depth perspective to the level of a (peer)

group; new meanings are forged in the process of interacting with each other on topics such as ESL. Thus, the challenges faced by the RESL.eu-project are quite wide-ranging.

Therefore, to be able to collect data on all three levels (macro-, meso-, and micro) the RESL.eu-project designed a *multilevel, mixed-method, multi-phased, and multi-sited* research project.

- **Multilevel:** We study the three levels that are commonly identified as crucial to grasp the intertwinement of processes influencing early school leaving. The **macro-level** of the broader European and national socio-economic and policy context was mainly studied by way of a literature review of academic, policy, civil society and media documents complemented with in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with several key figures. The **meso-level** of the institutional context in each partner country was studied in the RESL.eu project. New empirical data was collected among key stakeholders within various organizations, but also based upon a survey and interviews with the school staff in regular secondary schools and alternative learning arenas. The **micro-level** perspective of the individuals and their perceptions about interactions with significant others in schools and alternative learnings arenas was also studied by way of student surveys, in-depth interviews and/or focus group discussions with individual youngsters, their peer groups, school staff, and parents.

- **Mixed-method:** To grasp the complexity of the process of early school leaving, we applied a variety of research methods into a mixed method design. Our main methods of data collection and analysis were qualitative, quantitative and document data collection and analyses. As already mentioned above, we started with an extensive literature review in which we did not limit ourselves to the academic field, also collecting and analysing documents published by school bodies and other educational organizations, policy makers, advocacy groups and civil society organizations. Furthermore, we organized in-depth interviews and focus group discussions mainly with youngsters and staff in schools and alternative learning arenas, but also with policy makers, youngsters' peers and parents. Additionally, we organized a large-scale survey with youngsters with two measurement moments as well as a survey with school staff.

- **Multi-phased:** Since early school leaving is a process, the element of time is of essential importance. We therefore subdivided our research design in several packages that build upon each other; at the same time, the findings from one data analysis steer the subsequent fieldwork. More concretely, we organized the first survey measurement in spring 2014 and the collection and first analysis of these data allowed us to select relevant schools and youngsters to be interviewed. We thereafter conducted several interviews with youngsters and their significant others and were able to follow up on their trajectory two years later. The same group of youngsters surveyed in 2014 was surveyed again two years later in spring 2016. This multi-phased design allowed to gradually expand our knowledge and insights and enabled us to formulate new questions along the way.

- **Multi-sited**: In each of the partner countries in the RESL.eu project, two research areas were chosen to conduct our fieldwork. This was a significant and necessary choice, as ESL rates can vary considerably within various regions in one country. However, the qualitative fieldwork was only conducted in one research area to allow a more in-depth understanding of the processes in a single local area. We also made this decision because not only within-country differences, but also between-country differences can vary dramatically. As argued elsewhere, nine EU countries are part of the RESL.eu project and they display a wide variety of ESL rates.

The RESL.eu project was conducted within the research design described above. As expected, the challenges were considerable and the methodology as designed on paper sometimes needed to be adapted according to unforeseen circumstances. In the following paragraphs we discuss more in-depth the methodology as well as the various challenges with which we were confronted.

Field exploration and policy analysis: General design and specific challenges

Studying the impact of macro- and meso-level features and processes on early school leaving was the focus of Publication 1 Policies on 'Early School Leaving in nine European countries: a comparative analysis' (Araújo et al., 2013). The fieldwork was targeted towards grasping the impact of actors such as European, (sub)national and local policy makers, the impact of the broader institutional context and of educational policy in general. To this end interviews were conducted in each of the partner countries with key figures in these domains.

One of the major challenges for this fieldwork was to contact and recruit key figures to openly express their opinion on early school leaving. In some countries this proved to be a major challenge, as important political discussions were ongoing on the issue of ESL. At the risk of jeopardizing these 'behind the scene' discussions, it was not always easy to collect new insights. When they were willing to be interviewed, the respondents often held on strongly to the official discourse of the organizations they represented, and in these cases, as expected, the anonymity of the stakeholders was difficult to guarantee. A solution was to discuss in quite abstract ways about the organizations and cluster them into broad categories (e.g., 'educational boards' or 'labour market organizations'), but this sometimes oversimplified the within-category differences. However, on the local level key figures were more willing to express their opinion when anonymity was guaranteed.

Quantitative research: General design and specific challenges

As described above and presented in Publication 2 'Attitudes of school personnel to Early School Leaving' (Kaye et al., 2016) and Publication 4 'Early School Leaving: Risk and Protective Factors' (Kaye et al., 2017), the statistical analysis of early school leaving and related processes was a key aspect of our project. To this end a survey targeting youngsters and a survey targeting school staff were designed. During our project, we noted challenges with regard to the selection and recruitment of the schools and the youngsters, and also challenges related to doing comparative quantitative research analysis and reporting.

Challenges of selection and recruitment:

The main focus of the survey targeting youngsters was to study processes of early school leaving and measure students' socio-demographic and educational background characteristics, attitudes, beliefs, aspirations, and behaviour at one point in time to use as an explanation for their educational status approximately two years later in time. RESL.eu aimed to sample in schools that are located in local – mostly urban – at risk areas for ESL based on high local levels of youth unemployment and socially disadvantaged inhabitants. As variables, such as socio-economic background, immigration background, enrolment in the vocational track and grade retention often strongly correlate with ESL, we selected schools based upon their pupil composition and track composition according to the aforementioned variables in order to enable the project team to assume – in order to make

meaningful statistical analyses – that at the second measurement two years later, a 'sufficient' number of youngsters would become ESLers. Moreover, sampling in these 'high risk' areas and schools would allow us to discover which protective factors support resiliency when a student is confronted with theoretically high levels of risk of school disengagement and ESL. This approach of course has an important impact on the results of the quantitative analysis, as we deliberately did not opt for a representative sample. This is essential to consider, as the aim of the project was not to provide representative data on ESL rates; there are various other sources for that, such as EUROSTAT publications. Our aim was indeed to dig deeper into the process of ESL and collect new and innovative data on the process of ESL and related issues, rather than on the rate of ESL. Some specific challenges for Survey A1 and A2 were to find a common operational definition of ESL and the recruitment of schools and youngsters. We will discuss them separately.

First, due to the structural differences between the educational systems studied in the RESL.eu project, the first challenge was to find **a common operational definition of early school leaving** and to find a comparable sample of age groups to study within the different education systems. In some educational systems compulsory education ends at the age of 16 while in others it ends at the age of 18. Could youngsters that leave school at 16 years of age be considered early school leavers when their educational system formally allows them to leave school at that age? To find a common ground the project team turned towards the EU directive, arguing that rather than related to age or compulsory schooling, our operational definition of early school leaving and subsequent sampling was related to grade years that theoretically allow the attainment (or not) of the ISCED 3 level qualification. The first student survey (Survey A1) was conducted in spring 2014 in which 19.586 youngsters in seven partner countries were surveyed. All youngsters were at this moment enrolled in mainstream secondary education and could either achieve their ISCED 3 level qualification in the two years ahead or at the end of school year 2013-2014. This first survey is closely related to the Survey A2, which contacted again after a period of two years, in spring 2016, all youngsters from Survey A1 who had provided their contact details . A total of 7.072 (or 36,1%) of the youngsters from Survey A1 thus took part in Survey A2**.**

Second, **the recruitment of the schools** and, in a subsequent phase, **the recruitment of young-sters** for the first wave of the survey posed several challenges. Schools needed to be convinced that participation in the research project was relevant to them and would deliver insights they could apply in their own school policy and practices. The project teams applied various strategies to recruit schools and promised to provide documents and deliver presentations to disseminate the (first) re-sults of the survey and the added value of this information for their particular school policy. Young-sters needed to be convinced as well. We made clear that their opinions were valuable and could further our understanding of ESL, and that they were providing their contact details so that the project team could contact them again two years later. In general, when a school confirmed participation, its students – at least those who were not absent during the data collection – were more easily con-vinced to participate (although each respondent was offered the opportunity to decline participation). The recruitment of youngsters for the second wave of the survey (Survey A2), however, posed many more challenges, as contacting the same youngsters from Survey A1 was primarily based upon the contact details (cell phone number, home address, Facebook profile, and so forth) these youngsters had provided approximately two years before. In many cases the contact information was no longer up-to-date, or youngsters did not respond to a first online mailing. The project team designed an

elaborate strategy to contact these youngsters by various other media on different days and at different hours during the day, using the contact information that was at hand. Some project teams tried contacting the youngsters using telephone calls, Whatsapp and Facebook messages. However, attrition rates were, as expected, quite high and based upon insights from other research with vulnerable youth, it was to be expected that particularly those youngsters fitting the 'at risk' profiles were overrepresented in these attrition rates. In total 36.1% of the youngsters of Survey A1 also participated in Survey A2 with retention rates ranging from below 30% (Sweden and the United Kingdom) to approximately 47% in Poland, Portugal and Belgium.

Challenges of comparative quantitative research analysis and reporting

One of the major advantages of survey research is the comparison of specific samples of youngsters from theoretically 'at risk' (urban) areas in seven EU member states that are often only marginally included in international large-scale surveys. Since we used the same measurements, we paid close attention to limiting reliability and validity problems often linked to cross-cultural questionnaire design and survey translation. We therefore used a translation back-translation method and checked for reliability and measurement invariance problems. However, in the RESL.eu project we needed to compare data from students in quite different educational systems and schools in terms of structures, policy, curriculum and practices. To overcome these issues we kept some of the major elements of our research comparable (see selection criteria above) but the differences in structural contexts remained vast. Some of the measurements are therefore not fully measurement invariant between the country samples, so each of the partner countries provided insights into how to best interpret the national data in order to enable cross-country comparison, while also being able to produce their own country-specific analysis of the data from the specific sample in their country.

Qualitative research: General design and specific challenges

When writing the proposal of the RESL.eu project, we developed the idea to do 'intake' interviews with a larger group of pupils to collect general descriptive and background data on each of them and to select a smaller sample of these youngsters for our longitudinal study using two in-depth bio-interviews afterwards. However, as doing a wide range of intake interviews proved to be too demanding for the schools and research teams, we made use of the Survey A1 student data to sample most of the students that could theoretically be considered 'at risk' of ESL but were still in regular secondary schools at the time of Survey A1 (spring 2014). Rather than selecting from a much smaller group of approximately 60 intake interviews per research area, we were able to contact youngsters with specific profiles from a much broader group.

Consequently, the preliminary analysis of the survey data in the fall of 2014 to a large extent guided the selection of the individual participants for our qualitative fieldwork. This selection happened in a step-wise manner. We first selected schools based on aggregated levels of teacher support and then used levels of reported social support and school engagement – as well as some country-specific educational background variables such as grade retention – to recruit 'at risk' youngsters that were still in school. The idea was to follow them and expect to see their educational status change from 'in education' to 'ESL' or 'changed to an alternative learning pathway'. However, as these were only rough predictions of the initial sample's future learning pathway, we had to have a more flexible approach towards additional data collection and needed to allow for the recruitment of new relevant

profiles of participants 'emerging' from our fieldwork. This additional sampling mainly focussed on recruiting those Not in (Employment), Education or Training (NE(E)T) and those in alternative learning pathways. Here we recruited additional case youngsters through educational and training institutions providing alternative learning provisions and youth organizations reaching vulnerable youngsters. This gave room to the advantages of both types of recruitment, yet the final goal of the qualitative field work remained the same. Its main focus was primarily on conducting at least two interviews with eight youngsters at risk of ESL but who stayed in secondary schools (= focus on regular secondary schools); eight youngsters who left secondary education early and afterwards enrolled in alternative learning arenas that can compensate for leaving secondary education early by allowing them to attain an ISCED 3 qualification (= focus on alternative learning pathways); and finally, eight youngsters who left secondary education early and are not involved in employment, education nor training (= focus on NEETs). However, as argued before, this type of categorization of youngsters proved to be too 'ideal-typical', since in reality, youngsters switched between categories more often than not, and even if they could be categorized as an early school leaver based upon their answer in survey A1, when approached by the researcher, their status might have fundamentally changed. These experiences showed us that as a research team we needed to apply these categories much more flexibly.

Moreover, next to the focus on the experiences and trajectories of youngsters, we were also concerned with the evaluation of school-based prevention and intervention measures (aimed at keeping youngsters on board in mainstream schools) and of alternative learning pathways (aimed at providing youngsters that are ESL a pathway to attaining their ISCED 3 qualification via alternative learning arenas). This part of the qualitative fieldwork was based on a theory-based stakeholder evaluation approach and data was collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with school staff and students. Similar to the quantitative research part, we noted challenges with regard to the selection and recruitment of the schools and the youngsters, and challenges related to doing comparative qualitative research analysis and reporting.

Challenges of selection and recruitment:

With regard to the selection of youngsters, contacting a subsample of these youngsters proved to be a challenge, as not all were willing to be involved as participant in a two-year-long qualitative research project, while in other cases, the contact details were simply not up to date. In the end, the project team was able to recruit a larger sample of youngsters to be interviewed, taking into account that some of them might not remain involved in the project for the whole duration of the fieldwork. Moreover, given the nature of qualitative fieldwork, it was necessary to allow the project team to recruit other respondents – in particular those enrolled in alternative learning arenas and those identified as ESLers – which was evidently not possible based upon the selection of students from Survey A1, as they were at that time all enrolled in their school. Thus, the school could not be the only way to approach youngsters. The project team selected various alternative learning arenas and approached a variety of youth and other civil society organizations to recruit youngsters that were not in education to compose a much broader sample of youngsters to be followed up on.

Concerning the selection of alternative learning arenas, a new challenge was the selection of alternative learning arenas as there are often many organizations that cater to youngsters that are ESLers. To enable cross-country and cross-case analysis, we held on to the same definition; in the

long run these organizations are supposed to steer youngsters towards attaining their ISCED 3 level qualification. This could be done by providing a curriculum leading to ISCED 3 in the organization itself or rather by supporting youngsters to re-enrol in formal schooling or in other organizations that could formally provide ISCED 3 level qualifications.

Finally, the recruitment of parents was a different story; as expected, they were much more difficult to involve in the project. In some cases the students were hesitant to allow us to contact their parents; in others, some students no longer lived with their parents (and even had a family of their own); or the parents themselves were not able or willing to participate in the research.

Challenges of comparative qualitative research analysis

One of the main difficulties of the qualitative fieldwork was finding the balance between a comparative research project – that applies a similar design, collects comparable data, uses similar research instruments, such as topic lists, and produces comparable reports – and a qualitative project that allows for new research topics to emerge from the field and the actors themselves. Different than with our survey research – even though it was challenged to some extent by the same difficulties – the qualitative fieldwork needed to be approached much more flexibly and was more open, allowing the emergence of topics and issues from the perspectives of our respondents. Although there was some differentiation with regard to the selection of respondents for the longitudinal study of youngsters and cases in the study of alternative learning pathways, we used the same topic lists throughout all of the partner countries and made use of the same general coding tree in processing the large amount of data. Partners were able to add additional nodes and sub-nodes but the main coding structures were maintained to permit the merging of the national datasets into a master dataset that allowed cross-case analyses of data coming from different countries (e.g. Nouwen et al., 2015, Van Praag et al., 2016; Van Caudenberg et al., 2017).

Rather than comparing cross-country insights, we deconstructed the unit of analysis from 'country' to a more 'cross-case' type of comparison. We searched for comparable cases on the individual level (selection of participants) but also on the level of the schools and alternative learning arenas. This enabled us not only to make meaningful comparison without losing sight into important structural and contextual differences, but also to explore the richness of the data that was collected over a two-year period. Similar to the analysis and reporting of the quantitative data, the qualitative analysis was reported in a comparative fashion as well as in more in-depth 'country' reports, reflecting the particular structural contexts wherein the data was collected.

Directions for Future Research

Over the course of this research project, we have already refined the conceptual model to relate socio-economic and educational systems, institutional arrangements to individual level processes of school (dis-)engagement and early school leaving. We were able to gain more interesting insights by building further upon this revised and renewed theoretical and methodological framework, analyzing and triangulating the data collected in this research project. In this final section, we aim to briefly suggest directions for future research, situated at various levels of analyses.

The processual nature of ESL and school disengagement and the lack of identification with the category ESL

Future research should consider especially the processual nature of the phenomena of early school leaving. Youngsters at risk of early school leaving may have already quit school for a brief period of time; others may have left school because they were able to start working immediately; and then again, others perceive themselves in a transition phase, with no clear direction of where to head. This constant process of changing categories, of redefining the situation in which one is enrolled complicates in particular the study of early school leavers, as hardly anyone categorizes themselves as "an early school leaver". There are several ways in which future research could deal with this issue. First, more specific questions in quantitative surveys about all possible moments one has left school for a specific period of time; as well as more questions in surveys about identification processes could lead to inspiring results. Second, selection criteria to select youth at risk of early school leaving are in many cases too narrow and focused upon the finding of those who identify themselves as early school leavers, leaving aside those who were an early school leaver once during their educational career or those who already are working (without educational qualifications). In too many cases, the categorization of early school leavers is then confined to NEETs, which limits the findings on the phenomenon of ESL. In our survey, we tried to circumvent this by making use of a longitudinal approach (in secondary education) to capture to a certain extent those students that left school without educational qualification between the first and the second wave of the data collection. However, more diverse trajectories of youngsters who could have been categorized as early school leavers at a certain moment in their career, are important to include as well. This could help to fine-tune [our understanding of] possible mechanisms leading to ESL, but also paths of resilience, and typologies of ESL. Third, the inclusion of a more processual definition of ESL in policy and academic research will provide a more realistic view to the size and nature of the issues of ESL and the functioning of educational systems across Europe. In doing so, one should consider and relate disengagement (and engagement) processes of youngsters throughout their educational career. Fourth, in order to fully grasp all processes leading to ESL, including these disengagement processes, it is important to apply a longitudinal approach, encompassing the entire school career of the youngsters under study (and not only zoom in on the end of their secondary education). Finally, future research that focuses on how disengagement processes (whether or not these processes result in ESL) relate to institutions and systemic factors (across European countries) could reveal important insights for policy makers, and help to understand how institutions and which features thereof matter for ESL.

Social imaginaries and the value of education

As our research findings already suggested the importance and the value young people attach to education and see it in general as a way to get ahead in society, we still need more information about how these youngsters perceive education and link it to the concrete actions they undertake during their educational career. Several factors and narratives could affect the value of education, at different levels. First, dominant meritocratic ideals and discourses are found to heavily impact youngsters' aspirations and behavior. Nevertheless, young people in our study also questioned the role of education itself. Meritocratic ideas, such as 'you have to work hard to achieve something in society', could also translated on the one hand into youngsters' will to learn more and gain more tools to face the challenges of the labour market or, on the other hand, into a reason to quit school and start to work. The relative weight given to these meritocratic ideals and the role education plays herein could be an interesting starting point for future research. Building further on our findings, more attention could be given to the actual value attached to education, from distinct perspectives. The value of educational qualifications can be discussed and theorized from personal, societal and economic perspectives (see also the section on cost-benefit analyses and Publication 8). When doing so, the value of education and the importance of the reduction of ESL could be theorized from more points of view. Education prepares students to become citizens, to participate on the labour market and to take responsibility for others as well as for themselves (e.g., health perspective). Hence, attention should be given to the value of education and how its significance and meaning changes during school-to-adulthood transitions. Second, considering how philosophical, nationalist and religious narratives could determine the frames of references of these youngsters under study and may increase the value young people attach to education, insufficient attention has been given to how these frameworks vary across countries and how they interact with the local situation and treatment in society. Overall, in our study, these social imaginaries appear to be a protective factor for many young people at risk of early school leaving; we discovered that these imaginaries helped the students to engage with schooling and taught them how to react against negative experiences in school and the broader society. Third, in particular contexts, the role of language and the monolingual views on education and identities should be taken into account, together with the dominant ideologies on language that persist through education. Language can play a symbolic role in the ways the identities and cultures of ethnic minorities and majorities, as well as regional identities and cultures, are accepted and valued in educational spaces.

In general, future research could elaborate further on how these distinct types of framework and narratives can play a role in the value attached to education and the views of young people on the effort they have to put in school and the expectations they can have. In doing so, scholars could also use empirical data to further reflect on the imaginaries of the knowledge society and the place (or not) of ESLers therein. In a next step, more attention should be given to the ways narratives and frameworks protect youngsters against factors that increase the likelihood of leaving school early (or whether they should be seen a hindrance). More in-depth interviews are necessary for looking into the existence of broader frameworks and ideologies and relating them to the actual value attached to school, as well as to the pressure and support coming from the social networks. Furthermore, these findings could inspire quantitative data collection as well and be the start of an interesting mixed methods study on the protective and disruptive potential of grand theoretical narratives for students at risk of early school leaving and/or for students reengaging in education.

Social and family networks

As is the case in most research on educational inequalities, family and social networks play an interesting role in the RESL.eu project and provide an important background factor that cannot be neglected in future research. Concerning social networks in general, it would be interesting to depart from a social network perspective, instead of an institutional perspective (like we did in the RESL.eu project). Starting from youth and studying all possible actors that played a role in their educational careers, such as teachers, previous teachers, study counsellors, apprenticeship tutors, principals, peers and friends, family members and employers, might help to have a more retrospective and balanced view on their educational careers, and would also help to assess the relative importance of and possible influence that all these actors have had during the educational career of these networks, the kind of information shared and the perceived support given and received. Applying such a qualitative social network perspective could allow future researchers to critically understand the narratives of these youngsters and the social actors involved, and to understand how possible (interethnic/educational) conflicts and issues occur and are shaped. Additionally, it could help us to understand the mismatch between the expectations schools and families have developed of each other, which often gives rise to tensions between the two. Finally, it would highlight the importance of extra-curricular activities across countries as well, considering that participation in these activities and its benefits are largely overlooked in research on ESL. The ways these activities are organized and related to the schools and the educational system of each country (in-/outside schools, part of the functioning of the institutional arrangements in schools, participation fees, composition, etc.) can have an impact on the rate of ESL.

Examining the importance of the institutional context across European educational systems

When setting up in an international comparative research project that aims to compare the functioning of educational systems, studying ESL can shed light on important systemic failures. However, more systemic and macro-level analyses need to be incorporated in order to fully grasp how distinct characteristics of educational systems are interrelated with each other, and how this complexly interwoven set of factors can lead to particular educational outcomes. Educational systems not only have distinct sets of characteristics; each of these joint sets of characteristics often results in very system-specific educational practices.

A first way in which the institutional context matters for ESL, and needs more careful comparison, is the relationship between compulsory education, age and the achievement or qualification outcomes. Debates on the processual nature of ESL, on the way to classify youngsters as ESLers, and on disengagement processes should consider age-related issues in a more systematic way. When carrying out more comparative research, scholars should carefully study the impact of such compulsory education, and how it relates to and affects ESL in distinct countries. Age and compulsory education is too often taken for granted for researchers focusing on one particular country or educational setting. More comparative, longitudinal research is required that looks at age-related issues in a systematic way, such as changes in the age of compulsory education (e.g., Cabus & De Witte, 2011; Magalhães et al., 2015). Qualitative research could help the field to gain more knowledge about the impact of age-related matters on educational and occupational decision making. Longitudinal, quantitative research on compulsory education, in combination with other

features of educational systems, would allow researchers to map its consequences on ESL and side-effects related to ESL. Furthermore, issues of ESL should also be studied early during students' secondary educational career, which allows us to better grasp the effects of early tracking for ESL and build upon the extensive literature on tracking and its effects on achievement outcomes. Finally, a more critical stance should be taken towards the importance and the time constraints put on age, learning and obtaining an educational qualification. Definitions and processes of ESL are often defined by age, neglecting the changing dynamics in society that stress the importance of more in-depth learning throughout one's life and career (e.g., Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Commission, 2017).

A second way to examine the institutional context across European countries is through the comparison of highest and lowest achieving groups in several European educational systems. This may be not only an interesting basis for comparisons across countries, but also contextualizes each of these patterns of so-called failing and succeeding groups and students throughout educational systems. This may prove to be particularly useful grounds for comparison, as it is always difficult to compare macro-level features of educational systems for one particular (failing) outcome, without including those who actually succeed within these systems as well, and analyzing their trajectories altogether. Moreover, when doing so, one will be better able to grasp the prevailing educational practices that occur within one particular system (and often go beyond the educational features themselves). In the current research project, we selected many respondents at risk of early school leaving using insights from previous research and initial data analyses. Within this RESL.eu sample, we were then able to compare students that did not leave school without an educational qualification together with those who did. Nevertheless, in most of the samples in each of the countries involved, this did not entail all students from the entire educational landscape and certainly did not enable us to compare the highest achieving ones, nor those who did not even obtain any qualification at all. Furthermore, analysing the highest and lowest achieving groups of one educational system together could enable future researchers to better grasp the recurring educational practices and habits that translate how these systemic features are translated into actual educational outcomes and possibly trigger processes of early school leaving. Finally, by focusing on the educational trajectories of the highest and the lowest achieving groups, or by comparing educational institutional contexts together, it would be revealing to study the weight of social class and school across countries.

A third way to better assess the importance of the institutional context and link it to the phenomenon of ESL is to conduct intense fieldwork to gauge the importance of school cultures and policies on ESL and examine whether this relationship varies across countries. This way, we would also be able to better consider democratic arrangements, such as school unions, school magazines, anti-bullying groups and similar school organizations, and assess their impact on ESL. Moreover, this would allow us to better study the emotional and social aspects of school life in research and to evaluate the importance of social and emotional support and mental health outcomes in prevention, intervention and compensation measures (Downes, 2011).

Assessing the impact of the educational landscape: Alternative learning arenas vs regular secondary education

The RESL.eu project included both regular secondary education and alternative learning arenas. We focused on the discourses of educational policy makers and actors involved, mainly making use of a theory-driven stakeholder evaluation procedure. Findings of our project already reveal that the combined effect of the empowerment of young people enrolled in alternative learning arenas and the fact that they more frequently (and in nearly but not all alternative learning arenas) received more so-called mature treatment and flexible learning scheme made alternative learning arenas a success story. Nevertheless, it should be noted that we mainly focused on those who were still enrolled in alternative learning arenas, and that during our interviews with early school leavers, we mainly focused on the combined reasons they left education in general. However, it could be interesting for future research to delve deeper into the relationship between alternative learning arenas and regular secondary education, and how this relationship varies across countries (Nouwen et al., 2016). This could for instance be assessed using macro-level quantitative models and/or qualitative research methods that explicitly focus on the changing relationship between the two and processes that lead to social changes (e.g., realist approach, Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Another interesting focus of future research would be to evaluate the different ways all measures and the entire educational landscape is coordinated across countries and regions, and how the various measures are funded (Colombo, 2017). Furthermore, another point of attention should be the flexibility of educational systems. The flexibility of educational systems or particular educational institutions within this educational landscape can shed important light on the opportunities for students to fit in, the possibilities to change the system and adapt it better to the local realities or introduce measures to reduce ESL. Furthermore, as in the RESL.eu project, we selected a broad variety of measures of alternative learning arenas across distinct European countries, so equivalent measures were not always examined in all countries. Nevertheless, specific comparisons of measures in distinct countries, for example second chance education, could yield more insights in the ways educational policies affect enrolment and participation in these institutions (e.g., study grants) as well as students' experiences. Finally, more attention should be paid to the unexpected consequences of particular (educational) measures and programmes (Van Praag et al., 2015) and the effectiveness of both formal and informal indicators of particular measures (Tomaszewska-Pękała, Wrona & Marchlik, forthcoming).

Methodological and theoretical challenges: Bringing the local context in?

As already noted in the previous section on the methodological limitations and challenges associated with the study of early school leaving, this group of youth under study and the comparison across European countries yielded the most challenges. When trying to solve problems associated with the recruitment of early school leavers, and when analyzing the narratives of young people under study, we noted that young people often weigh the costs and benefits associated with finding a job; effort put in social networks and peer relations; staying enrolled in school; and providing a family income. For many of these youngsters under study, the perceptions of the local labour market conditions, the level of social control of an environment, the future evolutions on the labour market and the expected value of educational credentials vs work experience on the labour market in the future seemed to be considered in their discourses and decision-making processes (see Van Caudenberg et al., 2017; Tomaszewska-Pękała, Wrona & Marchlik, forthcoming). Future research should go more deeply into detail regarding youngsters' perceptions of the local context and the actual supply side of the labour

market for these youngsters within this local context. Furthermore, more attention should be given to the local organizations (welfare, youth organization, extracurricular activities, social work, etc) or the social networks (e.g., social cohesion, level of social control, etc., see also Tomaszewska-Pękała, Wrona & Marchlik, forthcoming) within the living environment of these youngsters at risk of early school leaving. Finally, the impact of the socioeconomic and ethnic segregation of schools on ESL (e.g., Van Houtte & Demanet, 2016) was insufficiently taken into account during the RESL.eu project. Policy reforms and measures tend to result in or impact the segregation of the schools in which students are enrolled. Particular groups of middle-class parents who would have been the most motivated and determined to put up a fight against the deterioration in standards tend to enroll their children in particular schools, contributing to more segregated schools (Hirschman, 2004). Consequently, schools in poor neighbourhoods do not have the same resources as those in more middle-class neighbourhoods (e.g., Ensminger, Lamkin & Jacobson, 1996). Future research that maps out the enrolment patterns in and between different schools over time and how this affects patterns of school disengagement and ESL could be very revealing for policy makers and help us to understand processes leading to ESL. The relationship between schools and the local environment yields more insights into the relationships between schools and civil society organizations (e.g., religious, sports and cultural) in the neighbourhood and how they could have a positive impact on the empowerment of students from families with lower resources.

Not only will the focus on the local context, how youngsters are embedded within this context and also perceive this context, bring an interesting light on the processes leading to ESL, they will also provide us a better view on the organization and the importance of the local context. Moreover, to be able to better recruit early school leavers and to grasp how youngsters navigate within their local context, ethnographic fieldwork and observations could also allow researchers to build a better rapport with their respondents, thereby increasing the number of interviewees and the variation in the group of early school leavers.

The importance of the macro-level to carry out a comparative research on ESL

As shown earlier in this publication, when starting the RESL.eu project, some macro-level variables were included in the conceptual model (see project paper 2) and their impact on ESL was recognized by our research team. However, macro-level factors were during the analyses largely disregarded and insufficiently taken into account. Over the course of the project, these macro-level variables became increasingly important to understand country-specific differences to explain the varying rates of ESL in a satisfactory way. More attention should be given to the specific historical/ political/ geographical context in which ESL rates should be interpreted, such as the effects of globalization, economic crisis and recession, and the spread of neoliberal education and youth policies, economic imperatives and market principles in education, austerity measures etc. Although these factors are often considered in country-specific analyses of the RESL.eu project, we also found indications that a more systematic inclusion and study at the macro-level would yield interesting results (e.g., see Van Caudenberg et al., 2017; Tomaszewska-Pękała, Marchlik & Wrona, 2017; Lenaerts, Kilhoffer & Silva, 2018). Moreover, the comparison between the national, regional and local policies and insti-tutional arrangements in the varying educational fields could help us to understand better why some countries are more successful in preventing ESL (given the specificity of each context). This could give us for instance more insights into how the GDP of a specific country could be related to the ESL

rate or which (often macro-level) factors (e.g., priority of policy makers; historical trends) also influence these overall ESL rates. Previously, several studies had already studied some of these macro-level factors. This was for example the case in the study of De Witte and colleagues (2013): the extension of compulsory education, the reduction of grade retention, and the supply of vocational education at upper secondary level across countries appeared to play an important role in the reduction of ESL rates across countries, while early tracking and ability grouping did not appear to be important or effective in tackling ESL. Other factors than merely economic ones should also be taken into account to fully understand how ESL rates evolve (or not) over time and relate to other macro-level factors (see also Tomaszewska-Pękała, Wrona & Marchlik, forthcoming). Additionally, effects of macro-level factors (e.g., change in compulsory education) and changes in ESL rates should not automatically be related to each other without further consideration. Macro-level factors could for instance also impact ESL rates due to the anticipation of labour market opportunities by youngsters (e.g., Cabus & De Witte, 2011). Hence, in future research, more attention should be given to factors located at the macro-level in the quantitative analyses. Another possible way to give more weight to these macro-level factors is to carry out a cost-benefit analysis (see Lenaerts, Kilhoffer & Silva, 2018; Brunello & De Paola, 2013).

Cost-benefit analysis

In one of the final parts of this project, Publication 9 (Lenaerts, Kilhoffer & Silva, 2018), we have theorized and reflected upon all aspects that have to be considered to carry out a cost-benefit analysis (CBA) on early school leaving based on the data collected by the RESL.eu project. In this publication, we performed an exercise about how future researchers should carry out a CBA through which we discovered that a lot of data has to be collected at various levels and sectors, and over a significant amount of time. Performing a CBA should be the focus of an entire, multidisciplinary, multilevel research project, with a clearly defined area of research. As the data that would be necessary to do a CBA would frequently entail policy data, one could discuss the authority carrying out these CBA (e.g., academics in collaboration with policy makers that provide the required data), which would be also very country- or region-specific. Additionally, not only the costs but also the benefits have to be clearly defined, keeping in mind a well-defined objective. Reflecting on the usefulness and the feasibility of cost-benefit analysis, we can argue that the value of education and obtaining educational qualifications can be approached from various perspectives and levels. As cost-benefit analyses may be too elaborate to apply to the entire phenomenon of ESL, future CBAs would benefit from having a clear and focused goal and objective (e.g., one particular measure in a particular region/area).

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