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Project Paper 1

Formulation of a Common Working Definition of ESL: International Contributions

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1. Introduction

Through the identification and analysis of the definitions of ESL by the partners of the RESL.eu project, this Project Paper 1 aims to provide an overview of the concept of early school leaving (ESL), constructing a common working definition for the benefit of all partners, particularly for the data collection and analysis in work package 2 (WP2), WP3, and WP4. This definition aims to incorporate the diverse concerns and political goals of EU member states involved in this project and, consequently, their range of definitions of ESL, ESL measurement, and national policies to address the problem. The European Commission Report (2011) underlines the fact that high rates of early school leavers have long-term effects on societal development and economic growth. Education furthers personal and professional development, facilitates adaptation to the labour market, and ultimately enables a certain level of quality of life in a world of constant change that is dominated by uncertainty about the future (European Commission 2011). Drawing on European and international literature “to examine the causes and consequences, and possible remedies for early school leaving (ESL) in Europe,” the NESSE Report (Dale 2010:5) accentuates that ESL is a key problem that moves beyond the frontiers of Europe to affect the whole developed world. In the EU, 16.9% of boys and 12.7% of girls are defined as “early school leavers” (European Commission 2009). Because of the wide-ranging effects of this problem, the reduction of ESL to 10% by 2020 is one of the key targets of EU education strategy.

Such concerns justify the need to work and find solutions for ESL all over Europe. However, the NESSE Report also emphasizes the difficulty of defining ESL. Although it sees great similarities among the definitions of ESL in use in the USA, Canada, and by the OECD, the report also underlines their differences in relation to the EU definition, whose wide-ranging character encompasses all young people (18–24 years) that complete lower secondary education. Taking into account the limitations of the current EU ESL definition and the need to adjust the definition to our purposes, RESL.eu has debated a general working definition of ESL and, as will be seen, has arrived at the notion of young people “leaving education un(der)qualified (unqualified or under qualified).” All young people who have left regular school without attaining a degree/certificate of upper secondary education or similar, equivalent to an ISCED level 3 (2011 ISCED scale) are considered to be ESLers. Note that this definition is linked to the establishment of a minimum qualification level and not to the compulsory school age. This allows for the translation into the EU strategy for reducing ESL via prevention/intervention measures and compensation measures in compulsory and post-compulsory education, respectively. In addition, in order to encompass partners’ diverse contexts, this definition includes not only mainstream secondary education but also vocational alternative learning arenas, both during and after compulsory education, as prevention or compensation measures.

This paper will clarify how this definition was constructed. Section 2 briefly lays out the process leading to the final definition, including a description of partners’ and coordinators’ tasks and examples of the methods of data collection. Section 3 presents the main aspects of countries’ individual reports and their own identification and analysis of the different definitions and meanings of ESL affecting the use of the concept in their countries on both research projects and education and social policies. Section 4 deals analytically with a ‘concept in progress of being grasped ...

earliness of diverse natures’ presenting the most pertinent findings of the country studies. Section 5 presents the final remarks and the definition of ESL that was adopted for this project and synthesizes the reasons for the choice.

2. Work Process: Data Collection

The first part of WP2 was dedicated to the formulation of a common working definition of ESL, to be delivered by month 6 of the project (Project Paper 1). In order to do so, partners were provided with a template clarifying their expected input for the task — nine partners’ country definitions of ESL (up to 5,000 words). The resulting formulation of a common definition of ESL — to be synthesized by the coordinating partner of WP2, that is, University of Porto, Portugal — should form the basis for data collection and analysis in WP2, WP3, and WP4.

According to the milestones defined in the template for the presentation of a draft report on country definitions of ESL, partners were required to identify the different uses and meanings of ESL affecting the usage of the concept in their home countries, both in research and education as well as in social policy documents. These documents (to be collected by the partners) should reflect national (e.g., government policy), regional (e.g., regional governments), and local (e.g., local power bodies) concerns that might have social cohesion, inclusion, and equity at their core.

The documents underwent content analysis in order to identify common and distinctive features of the existing definitions of ESL in each partner country as well as to ascertain keywords related to the concept (e.g., social inclusion, performance, competences, skills, recovery, and others) that help to understand the multiple uses of the concept and the deeper national meanings ascribed to it. In order to support data collection and help the comparison of the various countries’ definitions, partners were advised to use a set of ESL “identification tables”, whose description criteria included and addressed the title and type of the document, the entity responsible for its production, the specific definition of ESL used in the document, the age span taken into consideration, and the keywords related to the concept, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. ESL concepts — description criteria

Description criteria	How to fill it in
Document title	For example, meanings of ESL in public policy
Type of document	Research/educational policy/social policy
Responsible entity	Research team/national, regional, local entity, school, etc.
Concept of ESL used in the document	Place the concept in itself
Age span	Age limit reported in the concept
Keywords related the concept	For example, social inclusion, performance, competences, skills, recovery, and others

Not unexpectedly, the analysis of national country reports on ESL that led to the current project paper has revealed the diversity of national realities as well as the diversity of approaches to the conceptualization of ESL. Starting from this collection of conceptualizations, it is our aim to produce a common definition applicable in each country and research area and one that is relevant for regional, national, and European policy. On the basis of the proposal stated in the first part of the WP2 template, several partners opted for different approaches and were faced with several challenges. This was particularly clear in the reports from Spain and Portugal, both of which reserved a section to analyze the complicated process of data collection and the nuances in their findings. Some of these findings are highlighted in the next section.

What stood out through the analysis of the countries' reports was the diversity within each country in research and policy documents, the extremely diverse approaches and uses of the ESL concept, and the disparity of the age spans that were considered in the different countries. An important step toward creating a working definition of ESL for RESL.eu was a proposal from the project coordinator, upon which consensus was reached in the Brussels meeting (June 7, 2013). The summary of the definition in the "Final Report Brussels Meeting" (p. 3) was as follows:

In the RESL.eu project, ESL is defined as leaving regular secondary education system without attaining an upper secondary school degree/certificate, equivalent to ISCED level 3 (2011). The RESL.eu project takes a partly new approach in defining ESL with the intention to substantially complement the Labour Force Survey (LFS) ESL data. The data collection tools of WP3 and WP4 will be based on the RESL.eu definition. As such, the RESL.eu data collection primarily targets pupils leaving regular secondary education. Nonetheless, youngsters (up to the age of 24 years) who are in the process of attaining a diploma or certificate at an ISCED level 3 in alternative learning arenas (after leaving secondary education without an ISCED level 3 degree) can be included in the qualitative part of the data collection. This will allow us to study youngsters' pathways in alternative learning arenas that compensate for ESL.

3. Country-Specific Definitions of ESL: Dealing with Similarities and Differences

The RESL.eu project looked, as already stated, for a definition meant to be wide ranging in order to encompass different educational realities and to be simultaneously concrete enough to show which particular ESL situations are being addressed in participating countries. Particular attention has been paid to ESL in EU and European policy, especially in the European Commission. This means that the discourse surrounding this problem and the educational concerns underlying it have been on the educational agendas of the EU and its member states, particularly since the first decade of the twenty-first century, in the aftermath of the Lisbon Strategy (2000). Ambitious targets to tackle ESL have been formulated on the policy levels of both Europe and other countries.

Building on Eurostat — EU LFS data from 2012 (European Commission 2013) in what refers to ESL at the national level, it becomes clear that the problem assumes quite different dimensions in the partner countries. In Poland and Sweden, while the values of ESL are quite low, 5.7% (provisional) and 7.5%, respectively, these values rise to 7.6% in Austria and 8.8% in the

Netherlands and reach more than 10% in Hungary (11.5%). Belgium is still below the European (EU 27) average (12.8%), with a value of 12.0%, and the UK is slightly above, at 13.5%. The remaining partners — Spain and Portugal — occupy very uncomfortable positions with extremely high values of ESL, 24.9% and 20.8%, respectively.

Taking into account these partial but significant data on ESL and on the basis of data provided by the partners' country reports, an overview of the definitions of ESL proposed by each partner and also of the ways ESL is approached in different countries, both in research and in policy documents, will be provided. Table 2 summarizes interesting nuances on ESL data provided by each country.

Table 2. Countries' definitions of ESL

BE (Flanders)	(1) ESL = unqualified school leavers; (2) all youngsters older than 18 who did not complete secondary education (level 1, level 2, and level 3) (regular, vocational, and technical/vocational).
UK	(1) ESL implies premature departure from education — one of the many subcategories of the NEET; (2) compulsory education until 16 years old (increase to 17/2013; 18/2015)
SE	(1) Young people who leave “upper secondary” school or (2) do not pursue an upper secondary education after compulsory education; occurs almost exclusively once the pupil has entered upper secondary school
PT	(1) Young people who leave school without completing the ninth grade (compulsory until 2009; twelfth grade or 18 years compulsory since then): (a) regardless of age or before 16 years, (b) or are not attending school, (c) abandoned education before its legal limit, and (d) are not in education and training
NE	(1) Compulsory school until 16 years, (2) young people who have not obtained a basic qualification, and (3) school absenteeism of young people without a basic qualification under the age of 23
PL	(1) Compulsory education until 18/compulsory schooling until 16 years of age, (2) ESLers are young people who do not take up education and do not fulfill compulsory schooling/education, or (3) people who have not completed any form of compulsory schooling and have not obtained a school diploma
SP	(1) School abandonment — young people who left education and did not return to obtain a qualification (secondary and vocational), (2) fail to attain qualifications at ISCED level 3A or 3B, (3) dropout — people aged 18–24 years without post-compulsory secondary school and who do not continue studying
HU	(1) Young people with primary school education (ISCED level 2) (a) with a certificate of short vocational training programs or (b) having attended a remedial program for dropouts and low achievers and (2) failure to complete any kind of upper secondary–level education

AU	(1) Pupils who leave compulsory or lower secondary education without a certificate (including prevocational school = ISCED level 3c), (2) young people who do not continue education after compulsory schooling, (3) dropouts from upper secondary schools who did not achieve a certificate higher than ISCED level 3c in former education, (4) young persons who finished vocational school but could not obtain a positive apprenticeship diploma, and (5) youth with upper secondary education certificates not acknowledged in Austria
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3.1. Reflecting on ESL: A View from Flanders (Belgium)

This report brings to light that the way ESL or “unqualified school leaving” is conceptualized can produce crucial differences in the perception and measurement of this problem, which in turn impacts the educational policy to reduce ESL, produced on the basis of such concepts and estimations. This inference emerged from the discussion on the use of definitions and indicators. The Belgium Report focuses on Flanders to identify two main definitions and conceptualizations of ESL that build on each other as well as on their critiques: a three-step approach provides “an indicator to measure the proportion of unqualified school leavers ... and can provide a nuanced estimation of the unqualified outflow according to the different boundaries set in the stepwise definition” (Belgium Report 2013:2). Developed by the Higher Institute for Labour Studies (HIVA), this straightforward definition of ESL, commonly called “unqualified school leaving,” brings into evidence the relationship between the educational concerns and the concerns of the labour market as it strongly links with the definition of “qualified outflow” developed later on by the Policy Research Centre for Careers through Education to Labour (LOA). This definition incorporates five types of qualifications: secondary education diploma for general secondary education or for secondary art education or technical education; certificate of full-time vocational from the second year of the third grade; certificate of part-time vocational education and of apprenticeship or workplace learning.

On the basis of HIVA, the three steps of conceptualization of unqualified school leaving describes unqualified school leavers as all youngsters older than 18 years who do not have the following:

- Step 1: a diploma or certificate of the second year of the third stage of full-time secondary education (general, technical, arts, and vocational track)
- Step 2: a certificate of the third year of the second stage of vocational education, a certificate of the third stage of part-time vocational education, a certificate of the fifth year of special vocational education type 3 or 4, or a certificate for workplace learning
- Step 3: a certificate of the second stage of technical or vocational education

The LOA definition considers ESL as all youngsters that leave secondary education without having attained a level 1 diploma or certificate as proposed by HIVA and includes pupils who have not attained a certificate for part-time vocational education and workplace learning. The Policy Research Centre for Educational and School Careers (SSL) currently monitors “the unqualified

outflow from Flemish compulsory education using the LOA definition (. . .) based on administrative data from the Flemish Department of Education and Training, more precisely the enrolment and certificates census data,” through the use of three indicators: per calendar year, per birth cohort, and for a given age interval in the population, which can be supplemented with other data related to special vocational education, examinations, and certificates from adult education services.

Recent figures pointed out that a substantial part of the pupil population attained qualifications through special vocational education, and this information supported the idea to no longer consider all youngsters attaining a qualification through special vocational education as unqualified, by incorporating figures on certificates of the specific OV3 and OV4 types of special vocational education. Although the number of pupils attaining a qualification in alternative ways (such as second-chance education) is on the rise, that can only account for a small proportion of qualifications. Certificates from second-chance and adult education are therefore excluded (Belgium Report 2013:3).

As mentioned in the country report, the “Policy Research Centres LOA and SSL formulated various critical remarks concerning the Labour Force Survey (LFS)-indicator used in most EU comparative studies ... [that] mainly addresses ... the fact that the LFS-indicator is based on survey data which are not representative for the whole of the pupil population in Flemish compulsory education (while the administrative census data are); ... that uses the ISCED codes to distinguish among different levels of qualifications, which have to be translated to the specific educational context of the measurement and for Flanders are biased, especially in a longitudinal perspective; [and] ... that the LFS-data are based on a specific measurement point in which a youngster is asked if (s)he is, or has in the last 4 weeks prior to the questioning been, enrolled in some kind of educational activity. According to SSL, this broad definition of post-compulsory education is likely to lead to an underestimation of the unqualified outflow” (ibid.). This underlines the difficulty of transferring and adapting EU indicators to national contexts.

3.2. Reflecting on ESL: A View from the UK

The UK Report underlines that “education and social policy in the UK tends to define problematic and/or vulnerable youth primarily in terms of their labour market outcomes. Consequently, the youth policy agenda focuses on young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET). The concept of Early School Leaving (ESL) has received much less attention in the policy discourse, and as a result, in academic research in the UK” (Lőrinc et al. 2013). If mentioned in research, ESL is defined not as a separate term but as a cause or characteristic of the NEET group. It may refer to young people older than 16 years who are not in post-compulsory education, often in the context of underachievement or as a synonym of “dropout,” but with no clarification about attainment of upper secondary qualification. Although the two categories partially overlap and ESL is seen as one of the causes of NEET, the two terms are not interchangeable because

not all ESLs are NEET and not all young people 'not in education, employment, or training left the education system early and/or without adequate qualifications.

The difficult fit between the two concepts emerges from the “perspective and aim by which they are defined”: qualifications in the EU and labour market outcomes in the UK. The UK Report emphasizes the inadequacy of the EU definition of ESL and its benchmarks to capture the “risk of economic/social vulnerability in the UK context” — a shortcoming that has also been highlighted within the context of other member states. Although in the UK the equivalent of ISCED level 31 is also identified as the desirable level of qualification, the young people identified as most vulnerable are the 16- to 18-years-olds, whereas the needs of higher age groups (18–24 years) are primarily seen as the continuation of a problem that actually occurs at a younger age.

Education and youth policies differ among the four constituent countries of the UK (England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland); however, the concept of ESL is not incorporated in the policy agenda of any of them. Although historically the UK has had low rates of staying on in education after the age of 16 years, the figures have been rising significantly, and by 2011, 83.1% of 16- to 18-year-olds in England participated in some kind of education or training (Department for Education 2013). However, this figure is still relatively low compared with other developed countries, and there is a noticeable downward trend as young people approach the age of 18 years.

In an attempt to tackle the high numbers of young NEETs, a new legislation in the UK is being implemented to raise the statutory participation age to 17 years from 2013 and to 18 years from 2015. This can be seen in effect as a “compensatory” measure to try to ensure that all young people achieve at least a minimum level of educational before leaving regular education. It is from this point onward that a young person can be said to be an “early school leaver” within the context of the EU’s attainment-based definition, and it is also from this point that compensatory policy measures (as opposed to in-school interventions) may address the potential negative outcomes associated with ESL.

Therefore, the definition of ESL in the EU for the RESL.eu project proposed by the UK team is “young people who pass the regular end of upper secondary education without gaining an ISCED Level 3 qualification and are not in any form of educational setting” (ibid.: 5–6). It seems purely arbitrary whether an upper age limit of this group should be drawn — and if yes, at what age? It is suggested, therefore, that ESL rates may be calculated for different age cohorts or groups, bearing in mind the highly contextual nature of national education systems when attempting to compare across different member states.

¹That is, a good grade (A*–C) in 5+ general certificate of secondary education subjects.

3.3. Reflecting on ESL: A View from Sweden

As stated in the Swedish Report, ESL is rarely referenced in research and policy documents. When it is, it is used as a synonym for “school dropout”. Pupils in the nine-year primary compulsory school cannot leave school because it is compulsory for everyone. The Swedish definition of ESL involves young people “who leave upper secondary school or do not pursue an upper secondary education” (Rudberg 2013:2). ESL is defined and contextualized in research in terms of social exclusion, together with unemployment, inactivity, and NEET (not in education, employment, or training) (Rudberg 2013). ESL in Sweden includes a very small number of young people who do not go to upper secondary school, those who are not eligible to enter a national upper secondary, and those who proceed to national secondary education but leave school in year 1, 2, or 3. Some return to upper secondary school or complete education in alternative learning arenas. In terms of the age span of ESL, the minimum age in Sweden is 16 years.

Several factors have been found to affect ESL, such as low socioeconomic status, poorly educated parents, gender, and immigrant background. The consequences of ESL are lack of relevant qualifications, skills, and competence as well as low self-esteem and low self-confidence. In education policy documents for young people, upper secondary education is seen as “a ‘minimum level of competence’ (Ekström and Murray 2002) ... [to allow for a] steady position in the labour market’ (Murray and Skarlind 2003)” (ibid.).

In both Swedish policy documents and research, ESL is “indirectly defined through a number of proposed intra-muros as well as extra-muros interventions to prevent or tackle ESL. Since ESL in Sweden is particularly common among pupils from vocational upper secondary education ..., the intra-muros interventions are to a high extent related to the vocational programmes” (Rudberg 2013:12).

The Swedish Report gave particular emphasis to the reform of upper secondary education in their country, a change that was criticized for potentially increasing the number of school leavers. One reason — related to the structure of the educational system — is that the addition of one school year, implying a greater curricular load, might increase the school dropout since not all upper secondary routes lead to the preparation for further education at university; furthermore, not all students would manage to stay in upper secondary education for one more year. Another argument — at an individual level — places the responsibility on the students’ will or lack of it to follow an academic pathway in higher education and should be given the opportunity to follow different tracks according to their interests.

3.4. Reflecting on ESL: A View from Portugal

The national concern about education and ESL is evidenced in the amount of existing research in education, psychology, sociology, health studies, and other fields. Similarly to the Spanish case

(see section 3.7), however, not much work has focused directly on ESL, a concept that is frequently associated with school failure and dropout. Official documents follow the Eurostat definition: “ESL is an indicator which identifies the rate of the 18–24 population who having concluded lower secondary education is not studying or attending any kind of vocational training.” This is the case, for example, of the National Council of Education (Conselho Nacional da Educação [CNE] 2011), an independent consulting body of the state education department.

ESL is not clearly defined in the majority of research documents. In some, it is mixed up with dropout; in others, it is mentioned vaguely, presented as the “struggle for school achievement” and contrasted with school dropout. In some documents, the problem under analysis is the premature entry into the labour market, showing that many young people lack sufficient work qualifications, which in turn means that they risk dependency on their families, fragile positions in the labour market, and social exclusion. Some research produced before the extension of compulsory schooling up to 12 school years (until age 18) and before the financial crisis advocates the expansion of the secondary education (from 15 to 18 years) with clear vocational and technological paths as well as postsecondary courses. ESL is still a vague term, and the concern lies mainly with those who drop out from the former compulsory education (lower secondary education). Other documents mention ESL in relation to concerns about the “reinforcement of human capital and a politics of social cohesion or social insertion of social groups at risk of exclusion or poverty” (DPP 2005:10) or in relation to its reduction as framed by the PISA outcomes and the “attainment of values similar to the OECD mean” (PCM 2013:10; cf. also APA 2008). It is as if ESL is a buzzword or at least something that “we all know about,” and there is no need to define it consistently” (Macedo et al. 2013:15).

The operational use of the concept includes pupils leaving school in a range of school cycles and years and with different ages. The concept may be perceived as a cause (e.g., of the early insertion in the labour market) or as an effect (e.g., of teenage pregnancy) or a complex interplay between the two, and sometimes nuances of that relation remain unclear. ESL is frequently associated with social and individual factors, and the analysis includes macro-, meso-, and micro-dimensions.

In most of the selected policy documents, ESL is mentioned without any kind of definition or follows the Eurostat definition, despite the debates surrounding it. ESL is still a concept whose boundaries, contents, and nuances (age limit and school level of the leavers) need work to take into consideration countries’ volatile social contexts and educational systems.

3.5. Reflecting on ESL: A View from the Netherlands

The concepts of ESL and “school dropout” seem to be used as synonyms. In the Netherlands, early school leavers have been a concern, and policies aiming to reduce it anticipated the Lisbon Strategy in 2000. The concept has been defined and operationalized from different perspectives

(the school, the education system, the labour market, and the society as a whole) that depend on the social context and dominant actors and that imply and reflect different policy ambitions. It still lacks consensus. ESL includes young people “who leave school without a basic qualification” (ibid.: 5) as a point of reference used in Dutch research institutes and education or labour councils.

The umbrella of ESL includes a very diverse group of people, and several issues need to be taken into account in defining ESL in the Dutch context where at least one third of the young population returns to education after leaving for a certain time; therefore, “youngsters in the age of 12 to 23 without a basic qualification who missed school for at least one month without a legitimate reason or, who are not registered as student anymore” will not give an accurate figure of early school leavers (Dutch Inspectorate of Education 2002), and the difference between having a diploma and basic qualification determines different levels of vulnerability. This has informed various conceptualizations: priority early school leavers — those who have no diploma in upper secondary education, and early school leavers — those who have a prevocational or senior vocational education level 1 diploma. The Dutch Council of Education (2005) criticizes the wide variation and changes in measures over time, which complicates an accurate diagnosis of the amount of ESL in the Netherlands (Dutch Report 2013:5).

The basic qualification should be used as a reference point to define ESL in the Netherlands, in line with the European definition and the national policy definition. This involves young people under 23 who “are not in school and do not at least have a senior (upper) vocational education level-2 (MBO-2), general secondary education (HAVO) or pre-university education diploma (VWO)” (ibid.). Different situations of dropout are included: from prevocational, general secondary or pre-university education without a diploma; after completing prevocational education but without senior vocational education level 1 or 2; second dropout after entering senior vocational education level 1 or level 2 without a prevocational education diploma. “Since the introduction of the basic qualification requirement, compulsory education in the Netherlands ends at the age of 18 or the moment one obtains a basic qualification” (Dutch Report 2013:5). International comparison should “disregard the age of compulsory education and focus only on the basic qualification requirement to define early school leaving,” a concept that is applied to regular education and not to special needs education (ibid.).

3.6. Reflecting on ESL: A View from Poland

In Poland, ESL is seen as a European problem, and thus not directly related to the situation of the country, where the low level of ESL is presented as strong point of the education system in “Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats” (SWOT) analysis. Therefore, ESL is not seen as a major challenge for education in the future. Neither a comprehensive framework nor specific policies and strategies have been defined to prevent or tackle ESL at national, regional, or local levels. Hence, ESL is addressed “indirectly through other policies and programs concerning

education and young people” (GHK 2011:67). In turn, similarly to other partner countries, the unemployment of young people (including of those who have completed higher education) and NEET have become very serious social concerns.

Research tends to combine ESL and NEET. This corresponds to a poor definition of both concepts. While ESL does not appear much in Polish academic literature, dropout (in its different meanings) has been a common concept in the academic tradition. When referred to, ESL appears together with youth unemployment, NEET, abandonment, and school mortality. “Early” can apply to a wide range of people in different school situations. There is no consensus on the age of the ESL. The ESL age span starts at 12 years, even though the situation of the pupil who did not complete primary education is very different from the one who left school at 18 without taking the final exams (*matura*). ESL, dropout, and “sieve” are used in Polish literature to refer the same result; the different terms are associated with in the timing of school leaving within the educational trajectory. The ESLer is understood to have resigned from school, dropping out from formal education.

The concern about ESL in policy documents was raised by the Europe 2020 agenda. Definitions of ESL in official documents include the following: finishing school early, earlier, or too early; abandoning early; dropping out of education before completing a full cycle; and people aged 18–24 years who completed lower secondary school (*gimnazjum*) and are not in education or training.

ESL is portrayed as having implications for the labour market, but policy documents ignore the individual and institutional consequences of this phenomenon. ESL is also associated with deficiencies of basic vocational secondary schools directed at the most vulnerable pupils who are most at risk of falling out of the system. ESL is associated with social exclusion and marginalization.

The Eurostat definition is used in Poland and seen as valuable for statistical purposes, but it is also considered to be inadequate due to the difficulty of identifying the exact moment of school dropout, among other problems. Depending on the school level, different entities are responsible for keeping the student in school. Pertinently, the Polish report expresses the concern that “this definition focuses on the end result of secondary education (degree/certificate/diploma/exam) and not on the process leading to the abandonment of school which usually begins much earlier” (Marchlik and Tomaszewska-Pękała 2013:13). ESL is a very complex phenomenon that goes beyond the non-completion of upper secondary school. Hence, there ought to be a focus on ESL as a complex process “that occurs at the intersection of individual life and educational trajectories with a number of other factors: family, institutional, system, national, etc.” (ibid.).

3.7. Reflecting on ESL: A View from Spain

ESL is not perceived as a specific problem in Spanish research, despite policies and concepts such as school failure and dropout frequently being at the core of research, together with

engagement/disengagement, absenteeism, personal decision, previous school failure, success, completion of secondary education, and so forth. The same lack of pertinence was found in documents that refer to the Catalan autonomous community. ESL, dropout, and school failure are the focus of half of the research documents analyzed; the others combine the three or occasionally focus on other items (disengagement, truancy, school achievement, school-to-work transitions, NEET, etc.). Empirical and theoretical evidence express some concern over ESL facts that emerge from EU policy documents. Spanish research has focused particularly on the impact of ESL on the most vulnerable groups (children of foreign immigration, minorities, young people in public care, homeless children, etc.), sometimes using comparisons with other populations.

The link between Spanish policy documents and European documents is weak. ESL is used but not directly defined, and is vaguely related to poverty or to the need to promote equity. The preventive perspective inherent in the policies emphasizes a bottom-up definition with a focus on rights to education (universal access, compulsory education until 16 years old, quality to minimize school failure, and access to quality education from early age to combat poverty and social exclusion) and its intergenerational transmission, some of which are emphasized in official ministry documents. There is also a focus from the government on quality education and equity in its distribution, through overall improvement of performance and the reduction of the high rates of completion of basic education without qualifications and ESL, to ensure the maximum development of individual, social, intellectual, cultural, and emotional skills and a high-quality education tailored to the needs of the students. The disparity between Spanish government institutions and the Catalan autonomous community, the differing regional and local levels, and the various parties' political programs all reveal the divergences between the left- and the right-wing parties in dealing with education and dropout. Currently being applied, the last ones propose VET (incorporating the dual contract for work and training or employment, creating "political, legal, and economic barriers"), whereas the former advocate equity (attention to diversity, equal opportunities, family-work balance, and taking post-compulsory education into account), responding "with a pro-social discourse understood by right-wing parties as a barrier to economic growth, resulting in an ideological confrontation" (Spanish Report 2013:13).

Critiques of the concept of ESL are due to the diversity of ESL situations: the obscuring of different individual circumstances, experiences, backgrounds, and phenomena (absenteeism, repetition, or temporary abandonment) and the lack of distinction between obtained and not-obtained results (i.e., achievements/failure at various stages).

ESL may include people younger than 19 years or between 19 and 24 years to whom school abandonment is not significant because they left intentionally and do not plan to return to obtain a qualification. ESL refers to "secondary education and intermediate vocational training because this group fails to attain qualifications at CINE-3A (ESO) or CINE-3B (CFGM). ... students who have not attained such qualifications at 19 do not return to finish their education before 24" (ibid.: 5).

3.8. Reflecting on ESL: A View from Hungary

So far, there is no official state education policy on ESL in Hungary; the national ESL strategy is currently being prepared. The Eurostat definition of ESL has been used in policy documents since 2004 with the drive of the Lisbon Agenda and the aim to join the European Union. However, this definition of ESL “was not effectively adapted to educational policy or scholarship” and was not integrated into professional literature or policy language, a difficult move because of the statistic category of the concept (Hungarian Report 2013:1). The effort to comply with EU legislation leads the official approach to ESL to distance itself from the domestic traditions of conceptualizing and tackling ESL-related problems and the needs of the groups at greatest risk.

The European Commission (2011) objectives are taken into account in Hungarian government documents that express Hungary’s readiness to accelerate adjustment in all areas, including education and social policy, where there are no strict regulations. Strategic documents and policy makers did not use the original EU definition of ESL before 2000. Prior to the Lisbon Strategy, problems related to ESL were not focused on by either researchers nor educational policy makers, hence the lack of a single standard definition in Hungary. The Hungarian school system is described with regard to the EU definition of ESL in order to determine who falls under the ESL category, whereas the term dropout is presented in its multiple dimensions in order to shed light on the Hungarian narrative of the problem of ESL. ESL is absent as a category in research on education and young people 18 to 24 age group. It is also not present in the National Youth Strategy or in the yearly reports on youth matters.

As shown by the Hungarian Report, instead of ESL, the term 'dropout' has been more common in research and policy documents, where the most relevant categories within the “dropout umbrella” are “dropout from the entire school system; dropout from the formal day school system; [and] failure to complete any kind of upper secondary–level education (e.g., grammar school, secondary technical school, or (special) vocational training school)” (Hungarian Report 2013: 9). Dropout is not discussed or taken into consideration in what concerns youth beyond the age limit of compulsory education.

In Hungary school leavers are “young people with primary school education (lower secondary level (5–8 grades, ISCED 2) holding at most the certificate of a short vocational training program ..., which do not require the completion of 10 years of general education (ISCED 2CV), or having attended a second chance for further education remedial program for dropouts and low achievers (public education Bridge Program) (ISCED 2BV).” Problems of ESL are discussed together with marginalization, exclusion, poverty, low education, unemployment, or inactivity.

3.9. Reflecting on ESL: A View from Austria

The Austrian Report, like that from Poland, states that the 2000 Lisbon Strategy has influenced policy measures and incited research into ESL but criticizes the EU definition of ESL for narrowing down the age-group and for speaking of “not in education or training”: in Austria, because compulsory education ends after 9 years of schooling, the ESL definition should start with the 15-year-olds; it is also problematic to consider young persons to be in education or training when they have only participated in some informal further education program within the last four weeks before the survey (Austrian Report 2013:6). The report also shows concern about the negative connotation of the ESL concept insofar as it suggests stigma, educational poverty, and low qualification but ignores school structure or organization and, as such, evokes the idea that dropouts are themselves responsible for dropping out (Austrian Report 2013:7f.). It also points out that the data currently available do not distinguish “real” dropouts from persons changing schools or training programs, which makes it difficult to determine the exact ESL rates (Steiner and Lassnigg 2000:7).

The Austrian ESL definition includes the following groups: (1) pupils who leave compulsory or lower secondary education without a certificate (including prevocational school, i.e., ISCED level 3c), (2) young people who do not continue education after compulsory schooling, (3) dropouts from upper secondary schools who did not achieve a certificate higher than ISCED level 3c in any former education (4) young persons who finished vocational school but could not obtain a positive apprenticeship diploma, and (5) youth with upper secondary education certificates that are not acknowledged in Austria (see Steiner 2009:15–18).

The report emphasizes that ESL must be examined from three angles: (1) changes in society and economy (e.g., globalization, outsourcing of unqualified labour, transformation of industrial society into a knowledge-based society); (2) influencing factors at macro-, meso-, and micro-levels; and (3) negative consequences for individuals and society (Austrian Report 2013:8).

According to the report, the national policies discuss ESL in the context of education deprivation and forms of poverty that enhance and reproduce existing poverty. Although referring to the valid EU definition, the official documents emphasize the heterogeneity of early school leavers, their different education experiences, their specific social circumstances, and their diverse needs. Researchers critically highlight (1) unexploited possibilities to improve the Austrian school system and its structure (with high selectivity, early tracking, and the insufficiently developed early childhood education), (2) delayed or missing reforms in the field of professionalization of educators and counsellors/coaches, (3) social inequalities with respect to educational opportunities, and (4) insufficient measures (information capital) to support families with schoolchildren from disadvantaged areas. The research papers, mirroring the policy makers’ conception of early school (or training) leaving as a complex and multilayered phenomenon with far-reaching consequences, underline the urgency of ESL prevention by pointing to the dropouts’ high risk of social exclusion

and to the negative consequences for individuals, society, and the economy. On the basis of this unisonous diagnosis, the approved policies target the systemic, organizational, and personal levels, upon which ESL can be combated by prevention, intervention, and compensation measures (Austrian Report 2013:13).

4. A Concept in the Process of Being Grasped: the *Earliness* of Diverse Natures

The concept of ESL produced in different countries encompasses the countries' attempts to comply with not only the EU soft law in education but also the national political, social, and educational contexts. As mentioned previously, needing to adjust the definition to our purposes, RESL.eu opted for the general working definition of ESL as: "leaving education un(der)qualified (unqualified or under qualified)", a definition related to the attainment of a minimum qualification level and not to the compulsory school age. This means that ESLers are all young people who have left school without attaining a degree or certificate of upper secondary education or similar to an ISCED level 3 (2011 ISCED scale).

The careful examination of the reports produced by the partners, having led to a better understanding of their educational contexts and policy and research production in their respective countries, also allowed the detection a set of axes of analysis, which is described in the next section and that contributes to the construction of the working definition of ESL.

4.1. The *Earliness* of Diverse Natures

The concept of ESL based on the EU LFS data issued by the EU is complex because it considers education in a comprehensive perspective of school education and training — it includes goals of school education and qualifications for a European society, where the pathway from crisscrossing between education to the labour market is aimed at the construction of intelligent and competitive European societies based on innovation. It aims to measure the portion of the 18- to 24-year-old European population outside of the desired parameters on the indicators "level of education" and "level of qualification" (ISCED level 3).

Therefore, on the basis of these parameters, such definition in itself assumes an independent character from the compulsory education systems and the age spans in use in each country. One may say that in the attempt to encompass this age span and the European context as a whole, the concept goes beyond countries' diverse educational and social contexts.

Before beginning to use this EU concept, the studies on school dropout used as their point of reference the attainment of compulsory education, according to its various cycles and the legal age

associated with it. Concepts such as dropout, mortality, withdrawal, failure, school failure, and so on, have been in use in order to make visible the earliness of the phenomenon. The earliness of ESL now established by the EU concept, with the privileged goal of upper secondary school for all, takes on different meaning in the various countries. It forces all the countries where compulsory education falls short of that limit to consider all young people who fulfilled compulsory education but did not remain in school education or training to be ESLers. At the same time, early abandonment from compulsory schooling also should not be neglected.

4.2. ESL as a Political and Statistical Concept

ESL is a political concept introduced by the European political agenda, which is intended to support a European strategy for skilled employment, economic growth, and mobility. This concept has also underpinned social cohesion and the combat against social exclusion. Its ownership is a scientific challenge that calls for diverse conceptual sociological and educational approaches.

An aspect that may affect the conceptualization of ESL is the internal differentiation of educational systems, which may include various vocational pathways aimed at keeping certain categories of young people in the education system and at ensuring desirable levels of education/qualification. However, for these categories of young people, the processes of school disaffection may be part of their pathways, and the risk of ESL, failure, and social exclusion and marginalization may be highly present. This is one way to foresee and prevent ESL. Another way is to offer alternative training routes for young people who have reached the levels of compulsory schooling when they fall short of the upper secondary education. Hence, one may say that some perspectives call for prevention measures that may correspond to school integration at any price and so they defy the political mandate of education in democratic societies. In others, “prevention” foresees ESL as a process in relation to the educational system. Therefore, structural, institutional, and biographical levels are associated with ESL, whatever its earliness.

ESL can also be seen as a political/statistical concept that is intended to allow comparability between states and to measure the EU education system as a whole, as well as the internal differentiation of educational systems and the youth categories associated with it. The production of instruments that allow for comparability has been included in the European agenda by the Lisbon Strategy as a powerful mode of governance in Europe. Moreover, one may say that the definition of ESL also promotes convergence around similar political paradigms advocated by Europe. Therefore, ESL can be used as an indicator of this process. While fostering the relationship between education and the labour market, the definition of educational goals and the comparability that comes with it have a strategic purpose in the construction of a common political paradigm, which is expressed through the use of a common language and of systems of educational harmonization and accountability where lifelong learning, intelligent economy, creativity and innovation, entrepreneurship, certification, and mobility are to take place.

4.3. Other Findings

Some other major findings that could be extracted from partners' reports should be underlined. Data provided by the partners allow understanding of, for example, the diverse responsibilities of states, communities, local power, schools, and families in the provision of education, i.e. in organizing alternative learning arenas and in developing adequate strategies both to keep young people in education and to foster their engagement with learning in compulsory and post-compulsory formal education, informal and non-formal training, and adult lifelong learning. In addition, it also suggests the current organizational differences of the national educational systems and their diverse evolution through recent history and how this affects the ways in which ESL is and has been conceptualized in the last 15 to 20 years, as visible in particular in the Polish and Portuguese cases. Pertinent to our purposes and with regards to the former finding, it is also interesting to emphasize the weak definition of the age span among countries, which varies from 12 to 24 years old.

It is also of interest to underline the different ways partner countries express their relationship to the Lisbon Strategy, which was defined elsewhere in research and policies and also in this project as a milestone in and for educational change. Some countries, such as the Netherlands, expressed their concern toward ESL earlier than the Lisbon Strategy; others, such as Hungary, recognize the impact of this political event and document through the recent production of ESL documents and policies in their countries. This also constitutes a relevant finding as it shows the diverse ways in which the partners relate to the EU soft law in education, both in general and particularly in ESL. Besides, in line with the Flanders Report, it should be emphasized that the various discussions and uses of definitions and indicators on ESL show that the conceptualization of ESL and of other forms of unqualified school leaving can produce fundamental differences in the way it is measured and perceived, and it also allows us, for example, to understand if countries reach the political goals put forward by the European Commission (2010) to be achieved by 2020.

Another salient aspect to take into account in analyzing ESL are the political and social dimensions underlying the educational vision; for example, the emphasis put on the difference between the distinct left wing and right wing focus regarding educational concerns in the Spanish Report. The country reports also demonstrated clearly that the different aspects of ESL assume different relevancies in each country. Furthermore, we discovered that there is not only one definition in each country but several, depending on the social circumstances surrounding the problem, the diverse structures of the educational systems, as well as the level of educational development per country -- all of which are expressed by the educational policies of the respective educational systems. Internal diversity is mostly emphasized in the UK Report, which deals simultaneously with England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Hence, as referred by one of the partners, "We must remember that ESL rates are not a reflection of single system factors, but of their specific

arrangements and interrelationships between them, as well as institutional (school) and individual factors” (Marchlik and Tomaszewska-Pękała 2013:1).

5. Final Remarks

This project paper aimed at providing an overview on the construction of a working definition of ESL suited to the purposes of RESL.eu, by finding common concerns and emphases among participating countries. The goal was to encompass the diverse concerns and social/educational situations and the range of definitions of ESL, ESL measurement, and national policies addressing the problem. In order to do so, the European dimension and concerns about ESL were presented concerning the different partner countries.

After consulting and discussing the national uses of the concept as well as the specificity that this concern assumes nationally, emphasizing its confusion with other concepts such as school failure, dropout, NEET, and so forth, consensus was reached in the Brussels meeting on the following RESL.eu working definition of ESL: “leaving education un(-der)qualified (unqualified or under qualified),” which means that early school leavers are all young people who left secondary education without attaining a degree/certificate of upper secondary education or similar, equivalent to an ISCED level 3 (2011 ISCED scale).

Partners’ contributions demonstrated that, quite frequently, ESL is not at the core of research and educational policies. However, parallel political measures do contribute to reducing ESL, and policies can address diverse educational and social concerns, such as, for example, the extension of compulsory schooling. These issues will be discussed in more detail in the second phase of WP2.

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