

Early school leaving in context: some reflections after the ABJOVES Conference

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1. Introduction:

Last 12 and 13 May took place the [Abjoves International Conference](#) at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. The conference, organized as the closing act of the R+D+I project *Early school leaving in Spain: An analysis of young people's decisions, motivations and educational strategies*, enjoyed the presence of more than 140 assistants, including scholars, policy-makers and practitioners, who presented their thoughts and proposals on such a relevant and timely issue as early school leaving (ESL). In Catalonia, ESL (measured as the percentage of the population aged 18-24 with at most lower secondary education and not in further education or training) amounts almost to 20% - an utterly unacceptable situation not only in terms of economic and social development but particularly from a social cohesion and justice perspective.

This article discusses around five main lessons on ESL, which intend to take stock and systematize the debates held in the context of the Abjoves International Conference. Needless to say, these five lessons do not cover all the dimensions of the phenomenon, nor pretend to have an exhaustive character – but they do represent some of the key aspects regarding its conceptualization, explanation and intervention.

2- ESL as a global and national political priority

One of the first conclusions reached during the Conference is the centrality of this question not only at the Spanish but also at the European level. Far from being specific to certain

regions, ESL is indeed a cross-cutting and widespread problematic, as well as the focus of political efforts at all levels, as revealed by the huge volume of papers presented at the Conference. Up to a dozen of contributions with a focus on policies against ESL, from a variety of institutions (ranging from local education authorities to European agencies) evidences how ESL is increasingly one the most widely shared political priorities.

It is worth highlighting that, in spite of the substantive differences in economic, social and education terms, most of the European states face ESL as a challenge to some extent. The need to tackle this phenomenon is broadly accepted, and in fact constitutes one of the major priorities of the European Union in education, as the Education and Training 2020 Programme or the Council recommendations the reflect. There is a clear consensus on the need to address the question and to work on the reduction of the ESL percentages – which, despite presenting notable differences, are inescapably regarded as unacceptable on the grounds of their social and economic impact.

Notwithstanding, and despite an important number of elements in common, policy responses on ESL are a far cry from homogeneous. Within Spain, for instance, very different proposals and policy approaches coexist, as evidenced by the diversity of contributions at the Conference from different regional and local education authorities. At the same time, the uneven success of these experiences renders highlights the need to keep investigating the variety of public interventions – in order to understand not only *what* works but also *why*, *how* and *under which conditions*. In the same way, at the European level the diversity of policy solutions is also the order of the day. Although the Thematic Working Group fostered by the European Commission establishes a series of common recommendations, its selection falls within the responsibility of the national, regional and local education authorities. What's more, these administrations are also in charge for the reinterpretation of these proposals, which are readapted to the local reality.

As a consequence, the range of policy responses presents a notable diversity, brings into play different approaches of school success, and puts forward a wide range of policy tools. Hence, both at the Spanish and at the European level, the coexistence of different policy response is matched by the multiplicity of understandings of the phenomenon, as well as by the variety of motivations for the adoption of policies against ESL. In any case,

however, this diversity pivots on a broad consensus on the importance of such a phenomenon. Precisely because this is a widespread problem, policy reactions can be found at all levels, becoming a point of agreement between all kinds of education stakeholders.

3- The importance of local context in the fight against ESL

The Abjoves Conference not only highlighted the relevance of the fight against ELS in national and global education policies, but brought also to the fore the essential role of local government in the pursuit of such a goal. In particular, the panel session organized by the Education Area of the Diputació de Barcelona (provincial education administration), titles *Guiding cities, local best practices to reduce ESL*, evinced that it is at the local level where such a challenge can be more systematically addressed. Hence, it is at this scale where ESL can be better diagnosed and where it is possible to implement, in a coordinated way, all these resources and community services required for the prevention, intervention and compensation of ESL.

In fact, achieving school success for all necessarily involves a proximity and networked task, with the participation of a wide range of actors – students,, families, schools, social services and the very education authorities. Consequently, the proximity allowed by local administration plays a key role in the articulation of socio-educative actions, able to tackle the risk of school failure and dropout from a broad, integral and inter-sectorial perspective. Inspirational examples of the role of local governments are the Guided Schooling Programmes, the Municipal Adult Education Schools, the School-to-Work Transition Projects or the Local Education Plans. All them are clear examples of the possibilities enjoyed by the local level in the deployment of policies to fight ESL.

Furthermore, the Abjoves Conference evidenced also the need to pay attention to the context in order to ensure the success of any action directed to reduce ESL. The specificities of this phenomenon vary widely and according to local-level characteristics. Education provision; poverty, unemployment or social inequality levels; labour market structure; the presence of different socio-educative services; as well as political priorities of local administration – all of them are key elements in order to understand ESL and formulate appropriate solutions. Consequently, there is no single or universal solution; no

policy or programme can be successful without proper consideration for the particularities of the targeted context.

4- The role of schools and teachers

Although ESL is a complex and multi-causal phenomenon, taking into account the role played by schools and teachers at explaining ESL appears to be highly relevant. In the ABJOVES Conference there were a great number of contributions focusing on this theme and one could advice the pertinence of analysing ESL from this perspective. The contributions focused on exploring the role of educational institutions, including formal and non-formal education settings, when it comes to the processes of educational success, educational failure and ESL.

The papers presented at the Conference dealt with a great variety of topics that contribute to unfold the key role of educational institutions in the processes of educational success, educational failure and ESL: mechanisms of academic support, models for the management of pupils' heterogeneity (flexible grouping, ability grouping in some courses, etc.), school culture, teachers' expectations, and the collaborations established by schools with the local government and local entities. The presence at the Conference of a multiplicity of actors including researchers, policy-makers, technicians from the public administrations as well as teachers and principals enriched the debate and allowed the possibility of contrasting different perspectives of analysis.

The papers presented at the Conference confirmed that educational institutions are not neutral agents in the processes of educational success, educational failure and ESL. On the contrary, their school practices, their organizational cultures, the relations between the members of the institution have a crucial impact at explaining young people's educational trajectories.

The majority of the contributions analysed educational processes and the role played by school in these processes in relation to social inequality, demonstrating that students with a situation of vulnerability and social risk present a greater risk of ESL – but at the same time, showed that is possible to implement institutional mechanisms to reduce such risk. Nonetheless, while educational inequalities can be partly explained by the actions and/or

the omissions of schools, some of the contributions also highlighted that schools needed to be provided with the minimum conditions (resources, support from the administrations, global policies to combat ESL) in order to reduce social inequalities.

In summary, the contributions submitted confirmed that educational institutions have a key role in the processes of educational success, educational failure and ESL while at the same time they are key agents to guarantee the necessary conditions that will ensure that students remain engaged with their educational process.

5- The diversity of experiences and typologies of ESL explained from a subjective perspective

Another central topic that guided the ABJOVES Conference was the research of the students' own experiences in the processes of educational success, educational failure and ESL from a subjective perspective. From different theoretical and methodological approaches and from a great variety of actors linked to the educational field (researchers, foundations, local education authorities, unions) a very interesting and productive discussion was created in relation to how students experience the processes of educational success, educational failure and ESL.

One of the common elements in the various papers presented is that the exploration of students' own educational experiences was analysed based on the interaction between individual, familiar, school and systemic factors. In this sense, the necessity to analyse the diversity of students' educational experiences taking into account young people's social class, gender and ethnicity was highlighted. The research presents clear evidences that students experience unequal educational opportunities in relation to their social origin. Concerning ESL, data shows that there is a higher proportion of boys from low economic social background, immigrant, and /or from ethnic minorities that drop out of school.

One of the main conclusions that arose from the debates that took place at the Conference was the importance of considering all the expressive elements that are involved in how students make sense of their educational experience. Taking into account expressive factors means exploring how students experiences their daily life at school, that is, if they feel the school as a familiar space, the type of relation that they have with teachers and

with the rest of students, the degree of confidence they have in their own educational capacities and what type of students they believe they are, among other aspects. All these elements are key to understand the level of engagement that students have with the school and with their own educational process and at the same time, have a clear effect in the configuration of educational expectations and decisions to continue studying or to drop out of school.

In this sense, it is essential that all the professionals working in the educational field pay special attention to these expressive elements in order to ensure that all students, and specially those at risk of experiencing higher distance with the school, are able to strengthening bonds with teachers and the school and make sense of their educational experience.

6- The pertinence of Second Chance Schools

The fifth and the last main lesson learned at the ABJOVES Conference is related to the study of Second Chance Schools. These types of programs and schools represent a clear commitment to the socio-educational integration of students in a situation of vulnerability and social risk. Second Chance Schools are characterized by innovative educational methods based on a close accompaniment of students throughout their educational process, an individualized and personalized treatment with students, and the offer of extended and flexible paths that combine educational and labour training.

In this sense, the professionals working in Second Chance Schools that attended the ABJOVES Conference underlined the twofold objectives that lie behind the idea of Second Chance opportunities. On the one hand, there is an explicit goal to generate a space of transition and preparation for young people to access into the labour market with the better conditions possible. On the other hand, there is the objective of dignifying non-traditional educational and social trajectories, generating a space where they can feel they are being looked out and listened, where they can feel they are part of the project and therefore, they can make sense of their educational process and construct new expectations towards their future.

In fact, the ABJOVES Conference hosted a symposium specifically focused on the presentation of the “Spanish Second Chance Schools Network”. This network was founded in 2006 and it is composed by six entities: Adsis Foundation (Basque Country), Llindar Foundation (Catalonia), Federico Ozanam Foundation (Aragon), Peñaskal Kooperativa (Basque Country), Proyecto Don Bosco Foundation (Andalusia) and the Tomillo Foundation (Madrid). The main goal of this Network is to establish a common model of Second Chance Schools, promote the official recognition of this model into the education system and guarantee the development and sustainability of this model. As a matter of fact, second chance mechanisms still remain weak and poorly developed both in Catalonia and the rest of Spain. Investing in these types of programs represents a key task in the combat of ESL.

7- Conclusions

We conclude the ABOVES Conference with several lessons learnt around ESL. Lessons learnt thanks to the collaborative work with students, teachers, technicians from local education authorities, researchers, and many more socio-educative agents involved and concerned in the construction of a fairer world that guarantees equal educational opportunities for all students.