

## Publication 5

# A Longitudinal Study of Educational Trajectories of Youth at Risk of Early School Leaving

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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 ultimate 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 levels.

**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.

## *Key Work Packages*

**WP1** – Developing a theoretical and methodological framework for studying ESL in nine different EU member states

**WP2** – Comparative policy analysis of ESL policies on different policy levels & field descriptions

**WP3** – Quantitative data collection and analysis (i.e., Longitudinal student survey and staff survey)

**WP4** – Qualitative data collection and analysis (i.e., Longitudinal approach using bio-interviews and theory-based stakeholder evaluations of prevention, intervention and compensatory measures)

**WP5** – Developing a risk assessment tool & conceptual models for good practices in school-based prevention/intervention and compensatory pathways using triangulation of data and findings

**WP6** – Policy recommendations based on the findings of the RESL.eu project

**WP7** – Identifying and providing an overview of the factors important to consider for cost benefit analysis

### *How and where the project operates*

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

**New survey data** are collected in two waves among at least 1500 youngsters in the two local urban research areas of each country (except in Hungary and Austria). In these same research areas, school staff and school administrators are also surveyed.

**Qualitative data** is collected across seven EU member states (Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom). In each country, bio-interviews are conducted with around 24 to 32 selected youngsters per country. In most cases, youngsters participated in two bio-interviews. In the different countries, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with students and school staff are also carried out across a total of 28 schools and 24 alternative learning arenas that were carefully selected based on the first wave of the student survey data and the field descriptions of local educational landscapes.

## Introduction

In this fifth RESL.eu Publication, we present the findings of the longitudinal qualitative study of the educational trajectories of youth at risk of early school leaving in seven EU member-states, i.e., Belgium (Flanders), the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain (Catalonia), Sweden and the United Kingdom (England). This publication focuses particularly on the perspectives of the youngsters under study in an attempt to give space to their often still largely unheard or marginalized voices and perceptions. Our aim, however, is not to paint a generalizable picture of (groups of) youngsters 'at risk of early school leaving' in different national contexts. Rather, we want to create deeper insights, from the point of view of the youngsters themselves, into the mechanisms and processes that lead them to leave – or prevent them from leaving – education or training early. Thereby, we hope to contribute to constructing a broader understanding of the processes of early school leaving.

The findings presented in this Publication are based on the analyses of in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 252 youngsters between 16 and 24 years of age. In order to better capture the longitudinal aspect of youngsters' trajectories, 171 youngsters (21-32 per country) of the total sample were interviewed twice. All interviews took place between September 2014 and October 2016. In table 1, you will find a descriptive overview of some socio-demographic variables of the respondents. In table 2, we provide an overview of the educational background of the parents of the respondents.

**Table 1. Socio-demographics of respondents per country**

Country	N	Gender	Migration Status <sup>1</sup>		
			1st generation*	2nd generation**	No recent migration history
Belgium	34	41%	18%	56%	27%
the Netherlands	34	50%	15%	53%	32%
Poland	40	43%			100%
Portugal	31	55%	3%		97%
Spain	32	53%	19%	6%	75%
Sweden	38	42%	29%	26%	45%
United Kingdom	43	51%	33%	30%	37%
<b>Total</b>	<b>252</b>	<b>48%</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>58%</b>

\*1<sup>st</sup> generation migrants: Respondents who are born abroad

\*\*2<sup>nd</sup> generation migrants: Respondents who have at least one parent who is born abroad

<sup>1</sup> In the United Kingdom, the term 2<sup>nd</sup> generation migrant is not used for people born in the United Kingdom



**Table 2. Educational background of the respondents per country**

Country	Highest achieved educational level father					Highest achieved educational level mother				
	< Upper secondary education	> Upper secondary education & <Higher education	Higher education	N.A.	Mis-sing	< Upper se- condary educa- tion	> Upper secondary edu- cation & <Higher education	Higher educa- tion	N.A.	Mis- sing
<b>Belgium</b>	24%	9%	12%	3%	53%	32%	15%	9%		44%
<b>the Nether- lands</b>	24%	6%	29%	6%	35%	21%	12%	47%		21%
<b>Poland</b>	3%	5%	50%		43%	13%	13%	45%		30%
<b>Portugal</b>	52%		19%		29%	65%		19%		16%
<b>Spain</b>	28%	9%	9%	9%	44%	38%	13%	3%		47%
<b>Sweden</b>	8%	21%	18%	18%	34%	11%	11%	29%	8%	42%
<b>United Kingdom</b>	35%	12%	9%		44%	42%	12%	9%		37%
<b>Total</b>	24%	9%	21%	5%	41%	31%	11%	23%	1%	34%

The central idea of this longitudinal study was to study three different groups of youngsters. Group 1 consists of youngsters who could theoretically be considered ‘at risk’ of early school leaving but remained in mainstream secondary education. Group 2 includes youngsters who left mainstream secondary education early – before attaining an ISCED 3 level qualification – and who are pursuing this educational qualification via alternative learning arenas. Finally, group 3 are youngsters who are not in Education, (Employment) or Training, the so-called NE(E)T’s, and did not obtain an ISCED 3 level qualification. Therefore, careful consideration was given to the selection and recruitment of the respondents to make sure that the youngsters belonged to at least one of these groups at the time of the first interview (see Project Paper 4 for a more detailed description of this selection and recruitment). In table 3, we give more information about the educational status of the respondents at the first interview.

**Table 3: Educational status at first interview of the respondents, per country**

Country	Initial Educational Status		
	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
<b>Belgium</b>	47%	27%	27%
<b>the Netherlands</b>	47%	29%	24%
<b>Poland</b>	45%	28%	28%
<b>Portugal</b>	52%	26%	23%
<b>Spain</b>	50%	25%	25%
<b>Sweden</b>	45%	26%	29%
<b>United Kingdom</b>	37%	30%	26%
<b>Total</b>	46%	27%	26%

To identify ‘early school leavers’, we started from the definition that is used at EU level and defines early school leavers as ‘*those young people who leave education and training with only lower secondary education or less, and who are no longer in education and training*’. This definition is measured by looking at ‘*the percentage of 18-24 year olds with only lower secondary education or*

*less and no longer in education or training*' (Eurostat, 2012<sup>2</sup>). By expanding this group and including youngsters who enrolled in alternative pathways after leaving mainstream education as well as youngsters who are still in mainstream education but could theoretically be considered 'at risk' of early school leaving, we aimed to involve a diverse group of 'youngsters at risk of early school leaving' in our study. We identified this latter group based on the existing research literature on early school leaving, and focused on the characteristics of students that are more likely to leave school without educational qualification (e.g., Rumberger & Ah Lim, 2008<sup>3</sup>). Specific socio-demographic variables, such as gender, migration background, socio-economic status, language proficiency, family and school composition, and trajectory indicators, are often related to early school leaving across different settings. The specific characteristics of the young people considered to belong to the 'at-risk group' differed somewhat across the countries, and sampling procedures often related to the specific conditions in each country (e.g., vulnerable groups in society or educational system features). Consequently, this Publication deals with a very varied group of young people. Nonetheless, most youngsters had parents with a lower educational background. Furthermore, youngsters with an immigrant background were overrepresented in most countries but certainly not in all countries (e.g., United Kingdom and Poland). There was also a relatively large group of youngsters who had to deal with a long term illness or disability that made it difficult to continue their education. During the analysis of the data, it became clear that there were a lot of similarities in the trajectories and experiences of the three different groups of youngsters that were initially selected based on their educational status across the different countries. Regardless of their educational status, nearly all youngsters we interviewed for this study mentioned having encountered various struggles throughout their educational career, though the range and intensity of these struggles, as well as the ways in which these impacted their school careers, varied. Despite considerable variation in the life stories of these youngsters, we found a remarkable number of similarities across all countries involved in this study, especially regarding the main tensions within the lives of these youngsters. This made it difficult if

<sup>2</sup> Eurostat (2012). Europe in figures - Eurostat yearbook 2012: [http://bit.ly/Eurostat\\_yearbook](http://bit.ly/Eurostat_yearbook).

<sup>3</sup> Rumberger, R. & S. Ah Lim (2008). Why students drop out of school: A review of 25 years of research. Santa Barbara: University of California Santa Barbara

not redundant to make a strict division or comparison between the three different groups of youngsters that were selected based on their educational status in the discussion of the results. In this publication, we will mainly restrict ourselves to the presentation of the findings that made sense in the comparison between the distinct countries involved.

In order to facilitate comparison across the whole dataset, similar fieldwork documents, strategies and protocols, topic guides and coding trees were used in the different countries. The topic guides included questions about the following themes: 'aspirations and motivations', 'educational trajectories', 'connectedness between school and education', 'social networks', 'school-related and study behaviour', 'employment experiences', 'identity', 'perceived challenges and resilience'. The first stage of analysis took place at the level of the different countries, which allowed us to bring to the forefront context-specific factors and singularities. In a next stage, the analyses at the country-level were used as a starting point for this Publication; we used the method of constant comparison to analyse the data and find the themes that recurred throughout the data, both at country- and cross-country level.

Before setting out the main findings, some remarks have to be made regarding the concept of 'early school leaving'. When carrying out the data analyses, we found out that it was particularly difficult to distinguish distinct life spheres (e.g. school, labour market) from each other and our results clearly show that the process of early school leaving should be seen as the outcome of a complex interplay of factors. We want to emphasize that policies directed at the reduction of early school leaving need to consider this complexity in order to be successful. Furthermore, it is important to take into account that in many cases, early school leaving is a 'process' or a 'phase' in young people's lives (see also Rumberger & Ah Lim, 2008), which is the most pronounced at the moment they decide to stop putting any effort into regular secondary schools, and/or during the period they are looking for a job. When looking at our entire sample, it becomes clear that many young people are part of constant cycles with a high level of switching between being enrolled in a particular school, being in-between schools or trainings, or wishing to re-enrol in some kind of

education or training (see also Furlong, 2006<sup>4</sup>; MacDonald, 2011<sup>5</sup>). Due to the frequency of changes between educational institutions, trainings, schools, tracks etc., and the transition periods between these changes, youngsters do not necessarily perceive or identify themselves as 'early school leavers', but often rather see themselves as being part of some kind of temporary 'in-between' category or have distinct interpretations of the meaning of 'early school leaver'. For instance, some youngsters may self-perceive as an early school leaver when s/he has left mainstream secondary education, even though s/he or she is still enrolled in some kind of educational training. Others – who according to the EU-definition are categorised as 'early school leavers' – on the other hand, could perceive their out-of-education status as 'temporary', and part of a transition phase. Hence, self-labelling processes of early school leaving do not always overlap with the definition as described by the European Commission. Therefore, the actual labelling of people as 'early school leavers' does not necessarily make sense or should not be seen as the best 'label'. Considering that in each phase or educational status, youngsters are confronted with particular issues, problems and vulnerabilities, young people go through during their career, it may be more helpful for policy makers to actually focus on the actual concerns of these young people and the difficulties they are confronted with.

The Publication is structured in five parts. These parts are based upon the data analysed for this particular project. Part I focuses on the aspirations that youngsters hold for their future. Part II provides more insight into their educational plans, strategies and trajectories. In Part III, we look at the youngsters' relationship to school. Part IV provides insight into the way in which paid and unpaid work experiences play a role in the youngsters' educational trajectories. Finally, in Part V, we discuss the different social networks the youngsters navigate and the relative importance of these networks as sources of support in the youngsters' educational trajectories. We end this publication with a general conclusion in which we bring together the findings of the different parts and further reflect up the challenges that cut across the youngsters' (educational) trajectories and daily lives. The results of

<sup>4</sup> Furlong, A. (2006). Not a very NEET solution: Representing problematic labour market transitions among early school-leavers. In *Work Employment Society*, 20(3), 553-569.

<sup>5</sup> MacDonald, R. (2011). Youth transitions, unemployment and underemployment: Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose? In *Journal of Sociology*, 47(4), 424-444

this Publication can be seen as a starting point to further develop tools and get more insight in the ways policy makers and education and training providers could use these findings in their efforts to reduce early school leaving, which is also part of the next publications of RESL.eu project.

## Part I: Aspirations

In the first part of this publication, we will focus on the youngsters' aspirations. Overall, we see that the youngsters across the different countries and regardless of their educational status generally describe what can be considered 'ordinary' aspirations that mainly revolve around family, work and housing. These aspirations seem to be influenced by the youngsters' belief in education as a resource of opportunity and the generally high-aspirations their parents hold for them. However, these aspirations are rather abstract and are repeatedly presented as 'dreams' the youngsters hope to achieve one day, but often go unaccompanied by clearly defined educational and occupational goals or strategies that guide their (educational) trajectory. Moreover, while the youngsters generally do not question the (abstract) value of education, the importance of an educational qualification as a 'ticket to success' is sometimes toned down as youngsters have to respond to social forces and personal circumstances that are part of their often complicated lives.

This quote of one of the youngsters in the Portuguese sample is very illustrative of the way most youngsters talked about their future aspirations:

**Youngster 25 (Portugal):** *"I dream of having my own house, having a family and having children. [...] To constitute a family is one of my dreams. [...] Finding the ideal person. For that it is necessary to have a permanent and secure job, to have the ideal conditions to be able to support the families. [...] I would like to travel at least to Italy."*

As stated before and shown in this quote, these aspirations often revolve around what can be considered 'ordinary' things, such as having their own house, a family, a secure job and occasional travel. In some cases, these aspirations also specifically include a wish to pursue higher education, as for instance in the case of Youngster 13 (Belgium) who states *'I still dream about finishing college, then I want to get married.'* The youngsters aspire to a future life that allows them to *'just be able to live happily, peacefully'* (Youngster 39, United Kingdom) or *'just, live the life, so to speak'* (Youngster 13, Belgium), and often talk about it in terms of 'dreams', suggesting that these aspirations are rather detached from their actual lived realities. While there does not always seem to be room in the youngsters' often complicated lives to 'dream'

their future – Youngster 27 (Portugal), for instance, states, *‘For now it is what I said. I have no dreams. The normal dream is car, house, family, those dreams. Just the normal ones... But it is impossible for now’* – youngsters can sometimes find a source of motivation in these ‘imagined futures’:

**Youngster 6 (United Kingdom):** *“What motivates me (...) in the future, I have a lot of shaped imagination of what it could be like to have your own house, your own car, you know, living a good life, have a good job, that’s basically what I want to do so that’s what motivates me.”*

Our findings indicate that in general the youngsters believe in the value of education to get ahead in life and include the idea of education as a ‘resource of opportunity’ in their ‘imagined future’. They primarily link the role of education to their future labour market opportunities, or as one of the youngsters put it: *‘the more schooling, the better to get work’* (Youngster 26, Portugal). That is, the level of schooling – and particularly the level of the educational credential that comes with it – is considered to influence one’s position on the labour market. As the quotes below illustrate, the youngsters make a direct connection between getting a ‘higher’ educational attainment level and obtaining a ‘good’ or ‘higher ranked’ profession. For these youngsters, this belief in the importance of educational qualifications, and the fear that their current educational level will limit their job options, works as an incentive to develop a wish to continue studying:

**Youngster 12 (the Netherlands):** *“I want to do HBO [tertiary vocational education – ISCED 5] in any case after MBO [senior vocational education - ISCED 3 or 4]. (...). I don’t think I can achieve a lot with MBO. Because you cannot get a good job with MBO.”*

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**Youngster 12 (Poland):** *“I want to go to college so that it’s easier for me to get to the police and so that I could get a higher rank, a better salary.”*

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**Youngster 6 (Spain):** *“If I get a vocational qualification in cookery I can be a kitchen assistant... and if I do an advanced vocational qualification [ISCED 3] I can be a chef... well, then I’ll try to be the chef.”*

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**Youngster 6 (United Kingdom):** *“After I finish school, I probably want to go to university. And I either want to study international Law or Political Economics because that’s what I’m really interested in, I like these subjects (...) [These] will give you a good job in the future.”*

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**Youngster 14 (Belgium):** *“I find that important because I think that you can’t succeed in life without a degree. Who will hire you without degree? Everyone wants the best employees, so they ask for a degree. And if you don’t have a degree, then you won’t find work. That’s why I really want to get a degree; that’s also why I am here [at school].”*

A similar reasoning was found in the account of Youngster 13 (Portugal). By mentioning how ‘two years ago I just wanted to finish the 12<sup>th</sup> [grade]; I wanted to finish the 12<sup>th</sup> [grade] and I was thinking of getting a job; a job anywhere to help my parents. But then I started thinking, then I will not climb the career ladder, I will always stay here’, he clearly links his newly developed plan to continue studying after the 12<sup>th</sup> grade to the possibility of upward mobility on the labour market. The experience of not being able to move forward as a result of holding an insecure position on the labour market is also what seems to motivate some youngsters across the different countries to go back to education, as for instance in the case of Youngster 28 (the Netherlands):

**Youngster 28 (the Netherlands):** *“The reason that I decided that [to go back to school] is because I have worked, here and there. And mostly, it’s your work. Money is temporary. You work this hard and before you know it you don’t have anything anymore. But a diploma is something, you work hard for your future. Money always runs out. But a diploma is something that makes sure you will have work forever. So there is a big chance you will always have money.”*

This quote shows how obtaining a diploma is considered to allow one to move away from a situation in which ‘money is temporary’; to move between insecure lower paying jobs, to a situation where ‘you will always have money’ by securing a better paying job through (re-)entering the labour market with a higher educational qualification. In most cases, the value of education is interpreted in terms of the (perceived) value of educational qualifications on the labour market by youngsters that live in vulnerable positions (see also Part

IV). However, in some cases it is also inspired by a more humanistic perspective:

**Youngster 14 (Spain):** *“I think it is important in terms of success because it is where you spend most of ... I mean: most of the time, the stage in your life where you are going to learn is basically in school. And I think someone who does not give much importance to school, ... for example I see people who are in the first year of ESO [Compulsory Secondary Education] who say, ‘Oh, I want to leave because I do not know if I will be useful at all or not’. I think it’s very important because it gives you shape as a person and it is decisive for the adult life. Not only for the fact that culture is taught... I mean, you learn things, it also forms you as a person, because it is true that when you’re older, there’s something in your learning which is left and that leaves a print...”*

We see as a recurrent theme that the youngsters’ ‘significant others’, and particularly their parents, often play an important role in the development of their aspirations. This may be partly inspired by the dominant discourse that is prevalent in the capitalist, (neo-)liberal society where you have to approach schooling from a more humanistic perspective in order to be successful. The youngsters ‘at risk’ of early school leaving included in this study are a very diverse and heterogeneous group both across as well as within the different countries. Nonetheless, they often – though not always – have in common that they come from families that occupy a ‘vulnerable’ position in society, with parents with a low educational level or even without an educational qualification who hope for a ‘better future’ for their children. The youngsters’ parents share their belief in the value of education; they have high aspirations for their children and want them to do well in school so they can move away from the socially vulnerable position they grew up in. In their accounts, the youngsters often refer explicitly to how their parents want a different kind of life for them and how they believe that having a degree will make that possible:

**Youngster 7 (Spain):** *“And my mother says ‘look where I am, you don’t want this, do something, accomplish something in your life. Don’t be like me, don’t be a waitress, always tired, without...’.”*

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**Youngster 31 (Belgium):** *“My mum does not have a degree herself. Therefore, she always said: ‘I want you to have it’ (...) My mother says: ‘I don’t want you to have the same kind of life’.”*

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**Youngster 10 (Portugal):** *“My mother used to work in a clothing factory. I think it was a factory. However, it closed down. She had a really safe job, she had a [permanent] labour contract. She had a very good salary. But it closed down and after that she has never found a job again. She became a domestic worker [without a formal labour contract]. And my mother says ‘I don’t want you to go through what I’m going through now’. My father has been a construction worker his whole life, until he got back problems and got a job as a security guard. He’s a doorman. And he says ‘I don’t want you to spend a whole day or a morning waiting for the thief to show up’. As far as my father is concerned, I would stick to the 12th grade, but my mother wants me to go to university. The other day I was seeing the Faculty of Police and she said I should enrol [laughs]. She really wants me to finish, to have a future, a [financially] secure life.”*

These quotes resonate with the stories of youngsters in other countries. Furthermore, their parents’ high aspirations for them contributes to the youngsters’ own aspirations and their wish to do well. In the Swedish context, we see how this becomes even stronger in the case of second generation immigrant youth, for whom it was not uncommon to feel indebted to their parents for the sacrifices they were thought to have made with the purpose of giving their children better opportunities in life:

**Youngster 11 (Sweden):** *“When they were small they first lived in Lebanon. And then there was war, so they had to move to Syria (...) And there, there were a lot of problems ...so they never had a chance to study. That is why now my mum and dad’s dream is to see me and my siblings – my little brother and older brother – with a university diploma.”*

Thus, our analyses showed that most youngsters across the different countries and regardless of their educational status emphasize the importance of education and obtaining a degree to get ahead in society and arrive at their dream of a ‘good future’. However, the role education plays in their

perceptions on ways to achieve this 'good future' is not always straightforward. Rather, (mainstream) education is often seen as one important and 'typical' way to achieve this goal, but not necessarily the only way to prepare for a good future. The importance the youngsters attach to educational qualifications is negotiated and contrasted against the value of work (see Part IV), and is not necessarily translated into concrete educational and occupational plans and strategies (see Part II) and/or a high sense of school belonging (see Part III).

## Part II: Educational plans and trajectories

In the second part of this publication we will focus on the relationship youngsters develop with education. We will do so by looking at the ways youngsters translate (or not) their more general aspirations into actual educational and occupational plans and strategies and how this affects the ways youngsters navigate the educational system. Overall, we find that early school leaving as such does not necessarily relate to the youngsters' belief that education does not matter for their personal lives or in society, but should be rather seen as the outcome of a complex process in which the value of formal education is questioned. The latter is clearly visible in the ways youngsters approach education and make choices throughout their educational career.

### Educational and occupational plans and strategies

While the youngsters in our study generally aspire a 'good life' and believe in the value of education as one way to get there, our findings also indicate that these general future aspirations often do not tend to go together with clearly defined, concrete goals or plans to achieve them. Moreover, their parents' high educational aspirations for them do not usually translate into clear guidance, as the parents are often not entirely familiar with the educational options and/or possible strategies. As a result, the youngsters seem to be more dependent on the advice of teachers and peer influences. As we describe in more detail in Part V of this publication, teachers, and to a lesser extent peers, indeed seem to be pivotal in co-constructing the youngsters' educational trajectories. In some cases, the youngsters' teachers can be a source of inspiration or motivation, as for instance in the case of Youngster 11 (Sweden), who specifically refers to one of her teachers as the reason she developed a particular interest:

***Interviewer:** What is interesting about it [referring to the respondent's aspiration to go into social-behavioural sciences]?*

***Youngster 11 (Sweden):** I don't know! It has been like that since the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Ever since we got [name teacher], she inspired me. Then it became fun and good for me."*

Conversely, our findings also indicate that the youngsters often feel their teachers fall short when it comes to motivating them, or in some cases even encouraging them to stay in education. Youngster 1 (Spain) for instance explains how, when she was thinking about quitting school, the school staff *'immediately gave me the paper for my parents to sign. And of course, they didn't say 'no, no, try it''*, thus suggesting that in her experience her teachers did not make any effort to keep her 'on board'. In that sense, we see that the youngsters' teachers – and the educational institutions they attend more generally – are usually not helping the youngsters concretize their aspirations and develop specific educational strategies and plans. Consequently, we could see that when many of the youngsters – at a particular moment in their educational career, a moment which varied across educational systems – have to make crucial (educational) choices, for instance regarding which specific track or study pathway to follow, they seem to experience this as *their* choice, which they have to make on their own:

**Youngster 31 (Belgium):** *"Yes, my mother always said 'You have to make up your own mind about what you want to do, I can't – I'm not going to tell you to go into landscaping or go and wash people in a nursing home. That's something you have to decide, what you want to do'."*

The youngsters want to let their intrinsic motivations lead them in these choices, but this is a challenge for many of them, since they often do not have a clearly defined idea of what it is exactly that they want or how they can get there. Instead, the youngsters sometimes end up making choices that can be considered rather 'random', as for instance in the case of Youngster 27 (Poland), who says about her wish to obtain a qualification in hotel management *'it somehow came to mind. I think I like it.'* These unclearly defined goals or plans also show up in the account of Youngster 3 (Spain) who is trying to decide which upper-vocational degree to choose by assessing what she likes, but has a hard time deciding, as she has no clear view on the occupational path she would prefer:

**Youngster 3 (Spain):** *"I've been looking at upper-level vocational degrees, what's available, the ones... I don't know, what I'd like to do. I like nursing school. I mean I like things but they're all very different"*

*from each other. I like nursing school, I like nutrition, I'd like to be a dietitian and things like that... I don't know what to do!!"*

We found that across countries, the lack of more or less clearly defined plans or strategies tends to result in a considerable amount of changing educational tracks, training courses or occupational orientation, resulting in 'turbulent' educational trajectories. This could be a way to learn more skills and have more distinct learning experiences, and later on, make more conscious choices, but could also work counterproductively insofar as youngsters then do not really master any subject in a profound way. A clear example of this is Youngster 29 (Poland) who, after leaving mainstream secondary education with a lower secondary education (ISCED 2) degree, had already received a two-month training as a car mechanic and a seven-month training as a salesperson via an on-the-job training programme, and whose current plan was to become a chimney sweeper through the same programme. However, even before completing the training programme, he already doubted whether this job would be the best way to go, and was already thinking about another professional orientation again:

**Youngster 29 (Poland):** *"I'm really interested in it [chimney sweeper]. This is giving people safety, taking care of safety. I know, it's a dirty job, and I don't like getting dirty, but if there is such a need, I will get dirty. But it's important to like this job. And I do like this, this profession."*  
(...)

**Interviewer:** *"But do you think that you will earn your living as a sweeper?"*

**Youngster 29:** *"Generally, I don't think so, but I plan to have another profession in the future, as a driver. I have always dreamt of working as a bus driver."*

The absence of clear goals is also considered to influence the youngsters' motivation to put an effort in school, as illustrated by the quote of Youngster 13 (Belgium):

**Youngster 13 (Belgium):** *"It was, for example during a class, I don't remember exactly which one, and it was like 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' We had to make an entire PowerPoint presentation and stuff about that. And I didn't know exactly, and then,*

*yes I gave multiple options and stuff. But back then I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do. And from the start they [her classmates] were like 'I want to be a professor, I want to be a doctor' that kind of thing. So I thought 'they all have something in mind', so I also think that's the reason why you will put more effort into school because you are focusing on one goal. And I didn't really have a goal."*

Rather than being informed by well-defined plans or strategies to achieve their future aspirations, the youngsters often use their personal networks (particularly their families) and tend to make educational and occupational choices that are similar to the path followed by the people in those networks. This suggests the importance of and need for role models for youngsters. Youngster 26 (Sweden), for instance, explains how he chose a particular course *'because my mum also did this course herself (...) so she motivated me to get in, or to apply to this course.'* Also Youngster 19 (Sweden) refers to her mothers' educational choices when talking about her plans:

**Interviewer:** (...) *"is it still nail technology, like this beauty thing that you are going for in the future?"*

**Youngster 19 (Sweden):** *"Mm, with like nails and..."*

**Interviewer:** *"Yes, have you always wanted to become that?"*

**Youngster 19:** *"Ever since I was 13, since my mum did the training."*

The role of the youngsters' families in the choices they make is also apparent in the account of Youngster 4 (Spain), which shows how the youngster's choice is inspired by an experience of helping his brother-in-law:

**Youngster 4 (Spain):** *"Electrician because I know all about cables and those things. And my brother-in-law once came to fix the installation under the garages, and he had the cables, I helped him, neutral, ground lead...(...). Cars work with electricity. I think first I'll do electricity and afterwards plumbing, and if not, mechanics. As I already know about electricity, I'll link it in with mechanics. And survive."*

Besides being influenced by what the youngsters see and the information they have at hand in their personal environments, particular events or crucial moments in the youngsters' lives may also play a central role in shaping the choices they make. Specific internship experiences, for instance, may become



key in the youngsters' assessment of the pathway they are following (see also Part IV). When the internship experience is not what they expected, they often re-evaluate their occupational aspiration and readily adjust their plans, which can result in switching between tracks or study pathways:

**Youngster 3 (Spain):** *“Well, when I started I saw it as... I mean, I am interested in being a hairstylist, but now I realise that I don't want to do it my whole life. Because it's a hard job, it's hard on your bones and I don't want to spend my entire life... I can't see myself as a hairstylist my entire life!”*

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**Youngster 8 (the Netherlands):** *“Then I did care ... in level three but I didn't like it. With elderly. I did that for half a year but then I thought: I can better switch now. And then I could only start in February. So eh... Then I did pedagogical assistant. (...) [Before, when] I did elderly care, and as part of that, my internships, I could see that it wasn't something for me really. But now I know with internships, I'm doing an internship then here at the children's day-care. Yes, that's just fun.”*

Internship experiences, on the other hand, can also inspire youngsters, particularly those who are considering leaving education to start working, to adjust their plans and stay in school as they come to realize the experience on the labour market is not in line with their aspirations:

**Youngster 1 (Belgium):** *“I just wanted to quit everything. School and work, but I didn't know what it really is, to work. Would that be difficult? Would that be easy? I only thought about working, but now I know more about it etc. So now I think I really want to have a good job. Back then I just wanted to work. But now I don't think so; if I go to work, I want to have a good job etc.”*

To conclude, we see that youngsters often do not have clear plans or strategies to concretize their general future aspirations and guide them in their (educational) trajectory. Moreover, they also do not always seem to receive the expected guidance from teachers or other school staff in this process. As a result of this, their educational and occupational choices seem to be influenced to a large extent by their personal network and particular experiences, rather than by well-defined strategic goals. At the same time,

however, our analysis showed that across the different countries youngsters' aspirations, choices, and envisioned future options are also shaped by the social forces and specific circumstances they have to respond to. Particularly their financial circumstances, the perceived labour market opportunities (or lack thereof) and the sometimes complicated personal contexts are seen to have an important impact.

## Educational trajectories

Early school leaving can be a final outcome of a long trajectory in education, but is often also a temporary phase, a break, or simply part of the trajectory of young peoples' school career. It is important to note that there are a lot of differences between educational systems in how the educational trajectories are actually shaped by educational practices and structures. This is shown for instance in the possibility (or not) to (re-)enrol in or change to (particular) educational institutions/programmes and the consequences of those changes for young peoples' future educational and professional opportunities. In general, one of the main challenges appears to be that groups of 'vulnerable' students – regardless of the specificities of their vulnerability – encounter difficulties during transitions within these educational systems during their educational career. A main challenge for these vulnerable youth is the desire or need to make so many choices at various stages of their educational career; their lives hold so many discouraging experiences in education or chances to go 'off road' and leave school early. Our findings indicate that across the different countries, the educational trajectories of the young people at risk of early school leaving are very heterogeneous, both in terms of the routes they follow in education as well as in terms of the reasons for being at risk of early school leaving. For example, the youngsters' school careers include changes from childcare to hairdresser or from office to car mechanics, often in various kinds of educational institutions and/or different schools.

It is exactly this heterogeneity within these educational trajectories and the non-linear and – by policy makers – unforeseen routes throughout education that seems to be similar across the countries. That is, the group under study does not generally follow the 'routes' as originally designed by educational policy makers; they change track/field of study/program/training and schools more often than intended by policy makers or school staff. It is exactly this

heterogeneity of educational trajectories and the 'not so logical' routes throughout education that we found to be similar across the different countries. This heterogeneity – also within countries, type of students, social/ethnic groups – demonstrates the complexity of the phenomenon of early school leaving. Furthermore, this shows that the reasons for being at risk of early school leaving, taking a break from school or actually leaving school without educational qualifications altogether, are often multifaceted, but could, however, result in very similar trajectories:

**Interviewer:** *“Okay, what was it that made you leave upper secondary school then?”*

**Youngster 28 (Sweden):** *“It was my family situation, plus the fact that I was really tired of school.”*

**Interviewer:** *“But when you left upper secondary school then, did you receive any support from the school to like prevent you from leaving school early, or was it something that you just like decided that you wanted to do?”*

**Youngster 28:** *“I got support in the beginning, but then they just threw me out, literally. Without any warning, nothing. Okay, they just expelled me.”*

**Interviewer:** *“That seems quite hard maybe”*

**Youngster 28:** *“Yes, yes but it was.”*

**Interviewer:** *“Was it because you hadn't been there or something or?”*

**Youngster 28:** *“I was registered as ‘present’ because I had been going to the workplace where I was doing my practical training but because I hadn't been to school, they threw me out.”*

As shown in this quote of this Swedish youngster, in her case the reasons for leaving school early were difficult family situation, school fatigue and disciplinary problems in school. As shown below, similar accounts were found in other countries as well:

**Interviewer:** *“How did you make your decision [for this training]? Did you go to open [school] days?”*

**Youngster 15 (the Netherlands):** *“I didn't go to open days no, but in the fourth [year of lower secondary school] when I was in high school I wanted to become a hairdresser and then I chose that...I worked in*

*my aunt's hair salon so I rather enjoyed it. But yes, then I didn't finish that as well, at the last moment, because I couldn't find a model. I needed to find a 'European' male hair model [referring to a hair model that needed to have specific hair features associated with 'European' – or 'white' – males]. I don't really have that in my family circle or friends circle. So that was rather difficult. But for the rest, I like it but with that you also don't get that much work, being a hairdresser. And then eh I just let it be, I went to Tourism, where I applied. I did Tourism for a little – less than a year – and in April, no February last year, they looked then for example if you had enough grades, if your grades were good enough to continue to the next year. That wasn't the case and so I got another chance until July. Still wasn't sufficient, I still missed some points, and then I wasn't allowed continue. And then I went to Care.”*

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**Youngster 26 (Portugal):** *“My path could have been better. I fell a little behind. I was also angry. I concluded 4th grade, and my friends all went together to School X. My mother didn't let me go with them because it was far from home, and put me here in the private school. I was a bit angry. I started to do some stupid things, leaving studies behind and I failed in 7th grade and twice in 9th grade. I stopped those two years. That was when I came here. I failed in regular education because of the negative grades and in the professional education because of the absences.”*

In several countries we can see how in particular the transition into becoming a parent – especially for females – complicates youngsters' educational trajectory as they need to prioritize taking care of their child and do not always have (affordable) day-care at their disposal, as for instance in the case of Youngster 23 (Spain) and Youngster 26 (Portugal).

**Youngster 23 (Spain):** *“Now I can't [go back to school] because the nursery school hours are very limited. It's from nine in the morning until eleven forty five. What can I do in two hours? I work two hours and leave?! Because if not, the kid, who will pick him up? I cannot leave him eating lunch at school because just the meals plus the fees are 2000 euros per month.”*

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**Youngster 26 (Portugal):** *“I want to continue studying but now with the boy I will wait a bit. (...) For now, I can no longer go straight to university because he is still very little, but as soon as he grows he will not prevent me from that. (...) the near future is (...) I want to continue working and I also want to go to university, and I think you can reconcile one thing with the other.”*

As shown in this last quote, the fact that the youngsters have a child to take care of does not necessarily mean they abandon their wish to get an educational qualification altogether. Rather, their current situation forces them to adjust their plans and postpone their educational aspirations to a later (undefined) stage of their lives. The account of Youngster 27 (the Netherlands) furthermore shows how having a child can also become a motivation to return to education to set an example for the child and work towards what is considered ‘a good future’:

**Youngster 27 (the Netherlands):** *“I was dependent on social benefit. So I was like, this is not what I want. I want a good future, I want to be a good example for my son. Show him that his father is not lazy. That he knows: ‘where there is a will, there is a way’. And I always wanted to work in logistics. It pays well. And for the situation I was in, I saw it as the only way out. Because it is a quick study, it pays well and I like to work with my hands. I like being busy, so yes it seemed like something for me.”*

To conclude, the reasons to change between programmes, institutions and tracks should be seen as the outcome of a combination of complexly inter-playing reasons. In our sample, most youngsters have very similar educational trajectories in the sense that these trajectories are very diverse and include a considerable number of changes of tracks/fields of study/schools, resulting in heterogeneous and non-linear educational trajectories. These turbulent educational trajectories appear to stem from a lack of guidance by schools (as well as by parents – aforementioned), a lack of clearly defined educational and occupational plans and strategies, a lack of interest in school and disciplinary problems, as well as the difficulties the youngsters encounter to find their way in the educational system.

## Part III: Relationship with school

As already shown in Part I, most youngsters do find education important to get ahead in society. Nevertheless, our analyses further suggest that youngsters are connected to education in very varying and complex ways. While the importance of education in society is not necessarily downplayed by the youngsters, the importance of education for their lives is constantly negotiated and does not directly relate to their sense of school belonging. During our interviews, we found that in most cases, there appears to be a lack of interest in actually going to school. Youngsters say things like: *'For me nothing is important, [I go to school] because I have to'* (Youngster 12, Belgium) or *'I do find car mechanics very interesting, but it's just school that I don't like. It never appealed to me, school.'* (Youngster 11, Belgium). Youngsters' sense of school belonging varies considerably according to their personal experiences, interests and aspirations, moment in time, social networks and relationships, and is generally rather low. This means that youngsters do not reject education as such, but they do not support all aspects of the schools in which they are or were enrolled, which seems to have an impact on their sense of school belonging. Based on our analyses, mainly three factors can be distinguished to understand the differences in youngsters' sense of school belonging: 1) type of educational institution or programme, 2) personal and overall experiences of treatment by school staff, and 3) the perceived value of school for the acquisition of the actual skills and knowledge needed to succeed in their future lives. We will discuss them separately in the following sections.

A first factor that seems to have an impact on youngsters' sense of school belonging is the type of educational institution or training one is enrolled in (see also the RESL.eu Project Paper 7 and Publication 3). While comparisons across countries are hard to make based on the qualitative data of this sample, one central finding is that in each country, variation was found in the sense of school belonging depending on the educational institution/training. Remarkable is that there appear to be changes in the youngsters' sense of belonging, especially after changing educational institution/training due to the distinct approach and organization of courses and school life. For instance, when enrolled in alternative learning arenas, most youngsters seem to enjoy the more mature treatment by school personnel and these systems in general

(see also RESL.eu Publication 3); they also appreciate their own personal development over time. The students of the general upper secondary school for adults at a Continuing Education Centre in Poland, for example, talked about how their attitudes to education changed. They are more aware that their aspirations for the future require school attendance in the present. They relate this partly to the presence of other youngsters that are in a similar situation (e.g., who also had a break in education or repeated grades in previous schools) and the shared feeling that nobody judges them on the basis of their appearance or past experiences. They feel they returned to education with a 'blank slate':

**Youngster 31 (Poland):** *“Now suddenly I am organized; I want to learn, I want to develop, I do not want to sit and do nothing, I prefer to take care of my development etc. I have already entered this stage and I'm glad that it's now, because usually people come to it later, really. At least I think so. So I definitely changed for the better now.”*

However, losing a teacher with whom a personal relationship had developed (e.g. when the school switches one respected and liked teacher of a given subject to a different teacher) can influence the students' decision whether or not to continue learning at the particular institution. This was the case for this Continuing Education Centre: the youngsters interviewed expressed disappointment with the fact that some of the teachers conducting classes with their groups have been changed, although they were generally satisfied with the school and the program. This even resulted in one of them deciding to take a break in education for one semester.

A second main factor that appears to matter for youngsters' sense of school belonging is the prevailing school culture and the relationship youngsters develop with school staff. The relationship youngsters establish with school staff, mainly teachers, could be very decisive for youngsters' sense of school belonging. For example, Youngster 17 (Portugal) mentions the following:

**Youngster 17 (Portugal):** *“Teachers had different ways of explaining things and motivating us... certain ways... For example, the Math teachers sometimes took math games to the classroom and I think that we, by doing those things, were more willing to carry on studying. More practical pedagogies motivate us better. I think that schools should*

*have more activities of that kind, extracurricular activities that helped students...enjoy being in school more, not the study itself but to like school more. I think there are certain activities that school should have to make students enjoy being there, not only to study but to be in the school itself. If certain things were like that, many students would certainly not drop out of school."*

By contrast, not feeling like you belong could be the result of a negative experience with school staff, which in turn tends to foster negative attitudes towards school and education in general. Or as put by Youngster 10 (Sweden):

**Youngster 10 (Sweden):** *"I was really in conflict with them [teacher and headmaster]. And I think that was also a big reason why I didn't want to go to school because I had problems with them. Like they said, they told me that 'you are not a part of the class, you don't belong here, no one likes you anyway'. Yes so it was really sick, then they said that you can't come. Because no one likes you in the class anyway, you don't have any friends, you are not part of the class."*

Furthermore, the importance of feeling connected to school was found to affect the amount of support one was willing to accept or ask.

When the relationships youngsters establish with their school actors are characterized as problematic, this could in some cases also be seen as an externalization of students' issues with the 'typically' structured school culture and treatment of students in schools. This was the case for youngster 12 (the Netherlands):

**Interviewer:** *"How do you like it at MBO [vocational track] now?"*

**Youngster 12 (the Netherlands):** *"Well yes, it's alright."*

**Interviewer:** *"That doesn't sound very enthusiastic."*

**Youngster 12:** *"Well [laughs] that's because I don't like school in general."*

**Interviewer:** *"Why not?"*

**Youngster 12:** *"Just, getting up early, finishing things before the deadline and eh then a subject always gives you stress. Will I finish in time, or not? Or, those group assignments, when someone doesn't do*



*it, then you get angry at him. Like, I don't like school anyway but if I eh compare it to other people then we have a great class...Everyone is good with each other and we often do fun things together outside of school." With a big group. So actually I have nothing to complain about, but yes I just cannot like it..."*

There is a considerable number of youngsters that experience or have experienced some kind of school fatigue. This is also shown by Youngster 11 (Belgium), who states *'I find that this school, it's not my thing, but you have to, for your diploma. [To have] a good future. If you quit now, then, you won't have a job later'*, but also *'I have to drag myself [to school]'*. In many cases, school fatigue is mentioned to relate to a lack of school belonging. Youngsters frequently equalize this 'typical' school culture with a lack of mature treatment and the reasons they give relate to both institutional and school-specific factors. Institutional factors include an overall treatment of students in schools that is very strict and punctual and allows little freedom, receiving notes when being too late, or having to present a doctor's note for being absent.

**Interviewer:** *"Yes. And do you have any problems with something? Like, you need extra classes or something or?"*

**Youngster 15 (the Netherlands):** *"No, no, no. I don't really have problems with anything, it's more like that I occasionally fall behind with things because sometimes I'm not at school. Because then I'm - but now I see that I have to be at school a lot too."*

**Interviewer:** *"Well why are you not at school?"*

**Youngster 15:** *"Mostly due to getting up early, I fail at that. And yes, sometimes I'm ill, yes that happens too! But getting up, it's really a problem. And I just had a conversation with them like that I eh that I have to improve that.. I'm already missing a few things."*

School-specific factors often entail the experiences with one particular teacher in a school or the specific rules in a school. The immature treatment the youngsters experience is often described as very useless, such as *'you still have to walk a kilometre to get inside the building, you have to be silent, you need to walk straight. That's really, really stupid.'* (Youngster 23, Belgium).

For youngsters' school career, the effects of these rules and disciplinary practices – which partly constitute the existing school cultures and are mostly

characterized by little or no room for the voice of students – often coincide with, lead to, and/or increase the level of ‘problematic’ school behaviour, like skipping individual classes when youngsters oversleep or when they do not feel like being at school:

**Youngster 33 (Poland):** *“For example, we finish classes at 2 p.m., but history is the last lesson. Nobody likes history, so ‘let’s go for a beer’, but I am at school from the morning and... or for example, ‘let’s go for a beer during the long break, we’ll skip a few classes’. (...) So sometimes I wouldn’t even make it and the classes would finish. And it just was generally like that and it was because of where I live that I was skipping so many classes. Because I wake up at 10 a.m. and I have classes until 12, so by the time I eat and leave the house, classes are over.”*

Such behaviour and attitudes clearly do not contribute to succeeding in school. The immediate school environment appears to be problematic for many youngsters, and this is even more the case when schools are socially and ethnically segregated. Youngsters are easily influenced by their immediate school environment, which further shapes their educational trajectory and their overall ideas concerning the instrumental value of education for their personal lives.

A third factor that influences the youngsters’ sense of school belonging is the perceived instrumental value of education for their personal lives<sup>6</sup>. These discourses refer to a lack of usefulness of education received and the perception of discontinuity between academic learning and real life social demands: school learning does not prepare for real life and does not yield the same outcomes for everyone. For example, Youngster 5 (United Kingdom) stated: *‘I mean like some of the lessons I just felt like I didn’t want to feel like doing cause it wasn’t really something I wanted to do in the future’*. Furthermore, the relationship between youngsters’ sense of school belonging seems to relate to the balance between ‘learning things’ and ‘preparing for a future’:

<sup>6</sup> See also Mickelson, R.A. (1990). The attitude-achievement paradox among black adolescents. *Sociology of Education*, 63(1), 44-61.

**Youngster 3 (Portugal):** *“I liked school a lot when I was younger, when I learned new things. Now we have to think about school...how we are going to get a job in the future. Before, it was all about learning things. I was a much better student in primary and middle school. As time went by I started to lose some interest in school.”*

Young peoples’ educational and occupational decisions influence their sense of school belonging. For example, Youngster 15 (the Netherlands), stated ‘No, because it doesn’t really suit me, but I have to take this route to get where I want to go’, suggesting that she generally disliked going to school but understood the value of getting a degree for future life. While the value of getting a degree is hardly disputed, they challenge the ways in which going to a particular school actually contributes to learning:

**Youngster 28 (Portugal):** *“I think that not all those who are great students succeed in life. I think the school does not teach everything, it only teaches one part... The school is a structure. Having a certain personality is also important for the labour market and so on. [...] I think the school in itself just as it is at this point does not give everything. There is something missing.”*

The perceived instrumental value of education depends on the actual courses followed, the type of job one wants to prepare for (if specified) and the actual organization and curricula of educational programmes. Especially being able to gain some work experience through school (i.e., internships) is mentioned to increase the motivation to go to school and is clearly seen as an added value of formal education. Internships prepare students for a particular domain of work and are specialized.

In sum, we see that despite the overall high value the youngsters under study attach to education, most youngsters have a difficult time actually translating these aspirations into educational and occupational plans and strategies, which is reflected in their very heterogeneous educational trajectories. The absence of a positive relationship with school staff and the punctual school environment that only marginally incorporates the viewpoints and voices of students seems to have a negative impact on the youngsters’ sense of school belonging, which further complicates their educational trajectories. The heterogeneity and the relative high level of inconsistency in educational

choices seems to relate to youngsters' ideas concerning the value of education and their sense of school belonging. The institutional arrangements of most of the educational systems included in this study put considerable weight on youngsters to make choices, in order to have a logical and consistent school career that prepares them for their future. This finding clearly demonstrates institutions' inability to help young people develop strategies and plans in the absence of parental support. Finally, youngsters' trajectories are even more challenged by the lure of the labour market or youngsters' perceptions of the functioning of the labour market, which will be discussed in the next part.

## Part IV: Work experience

In the fourth part of this publication, we will mainly focus on the importance of 'work' in all of its aspects for the lives of the youngsters involved. We will not only look at previous formal and student employment experiences, but also examine work-based learning experiences, such as apprenticeships, shorter periods of internships and simulated workplace experiences. Moreover, we will include the role occupational aspirations could play during youngsters' school careers.

Before doing so, we should note that the importance and opportunity to find 'work', in addition to education, differed considerably across countries. For instance, in Sweden, it is very common for young people – even those with a relatively higher socio-economic background – to be working part time while studying. Most of the youngsters who were interviewed have at least some work experience either from paid work or voluntary work, and several found jobs either through their own contacts (family, friends etc.) or through the municipalities' work schemes for young people. These habits with regard to working contrast with those in other countries, where there appears to be a stronger relationship between the type of education and the type of work. For example, in Poland, the youngsters who participate in general education seem to have all sorts of jobs that do not require specific qualifications or higher education (e.g. waitress, salesperson, factory worker, telephone consultant). Youngsters who participate in vocational training have more experience in jobs that are in line with their study pathway. In general, the cross-country variations depended on the organization of each type of education and the number of hours one has to be enrolled in school. This can be illustrated by looking at the Polish case where students who are enrolled in vocational training seem to have 'sufficient' time to work part-time, while students in the general upper secondary school for adults have a shorter school week (i.e., the classes are only organized three days a week) which allows them to work and provide an income for themselves (and families).

Apart from differences in the working habits of youth across countries, labour market conditions vary as well and also affect youngsters' relationship with education. Our findings indicate that the youngsters' aspirations are shaped or re-shaped by the perceived local labour market opportunities, or lack

thereof. Particularly a context of economic crisis and high (youth) unemployment rates, as for instance in Portugal and Spain, may on the one hand strengthen youngsters' beliefs that an educational qualification will improve their labour market opportunities – *'those who have more qualifications have more chances than those who have fewer'* (Youngster 13, Spain) – and thus motivate them to remain in education. On the other hand, these high unemployment rates may also disrupt this belief that educational qualifications lead to better job opportunities. That is, as the labour market opportunities are perceived to be very limited even for those with a (higher education) diploma, youngsters may lose their motivation to continue education and instead start focusing on getting 'any job available':

**Youngster 28 (Portugal):** *"the key is to look for, to work in whatever shows up, to get experience, to make money to build your own business. (...) I think I will have to get used to any kind of job. I do not want any particular job. It will be what comes up, what I will find later... At that point, I will find a job."*

Due to this variation across countries and distinct labour market conditions, we will mainly focus on how the life spheres of work and education could possibly interplay with and affect each other. Education may serve many functions in society, and can be seen as a way to empower youngsters, make them citizens and provide them the knowledge and skills they need to survive and 'succeed' in future life. Youngsters are being trained and become more specialized over the course of their educational career. However, as degrees are crucial for getting a job and are perceived to secure one's future on the labour market, many youngsters tend to have a more pragmatic approach to education and mainly interpret it as 'training for work', expecting to acquire certain skills and qualifications needed for employment:

**Youngster 29 (Spain):** *"I would like to continue studying, of course. I want to train so that I can work and live a normal life. [...] The path was not ESO [Obligatory Secondary Education] but we wanted to study and train in a different way."*

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**Youngster 27 (United Kingdom):** *"It is [important], because otherwise you cannot get the skills needed for you to get a job,*

*especially in London. If you don't have the skills, they will not employ you."*

Even though the youngsters generally believe in the value of education as a resource of opportunity, we see that they sometimes seem to tone down the importance of an educational qualification and start to prioritize other aspects over continuing with their schooling. Particularly, when youngsters experience being 'tired of schooling', they may feel the need for a 'change of scenery' and start emphasizing earning money over getting an educational qualification, as illustrated by the message of Youngster 27 (Portugal) that 'money talks louder':

**Youngster 27 (Portugal):** *"Money talks louder. I have to give up something to go to another. I am tired of school. There have been many consecutive years in school. Now, it is time to rest the brain a little from school and go to another environment, which is the world of work."*

Entering the labour market can thus become an objective in itself that becomes detached from the idea of an educational qualification as a 'ticket to success', for instance, by stating that finding a job is '*really difficult. Even with diploma, it is hard*' (Youngster 25, Belgium). While they do not necessarily entirely give up on the idea of education or training, studying becomes an option among other options, rather than a means to an end:

**Youngster 18 (Spain):** *"I would sign up for CFGM [Initial Formal VET Studies], and while signing up for it, I would look for a job. If I found a job, I would leave CFGM."*

Resulting from our analyses, we see that the function of education is by most youngsters under study more narrowly interpreted as 'a preparation for the labour market'. This seems even more the case for this group of youngsters that are at risk of early school leaving, as they are mainly enrolled in educational programmes or trainings that prepare them for immediate labour market entry (and in most cases not for higher education). As many youngsters are of the opinion that education mainly matters to prepare them for the labour market, work experiences become increasingly important. This

is particularly the case for many of the youngsters in our sample that already left school without educational qualification.

Based on our analyses we can distinguish two main ways in which work experiences appear to play a role in the educational trajectories of young people at risk of early school leaving. The first way relates to the idea that education can only be valued as a preparation for youngsters' professional futures, and therefore increases youngsters' instrumental value of education and school engagement. Second, the necessity to contribute to the family income could hinder youngsters' educational trajectories substantially. Feeling obliged to work limits the amount of time and energy one is able to spend on studying and putting effort into (going to) school.

### Negotiating the importance of educational qualifications and work (experience)

Our analyses revealed that for youngsters at risk of early school leaving, the relationship between work and education is constantly debated and negotiated, which in turn affects their school engagement, educational choices and aspirations. The relationship between work and education appears to affect youngsters' school career: not only in the sense that work experience can influence youngsters' decisions to leave school early, but also in the sense that work experiences (school-related or not) can affect youngsters' engagement in school through an increase in intrinsic or extrinsic motivation to go to school (e.g., youngsters may see or are told at the workplace that school is important). Overall, the value of education appears to be contrasted against the value of work experience. These perceptions about the relative importance of education, compared to work experience, is not necessarily in line with the overall importance attached to educational credentials on the labour market. Nevertheless, these perceptions are very much alive in the discourses of the youngsters under study:

**Youngster 5 (Portugal):** *“A diploma is always important, because employers always see the diploma as a proof that you have concluded something... and succeeded... if they have the diploma it is because they have also done something to get it... I think a degree is a bit, seeing things, for a piece of paper.... I guess it should not be so and I*



*think you should rather be seen for your competences... There are many people who have diplomas, and there are other people who do not have [diplomas] and they are much more competent, and know more things.”*

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**Youngster 24 (Sweden):** *“But then like when we came to 8th grade or 9th grade and then we thought, people thought that... it was a great school, in contrast to [school C]. Yes, usually, people went to [school C] where they thought that it is easier to get grades there and that they went to the school to get grades. That seemed more important than actually learning.”*

These accounts seem to indicate that credentials are found to be highly valued on the labour market, however, youngsters do not seem to always ‘feel’ this importance in their everyday lives. The continuous balance between staying in school and entering the labour market is often triggered by the idea that ‘work experience’ is very important as shown by Youngster 25 (Spain):

*“I finished ESO [Obligatory Secondary Education] and started to look for work. (...) but I couldn’t find anything so I started to look for a training course and I started to study mechanics, the PQPI [Initial Professional Qualification Programme]. (...) at the beginning I had the idea of doing a course that could allow me to get some work experience... get some experience that would help me to find a job...”*

Different kinds of work-based learning and other experiences with work are highly valued for deciding on one’s occupational choice and gaining work-related experience, as shown by Youngster 9 (Belgium): *‘And I really needed it; if I hadn’t done the internship, then I’d have difficulties finding a job in the future. (...) Experience means a lot to me, to get a job.’* Or by Youngster 19 (the Netherlands):

**Youngster 19 (the Netherlands):** *“Well, first, my goal was to go into health care, so I followed that study, and I felt like: ‘yes, that’s where my heart is, that’s what I want to do’. But during the study, we didn’t get any practical experience, and because of that, my job applications were rejected. They told me: ‘you meet the requirements, [but] you don’t have any practical experience, so honestly, we can’t use you’.*

*And that happened at several jobs for which I applied. And you know, at some point you think yeah, I would even stock shelves at [name of a supermarket], so to speak, just to have something. So again, I am chased by the bad experiences from my previous study. And yes, then again, I am confronted with it and it is a confirmation that the education was very bad. So that was a bummer. But well, I have been at the right place for half a year now. I like it here. I just don't earn that much money. But well, I was spoiled with my salary at the hospital... I already wasn't having a good experience with the study, but by starting to study again, I was confronted with it again. So I thought to myself, yeah, actually the money for the study is just wasted, I think it's a shame that I started that study at all."*

These accounts already show how much the youngsters value work experience. Some youngsters even take this a step further and mention that the lack of work experience was one of the reasons they left school early:

**Youngster 23 (Belgium):** *"Like I said: I think the lack of [work] experience had a bigger influence on my decision to drop out [than the economic crisis]. I think, that [the lack of work experience] is the reason why I can't find a job. If I had even just had a few student jobs while I was enrolled at school, I would have gained some experience. If I had done that earlier, and then if I dropped out now and started applying for jobs, I think I would have had a better chance than I have right now."*

While valuing work experience considerably, there appears to be quite some variation in the actual gaining of proper and relevant work-related experience that helps secure the youngsters' position on the labour market and future lives. Not all youngsters experience a beneficial interplay between work and education. Over the course of their career, the acquisition of work experience makes youngsters reconsider the importance they attach to work experience and educational qualifications. In practice, the actual work experiences of many youngsters that (so far) lack educational qualifications seem to be largely shaped by the fact that they 1) have to carry out particular types of jobs and 2) many of them lack proper work experience, and 3) other obstacles they have to deal with when finding a job, such as the lack of clearly defined aspirations, behavioural issues and discrimination on the labour market.

First, the jobs (all types of jobs) the youngsters under study have access to, are often characterized by poor working conditions ('the dirty jobs'), lack of 'growth' opportunities, a lot of job insecurity resulting in many job changes, and a high level of difficulty of the tasks one has to carry out (broadly interpreted), as shown by the following accounts:

**Youngster 39 (United Kingdom):** *"Not like a full job. But sometimes my mum's friend needed help with his work, [and] I'd help him or something like that, but that was it. [...] Like a mixture of everything. Between like work in driveways, painting, decorating, a mixture of everything. Helping a few times. But nothing like full time work."*

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**Interviewer:** *"Are you looking for a job now?"*

**Youngster 22 (Spain):** *"I've just started. Well actually I quit my last [job]. I was running around delivering pizzas, it's hourly wages, you get paid by commission, not ... a salary. Since I don't have my own motorcycle and it broke down and all, I quit. I got tired."*

Many of these jobs are considered unappealing for their lack of good working conditions; youngsters are also looking for more job security and better wages. Additionally, even when youngsters find a job, there is a lot of job insecurity and many of them have to change jobs quite fast. Because of this relatively fast turnover in jobs, these jobs often do not significantly contribute to the youngsters' career in one particular field of expertise.

Second, many youngsters cannot rely on proper educational qualifications, but also lack the required work experience to find a proper (student) job or even apprenticeship/internship. As a consequence, despite their preference to work, for many youngsters without educational qualification it is really difficult to find a job, as shown by Youngster 18 (Belgium): *'I worked [last year], not fulltime or something like that, but I did have a weekend job with a baker, but I did not find a real job.'* When youngsters try to find a job on the labour market, many of them expect more from their work experiences that they actually get out of it:

**Youngster 25 (Portugal):** *"The employment experience changed what I thought about the job market. I thought it was not so hard and with... so responsible and it changed me a lot. The mentality of the*

*person changes, we have to be always attentive to the schedules, we have to arrive early, always do the right things, not to be distracted. It changed a lot.”*

Third, we see that personal challenges related to the youngsters’ often complicated home contexts and personal circumstances can also influence and constrain their aspirations, and limit the choices (made) available to them. For instance, one can only gain the appropriate work experience in a particular field and start to build up a career, if one knows in which field one wants to work in. Also, many youngsters have problems remaining employed due to perceived disciplinary problems at school, or have problems actually finding a job, for instance due to a previous encounter with juvenile court or due to health-related issues. Having an immigrant background and experiences of discrimination on the labour market are also obstacles some of the youngsters face when looking for a job:

**Interviewer:** *“What kind of troubles do you find while you are looking for a job?”*

**Youngster 23 (Spain):** *“I encounter many troubles... The veil...yes, because they see you and say to you... Well, when you go to a job interview you can tell they do not have confidence in you... They have a bad facial expression... Well, not bad, but it’s evident that they are thinking you are not the person that they were expecting ...”*

**Interviewer:** *“So, do you really think that the veil would not be a problem if there were a real need for employees?”*

**Youngster 23:** *“Yes”*

**Interviewer:** *“So, you think the veil is just an excuse to--”*

**Youngster 23:** *“Yes, yes... Just an excuse (...) the veil doesn’t speak about you, it doesn’t say if you are a bad person or... well, I don’t know... They only see that you’re an immigrant, a stranger...”*

Thus, despite the fact that youngsters overall value the role of education, social forces and personal circumstances play an important role in the youngsters’ aspirations and choices made available to them. However, as the findings in this last section illustrate, this impact is not straightforward and can function in diverse ways for different youngsters. Furthermore, youngsters have different reasons for and levels of negotiating or toning down the

importance of an educational qualification, and potentially prioritizing employment over education.

### Work as hindrance for attaining educational qualifications

Work is for most of the youngsters under study very important and its value is often interpreted in relation to the value of education. However, despite the value youngsters attach to (future) employment and the ways it could inspire them to achieve better in school, develop their aspirations and regain their interest in schooling, there are many ways in which work was found to hinder youngsters' educational career. The most common hindrances are: 1) when young people have to work to contribute to their family income, they have less time to put into school, and 2) work experience or having a job in some cases diminishes the perceived need to continue education.

The fact that youngsters will sometimes prioritize early entrance to the labour market over an educational qualification can also relate to the financial conditions they find themselves in. Especially when youngsters, for whatever reason, have to generate an income it may be appealing or even necessary for them to adjust their plans and to exchange education for employment. In this context, educational systems that provide work-based learning or paid apprenticeship opportunities can provide the youngsters with an opportunity to continue their education. In the accounts of these youngsters in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom for instance, we see that youngsters choose this option as it allows them to combine learning with earning money:

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**Youngster 30 (the Netherlands):** *“If it’s possible, a working-learning route. Actually, it would be better to do working-learning. (...) I still have to pay that debt.”*

**Youngster 35 (United Kingdom):** *“It was on the basis that I could earn money and learn at the same time, and then not leave the particular education route with no experience and be told, ‘oh yeah, you have the theoretical knowledge, but you have nothing to apply’.”*

On the other hand, the often low pay of apprenticeships could make this route not feasible to the youngsters that need an income the most, as shown for example in the account of Youngster 15 (United Kingdom) who emphasizes

that the financial aspect is something he always needs to take into account, which consequently limits the options available to him:

**Youngster 15 (United Kingdom):** *“Just the amount you earn on apprenticeship -- it’s below minimum wage, isn’t it. It’s just like for me, we struggle with money, so money is an important aspect as to why I would go to work and why I’d go do an apprenticeship, or why I’d go to university. So I need to ... I just try to keep that in mind when I’m trying to make an important decision like that, you know.”*

Although the necessity to add to the family income is not questioned by any of these youngsters, this heavily impacts the effort they are able to put into school and, consequently, shapes their educational careers, as shown by the quote of this youngster:

**Interviewer:** *“And why don’t you want to go to school for now?”*

**Youngster 22 (Poland):** *“I am worried about how I would reconcile school and work. The thing with the employment contract is that I’m afraid that I will sometimes have to work on Saturdays, and the school would also be on the weekends. I’m afraid that I wouldn’t be able to get time off work for school. And I’m not sure that classes would be regularly scheduled for two weekends in a month. In that last school, it was sometimes three weekends in a month. (...)Week after week. Sometimes they changed the schedule without prior notice. And in general it was a complete mess in terms of information. They didn’t inform us about changes in the schedule. Or they posted information on the website in the morning, when people were already on their way to school. It made no sense.”*

Paid employment is seen as crucial for many students to finance their studies and lives. This affects youngsters’ school careers mainly in terms of the time and effort they are able to put into their schooling.

Apart from the financial issue and the necessity for some youngsters to generate an income, particular work opportunities are sometimes explicitly mentioned as a reason to quit school. For example, Youngster 17 (Belgium) who left school for a job: *‘Yes, he promised me that I would get the job, I could be 100% certain. And then I quit school.* Also in the case of Youngster 20

(Portugal) and Youngster 9 (Sweden) employment opportunities influenced their decision to not continue with their education:

**Youngster 20 (Portugal):** *“I never worked but I did the internship... Actually, it encouraged us to work, to drop out of school and go work. The internship ‘holds’ us there. To continue it and not go to school... (...) Because I left school, too, because of the economic situation. I got a job, because I was alone at home and had to pay bills... I was with my mother and then I was alone when I got a job. I got the job at [name supermarket], then I managed to get a house that was a little bit cheaper.”*

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**Youngster 9 (Sweden):** *“I can only say what I like and my friends, my old friends, think. It is because we maybe quit like after taking upper secondary school, that is, graduated, I mean. That is because we want to make money instead of to continue studying.”*

To conclude, the overall agreement that education helps one to get ahead in society is, in practice, challenged by youngsters’ prevailing ideas about the value of gaining work experience and their ideas about the functioning of the labour market. Youngsters weigh all types of costs and benefits of getting an educational qualification, and this is even more so the case when youngsters are confronted with additional challenges in their personal lives. Across the different countries in our sample, there appear to be differences in the attractiveness of the labour market for youngsters at risk of early school leaving. These cross-country differences seem to be related to the features of the labour market of each country, related to the economic crisis, to the ease of finding a job making use of informal social networks, the societal value of and habits in volunteering, and the amount and quality of job positions available to youngsters.

## Part V: Social networks

In the fifth part of this Publication, we will zoom in on the social networks the youngsters in our study navigate in their daily lives, and particularly how these networks do (not) function as a source of support in their (educational) trajectories and the choices they have to make. The scope of social networks that are available to the youngsters, the type of support these networks can offer, and the extent to which the youngsters (successfully) utilize this support, is quite diverse. There are youngsters who feel they can count on a broad social network that includes the (extended) family, friends, classmates and school staff who support them, believe in them and motivate them. One such example is Youngster 1 (United Kingdom), who came to the UK as a teenager and was included in the sample because of her late arrival into the British educational system:

***Youngster 1 (United Kingdom):*** *“I really think I have a lot of support around me right now because I have my family, I have other friends and family, I’ve had a good teacher; so I really think that I’ve gotten a lot of things that people hope for and I think I’ll use that in a positive way and really try not to disappoint any of them.”*

Other youngsters, on the other hand, report having very small networks, which leads to them being more isolated and feeling they hardly have anyone to turn to for support, as for instance in the case of Youngster 20 (Portugal):

***Interviewer:*** *“Who do you go to when you need help?”*  
***Youngster 20 (Portugal):*** *“Right now, no one”.*

These two quotes show two rather extreme experiences of two youngsters who found themselves in very different situations. Youngster 1 (United Kingdom) was in full-time mainstream secondary education and by the second interview had gotten accepted to a good university to study law. Youngster 20 (Portugal), on the other hand, had left mainstream education without an upper secondary education diploma and was unemployed and not in education or training by the time of the second interview. As these examples illustrate, we see that in general there is a tendency across the different countries that suggests that the youngsters’ social networks, and the support youngsters



report receiving or utilizing from these networks, matter in their (educational) trajectories. When youngsters are surrounded by people who support them, whom they feel they can trust, who can provide them with guidance, information and contacts, they tend to be more likely to overcome (educational) challenges or find their way back to education, than when these support systems are absent. On the other hand, in certain circumstances (for instance in the case of 'bad friends') social networks can also be a barrier or a risk factor for the successful completion of schooling. The social networks that emerged as the most important ones in the accounts of the youngsters throughout the different countries and regardless of their educational status, are the youngsters' families, their teachers and other institutional agents within or outside educational settings (counsellors, social workers,...) and their peers. In the next sections we will discuss the role of each of those networks separately.

## Family

As we already described in Part I, the youngsters generally feel that their parents share their belief in the value of education, which, from their point of view, mainly stems from their parents' wish for a 'better future' for them. On the other hand, our findings also suggest that the generally low educational level of the parents and/or their unfamiliarity with the educational system affects the type of support they can offer their children. In many cases, parents have to limit their support to socio-emotional support that revolves around showing an interest in the youngsters' schooling and encouraging them go to school and to study, rather than being able to help the youngsters with their studies or provide guidance in making educational choices (see also Part I and Part II). From these following quotes, we see indeed that the youngsters mainly situate their parents' support at this socio-emotional level. *'They encourage me to go on, yes, and support me. They tell me to commit and not give up and to continue studying to achieve.'* (Youngster 5, Portugal) *'So she just said like, 'stay calm, make sure you finish that task and you will do a good job during the defense of the task.'* (Youngster 13, Belgium) Or, *'they're putting great hope in me. And they support me the most; if I need anything, then they also offer help and that is mutual.'* (Youngster 13, Poland) In some cases, this type of support is not limited to the home context, but also extends to the school environment. This was for instance the case for Youngster 20

(Sweden) and Youngster 8 (the Netherlands), who explain how their parents coming to their school was part of how they supported them:

**Youngster 20 (Sweden):** *“She [her mother] has always like supported me all these years that I have had a tough time. Came to school and defended me.”*

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**Interviewer:** *“How involved are your parents with your degree? I don’t know how things work here, but do they come to parent-teacher meetings?”*

**Youngster 8 (the Netherlands):** *“Yes they came last time, but the room was quite empty. Many parents did not show up, I think there were only 4 parents.”*

**Interviewer:** *“They both came?”*

**Youngster 8:** *“Yes they always come, they always want to know how things are going. They are quite worried about me.”*

When it comes to providing youngsters with more practical support, for instance helping with their study work, or more general support in setting out their educational pathway, the youngsters seem to be able to count less on their parents. The youngsters mainly relate this to the fact that their parents often do not have the required information or knowledge about the educational system or particular courses within this system, to offer them this kind of support. Furthermore, in the case of immigrant youth, their parents’ lack of knowledge of the language of instruction is sometimes referred to as a reason why the youngsters believe they cannot provide them with more practical support. Generally, youngsters do not see it as a matter of their parents not wanting to help them, but rather as an issue of not being able to, as illustrated in this quote:

**Youngster 7 (United Kingdom):** *“They do make sure that I’m doing my work, and if I do need their help and I ask them then they will try, they will try their best to help me but I’m not, they’re not, they don’t really have much information in the fields that I’m working right now which is PE [physical education] and music technology.”*

Along this same line, parents also seem to be less involved in the youngsters’ educational choices. Even though in some cases youngsters discuss their

educational pathway with their parents – Youngster 17 (Sweden), for example, explains that *‘I think we [she together with her parents] agreed that a ‘folk high school’ [alternative learning arena that offers vocational and general education for adults] is a better, better idea for me, because I am not very disciplined when it comes to my studies.’* – we see that generally, in the end their parents often leave these decisions up to the youngsters, or follow the advice of the teachers without questioning it. When talking about choosing his educational track at the beginning of secondary school, Youngster 12 (Belgium), for example, relates how he felt that his parents basically let him choose, but also followed the advice of the teachers when talking about it with him:

**Youngster 12 (Belgium):** *“I could choose.”*

**Interviewer:** *“You could choose, okay yes. And did they help you with your choice?”*

**Youngster 12:** *“Yes”*

**Interviewer:** *“Yes. What did they say about it?”*

**Youngster 12:** *“Just ‘follow the basic program mechanics’. Basic-mechanics they meant. (...) They had spoken with my teachers who said that it [computer science, which he actually wanted to do] would be too difficult for me – so I just continued this field of study.”*

This quote also illustrates the importance of the school staff in the youngsters’ educational careers. When parents do not have the required information or knowledge about the educational system, the options at hand and the consequences of particular educational choices, school staff’s opinions and advice may become (even more) pivotal in the youngsters’ trajectories. Conversely, we see that in the cases where parents are sufficiently familiar with the educational system or alternatives options, and have broad social networks themselves, they are able to become a source of informational support and provide the necessary contacts to secure work experiences or propose alternative pathways. For instance, in the case of Youngster 25 (Belgium), it was his parents who led him to second chance education when mainstream secondary education was not going as planned:

**Youngster 25 (Belgium):** *“My parents said something like ‘that’s also still a possibility’ [referring to second chance education]; yes – I had never considered that, and then together we looked at it for a moment and that seemed interesting to me.”*

For Youngster 1 (Sweden), it was also because of contacts of her mother that she was able to find a work placement that related to her educational training in hairdressing:

**Youngster 1 (Sweden):** *My mother knew what it was called, we were neighbours with some and they were hairdressers. And they were like 'Come to the salon and watch us work. You can help'. And I was like 'Okay!' I went to them every Saturday and Sunday, and when I had holidays.*

When youngsters are more advanced in their secondary school career and feel that they cannot turn to their parents for practical or informational support, we see that they sometimes refrain from approaching them to discuss their educational plans. As their parents are not familiar, for instance, with higher education and what 'studying at university' would entail, in some cases youngsters might prefer not talk about it at all with their parents:

**Youngster 9 (United Kingdom):** *"Discussing which uni[versitie]s you want to go to - she doesn't really have a good understanding of like what you'd get up to at uni[versity] and stuff like that so she'd just ask questions about everything so it's like yeah, you might not discuss that sort of thing with your parents."*

Since the support the youngsters receive from their parents in their educational trajectory in many cases (though not always) tends to be limited to socio-emotional support, when possible, they turn to other members of their families to seek more practical or informational support. This is where the youngsters' (older) siblings often come into the picture, as they are usually more familiar with the educational system, the courses, and particular educational challenges:

**Youngster 40 (Sweden):** *"I ask my sister to come or I come to her. She is not very good at math, I am good at math. She is great at social science and I am all right."*

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**Youngster 1 (United Kingdom):** *"I definitely ask my sisters and brothers because I have a large family."*

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**Youngster 16 (Belgium):** *“My brothers are helping me and stuff. They know how to motivate me and stuff.”*

While the youngsters generally find that their parents and family support them as much as they can and this support seems to be important for the youngsters’ self-esteem and is also perceived to contribute to their educational success, it is not always enough to keep youngsters in education. Even when they feel supported by their parents, youngsters indicate that their parents cannot always convince them to stay in school or change their situation, and emphasize that they feel in charge of or responsible for their own decisions. This was for instance the case for Youngster 22 (Poland):

**Youngster 22 (Poland):** *“Unfortunately they were not able to change the situation with the school, they don't have that much influence on me. They give me advice, sure, but I make decisions on my own. They won't live my life for me.”*

Furthermore, our findings suggest that not everyone perceives their family as an important source of support. Some youngsters report having no contact with their parents or family, or to have a much more conflictual relationship with them and could thus not find any support there. This lack of support was most often mentioned by youngsters that are unemployed and not in training or education and have not acquired an educational qualification. Youngster 20 (Belgium) for instance states how her mother told her: *‘You don't have to continue your studies, you don't have to accomplish anything in life, also not a driver's license, nor an A2 diploma [short-cycle tertiary education]. She told me: ‘you aren't worth anything anyway.’ That was how it went in my house.’* On the contrary, in her experience they seemed to discourage her from continuing her schooling and did not believe she was worthy of anything. Another example of not feeling supported by the home environment is Youngster 38 (United Kingdom), who was homeless at the time of both the first and second interviews and recounts how his relationship with his mother deteriorated and he eventually got kicked out:

**Youngster 38 (United Kingdom):** *“My mother, she played mind tricks with me, [...] all my older siblings they just knew I was ‘high’. So they kind of like they were unaware that they were messing up my psyche, you know. [...] Well I got kicked out of my mum’s house.”*

When youngsters do not find the support they need or are looking for within their family or need extra support because of their specific circumstances (e.g., homelessness, health problems, depression, being the sole care giver of the family), they sometimes find this support at other places, particularly the school or a particular programme that serves as an alternative pathway. Indeed, our findings suggest that institutional agents within or outside of the school environment are seen by the youngsters as another crucial source of support that has an important impact on their (educational) trajectory – also when youngsters feel supported by their home environment. We will discuss this further in the next section.

### Institutional agents

When reflecting on their schooling, a recurrent theme in the youngsters' accounts across the different countries and regardless of their educational status, is the support they perceive(d) receiving from institutional agents (particularly teachers), and whether they felt their teachers believed in them and motivated them. For many youngsters, experiencing a close relationship with their teachers is crucial in their educational pathway and their sense of school belonging (see also Part III). Many of the youngsters under study consider it very important to have a good relationship with their teachers, which is often about receiving support, having someone that cares about them, shows and interest in them and motivates them:

**Youngster 5 (Portugal):** *“If I’m upset, sometimes, the teachers, sometimes... they notice and ask if everything is okay and then they say if we want to talk, to wait for the end of class to talk. (...). Of course they give some personal examples and... they encourage students to continue to not give up, even when you think, you think that things will not work out, to carry on, and I end up keeping my head up.”*

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**Youngster 6 (Belgium):** *“My class teacher last year (...) he's really the one who helped me through it. And I'm really grateful to him. And he always sent me emails and even if I was not in school. ‘I know you can do it, I prefer that you come to school, we go through it, we are going to make a change together’. And that is actually the encouragement that let me take a new step. That was my class teacher*

*Mr. X. Yes, because of him (...) – honestly, if Mr. X hadn't stood behind me [supporting me], I would have given up."*

This quote illustrates how, in the experience of the youngsters, feeling supported by their teachers can become a crucial part of the chain that eventually prevents them from 'giving up' and leaving school. The fact that teachers show that they care is considered primordial in establishing the necessary level of trust that allows the students to create a 'good relationship' with them, as explained by Youngster 10 (Sweden):

**Youngster 10 (Sweden):** *"I don't know. Good teachers are important. Good support. Like – teenagers need support, they really need that. That people care about them. ... I think that is what is needed: that adults show that 'I am here for you'. Because that is how I like got to trust them, because when I came here they really showed that 'we really care for you'."*

Having a personal relationship where there is a certain level of trust and familiarity is considered very important. Consequently, we see that in some cases the youngsters will be somewhat reluctant to approach or value the advice of career advisors or other support staff, as this personal connection is often absent. If they have a good relationship with their teachers, however, they seem to be more inclined to turn to them to ask for support or advice: *'I usually talk to my teachers, mostly my tutor; she's always giving me advice and help about where to go next.'* (Youngster 2, United Kingdom).

Our analyses furthermore suggest that teachers can also provide important informational support regarding the youngsters' educational trajectory, particularly when the required knowledge or information is absent in their family or other social networks. We already mentioned how the youngsters' parents tend to follow the advice of the teachers when they are not very familiar with the educational system themselves. When teachers consider certain tracks or educational pathways to be 'too difficult' for the youngsters this may result in them choosing the 'easier' option – as was the case for Youngster 12 (Belgium) (see section above). However, teachers can also inform youngsters about their educational options and advise them to obtain all the necessary information to ensure that they are following the correct educational path. In the case of Youngster 16 (the Netherlands), for instance,

who arrived to the Netherlands in the middle of her school career, her teacher advised her to have the level of the degree she had already obtained abroad evaluated:

**Interviewer:** *“So you got from level two”*

**Youngster 16 (the Netherlands):** *“To level four, yes.”*

**Interviewer:** *“How did you do that?”*

**Youngster 16:** *“I have, because I had a high school degree and I didn't know that I could use it here. So a teacher of me told me, let them estimate the value of your degree and then you can do a level higher. And that happened.”*

**Interviewer:** *“So actually, you didn't have to do level two.”*

**Youngster 16:** *“No, actually I did not.”*

This account shows how, because of this teacher showing an interest in her educational trajectory, the youngster received important information she otherwise might not have had access to. This allowed her to go to a higher educational level and take a quicker route towards her diploma. Also in the case of youngsters who left mainstream education – and even though their reasons for leaving school are always complex and multifaceted – we notice how having a good relationship with their teachers or other school staff (or the lack thereof) in the sense of having teachers that care for them, motivate them, and provide them with the necessary support, is often part of their story of why school did not work out for them:

**Interviewer:** *“So you actually also didn't have a single teacher with whom you could really [talk]?”*

**Youngster 22 (Belgium):** *“No exactly. I kept it all inside myself. And so I went – so I finally quit school. (...) I had one teacher in my school, she taught French, Miss X, and she always told me that I, that she believed in me and stuff. So I think if I had had that sooner... Someone like that, that I would be in my, that by now I uh, that I would have graduated.”*

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**Youngster 17 (Sweden):** *“Yes, so, the subjects I managed to pass, I got good grades in, but, that wasn't really the problem, but rather it was the absence, and a little bit how I was feeling, and how the school handled it, and stuff that was the problem. It was annoying, it was often*



*really annoying, because my teachers always told me that 'you are like, we know that you know this stuff, we understand that you know it, we notice it in the way you talk and write and when you talk, like express yourself, that you know it, but you have to show it as well'. I was just like 'no. I can't, I like can't do it in the way you want me to.' (...) I wasn't there, and I don't know what they wanted me to do, because I stopped going there in the end, because they didn't listen to me when I said..."*

When youngsters leave mainstream education and find their way to an alternative pathway, we see that there usually is a difference in the way they perceive their relationship with the teachers in these different sectors of the educational landscape (see also RESL.eu Project Paper 7 and RESL.eu Publication 3). These youngsters often remember their teachers in mainstream secondary education as absent and not very dedicated. In their experiences, they feel that the teachers often did not see them as a person and were not able or willing to engage with them. In alternative pathways on the other hand, the youngsters feel treated more as adults by the school staff who try to make an effort to forge interpersonal relationships. Moreover, they are perceived as more engaged and approachable – *'In adult education you feel it's easier to approach your teacher to ask anything than it is in mainstream secondary school.'* (Youngster 27, Belgium) – and are also considered to care more about them as a student and as a person:

**Youngster 25 (Portugal):** *"I'd say that it's much better here because teachers here help a lot more so that you might move to the next grade. They really help much more. And in regular education I don't think they care much. They see mainly students who are more intelligent, and the others who have difficulties, most don't want to talk with them. I think that's where this school is good. The teachers try to pass all students. They'll only fail if they [themselves] want to. That's it."*

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**Youngster 36 (Sweden):** *"And I think the headmaster here is damn good, listens actually (...) I think that he listens and takes in what you say. (...) Yes that is actually the reason why I want to stay at this particular school – because of [headmaster's name]"*

**Interviewer:** *"Aha, that's it, that is great"*

**Youngster 36:** *“Yes, because I know that, okay the headmaster, or deputy headmaster, he listens at least. [laughs] (...). Rather than that I will be, know that I'll come to a school where they don't give a shit about you.”*

Furthermore, institutional agents in alternative pathways may turn into important sources of support for other life spheres beyond education, especially when support from the family or other networks is absent. This becomes particularly evident in the case of specific alternative programmes whose *'raison d'être'* is broader than providing youngsters with an option to continue their education, and also want to tackle problems in other areas of the youngsters' lives. Youngsters who attend those programmes often refer to social counsellors as being crucial to help with important preconditions that need to be met for the youngsters to be able to get on with their lives. In the Netherlands, for instance, Youngster 30 found an important source of support in the mentors of a specific programme that focuses on sorting out the housing situation for youngsters who find themselves without a place to live:

**Youngster 30 (the Netherlands):** *“They helped me with [housing], when I [had] no house et cetera, no [viable] living situation. They helped me find a small room, at the beginning, a small room. And they helped me a little with certain things, papers that I need, what I needed to do.”*

**Interviewer:** *“To get a house or also for other things?”*

**Youngster 30:** *“No, they arranged the house for me. For example, when I got it I had problems with my identity card.... Also you just have certain things that you get help with. Mostly my Dutch isn't so good – that is one of my downsides. They helped me with certain things, or choices.”*

Also other non-educational social actors are in some cases reported as having an important influence. Particularly youngsters who are dealing with long-term illnesses or have a particular disability refer to psychiatrists or medical doctors, whom they tend to describe as 'caring' and 'listening', and who acknowledge their feelings 'in a positive way'. Overall, the youngsters value the fact that these actors show a real interest in their lives and a real commitment to helping them make steps forward. In that sense, once again, the youngsters

emphasize the importance of a good interpersonal relationship in which they experience a sincere interest in their situation:

**Youngster 26 (the Netherlands):** *“And yes, youth office sends you home like: ‘you can apply for five times first. And if it doesn't work out it's a pity. You can come back next month and you can apply five times again.’ And [name of coordinator of project B] says like: ‘you know, I have five spots where you can apply. Come to my office and we are going to sit together, we'll draft a motivation letter, and we'll send it. And see what happens. And should it not work out in this way, then we'll visit a few places and we'll try it face to face.’”*

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**Youngster 36 (Sweden):** *“So, it is insane, she [representative from municipal educational support] is like rheumatic and walks with crutches and [yet] she like came in all the time and helped me with all meetings like and made sure that I got all the help I was supposed to get like and she was fantastic.”*

## Peers

Overall, the youngsters report very heterogeneous experiences when it comes to their peers and the support they perceive as receiving from them. Furthermore, we see that the youngsters' peer groups tend to be relatively unstable with a certain level of fragility, and prone to change depending on the context in which the youngsters find themselves. Some youngsters have a more or less large network of friends from whom they report receiving support and guidance. In this context, youngsters state that they are *‘all always communicating, also working together and always have that interaction’* (Youngster 24, Portugal) and see this network of friends as an important space to *‘vent [their] thoughts and emotions’* (Youngster 29, Sweden). Other youngsters, on the other hand, say they have very few friends or do not experience a lot of support from their peers; nor do they discuss their schooling or future plans with them. Such experiences of small peer networks were particularly – though certainly not exclusively – reported among youngsters who left mainstream education early and were often part of a narrative in which the youngsters said they preferred not to rely on anyone

and asserted they would rather solve their own problems, as for instance in the case of Youngster 39 (United Kingdom) and Youngster 29 (Portugal):

**Youngster 39 (United Kingdom):** *“I don't like relying on people... Just, just... I don't like relying on people... Yeah, I don't know really. I'm one of them ones that just keep myself to myself, like if I have something, a problem, I sort that myself.”*

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**Youngster 29 (Portugal):** *“No [I do not discuss future plans with friends]. I think alone. Do alone... I have no idea [of what they want to do with their lives for the future]... We talk about work. [laughs]”*

Nevertheless, our findings also indicate that when youngsters who left mainstream education have a peer network to fall back on and are not reluctant to accept support, this network of friends can become key to help cope with the situation, overcome obstacles or provide information or contacts to find alternative ways to continue their education. This is particularly so when they are seeking support from someone in a similar situation, which they do not always encounter within their families. Youngster 23 (Belgium), for example, explains how he prefers to turn to his friends who also left mainstream education, since, according to him, his family does not understand his situation:

**Youngster 23 (Belgium):** *“I'm more like – with friends I trust. Not that I can't trust my sisters and brothers, but I'd rather have a friend who's been in the same situation, who knows more about it than someone who doesn't know that much about it. Because they're graduates, they have their diploma, they have no clue about my current situation without a diploma. They don't know how that feels.”*

In that sense, peers in a similar situation may thus become an important factor in the youngsters' lives and prevent them from feeling isolated. At the same time, however, our analyses suggest that youngsters can also perceive their peers as a potentially bad influence for them and their educational trajectories. For instance, youngsters may experience being 'pulled-out' of school by their peers who persuade them to skip school and hang out with them instead. In this context, some youngsters may try to resist this by staying away from specific peers to not 'risk their future', or by purposefully looking for new social

settings where they believe their friends and their 'bad influences' will not follow them, as illustrated by the quotes below:

**Youngster 30 (Portugal):** *"I've never been the kind of person who has a lot of friends. I'm very shy. Sometimes it's difficult to make friends with people because nowadays, if we don't do the same as them, we're no good, we're no longer friends... Sometimes I'd rather not do certain things, I'd rather be alone in my world than ruin my life because of other people. I have few friends, but I know that the ones I do have, have been there for me and have supported me in my decisions. That's enough for me. I don't care about the rest."*

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**Youngster 4 (Sweden):** *"So, I like chose what I wanted to go after, not what my friends wanted. Because there was like someone who tried like this 'yes, come with us to this school, come', like this, because I say no because it becomes too much."*

Moreover, we see that youngsters sometimes change their group of friends, as they perceive their company as a 'bad influence' and feel a need to break contact with them. Youngster 2 (United Kingdom) for example explained how she was *'surrounded by the wrong people in terms of friends. (...) They just didn't really care about anything. They were just reckless, I guess, and they were a bad influence on me.'*

In sum, our findings suggest that, while often less prominent than is the case with family or institutional agents within and outside of educational settings, peer networks are also important in the youngsters' accounts, both in the sense that they can be perceived as a source of support or motivation or a potential 'risk-factor' in the youngsters' (educational) trajectories.

## Conclusion

In this publication, we presented the findings of a longitudinal study of the educational trajectories of youth 'at risk of early school leaving' in seven EU countries. We used in-depth interviews with 253 youngsters (the majority of whom were interviewed twice) and were particularly interested in bringing to the fore their voices and perceptions about their own (educational) trajectories and the processes and mechanisms that led them to leave – or prevented them from leaving – school early. An important and general conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that the youngsters under study encountered and perceived many challenges related to various life domains. To conclude this publication, we will discuss the most frequent and important challenges many of them perceived and relate these to the previously presented findings of this publication. We want to emphasize that the findings presented in this publication reflect the main trends and patterns that were present in the discourses of youngsters, but there was a clear difference in the extent to which the youngsters experienced these challenges as a hindrance to their school career according to their educational 'situation'. In general, youngsters that left mainstream secondary education prematurely and were not in education or training encountered a complex interplay of relatively many 'insurmountable' challenges - more so than those still enrolled in some kind of educational programme. The narratives of youngsters enrolled in alternative learning arenas, on the other hand, often reflected the importance of resilience after having faced similar challenges and 'bumpy' trajectories in education as those who left education early but were not enrolled in alternative pathways. Finally, while we could find similar structural, institutional and individual seeds of disruptive or troubled school careers in the stories of many of the youngsters that were still enrolled in regular secondary education, it was often to a lesser extent.

Bearing in mind this considerable number of differences between the youngsters under study, we intend to provide a brief and general overview of the main findings of this study, which can serve as an inspiration for future policy makers. In spite of the variation in educational systems across regions and countries, our findings may help to identify crucial points of attention that add to a better understanding of how very diverse educational systems and educational practices and measures seem to affect the school careers of

young people, as well as what the struggles and challenges are that young people at risk of early school leaving are confronted with.

### *Lost in translating aspirations into strategic plans and strategies*

When talking about their aspirations, most youngsters formulated these in very general and broad terms and often referred to them as ‘dreams’ they hoped to achieve in the future. Overall, the youngsters highly value the role of education to attain their aspirations/future goals – and are also repeatedly reminded of this by their parents. However, they do not seem to (be able to) translate their aspirations into more clearly defined educational and occupational strategic plans or strategies that guide their trajectory.

Rather than seeing structural constraints, many students tend to place the responsibility of being successful in education and obtaining a diploma primarily upon themselves, and mainly link it to ‘wanting it enough’ and working accordingly to achieve it. In that sense, they seem to buy into the prevalent meritocratic discourse, according to which individual efforts and merit are the key to success. At the same time, however, they described a range of (individual) challenges they are faced with during their school career, which included cognitive problems (e.g., the difficulty of the courses, having learning disabilities, not being intrinsically motivated for (all/part of) their courses), psychological/physical health issues, disappointments (e.g., experiences of discrimination, lack of support when in need, not finding a suitable work based-learning placement), problematic living conditions or issues in their personal lives (e.g., difficult/insecure home environment, drug abuse or the use of psychoactive substances, encounters with police and juvenile court, domestic violence, (unplanned) pregnancy). Especially the youngsters who left (mainstream) education without a diploma emphasized these complicated situations of their daily lives, which, according to them, are often not taken into account by school staff. This makes it more difficult for them to keep attending mainstream secondary education, which in turn can contribute to leaving school early or switching to an alternative pathway.

Together with the difficult living conditions and problems they face in their everyday lives, the lack of concrete plans and visions on how to realize their educational goals makes youngsters more vulnerable in education and

jeopardizes a successful educational career. Especially in the higher years of secondary education, the more demanding and more 'difficult' educational contexts and the fear of educational failure made some youngsters question whether or not to continue to the end of upper secondary education. These fears impacted the youngsters' plans to continue (higher) education and jeopardized the actual realization of their initial aspirations. Instead, they sometimes started to tone down the importance of educational qualifications and prioritize other aspects - especially when they experienced school fatigue - often listening to the cry for money. That is, employment is sometimes prioritized over education, exactly because of the financial conditions in which youngsters find themselves.

### *Hard choices, weak guidance*

When asking explicitly about educational challenges, the youngsters' stories suggest that these challenges could in many cases be linked to the country-specific organization of the educational system and accompanying practices, such as grading systems, structures of educational programmes (e.g. early tracking) and the rigidity of the system, which limits opportunities to change programmes. Some structural features applied to all or most educational systems, albeit in different ways, while others were more country-specific. However, across all educational systems we found that the timing and number of possibilities to switch educational tracks/programmes/institutions mattered for the final outcome of the youngsters' educational trajectories. Nearly all youngsters in our sample followed very heterogeneous, non-linear and (thus) 'not so logical' educational trajectories, characterized by frequent 'changes' across educational programmes/institutions/tracks over their educational and professional careers. These educational transitions could lead to exclusion from a particular institution/programme/track or result in changes in one's future professional career opportunities.

Despite the different motivations and reasons for making particular changes and choices (across and within countries), the 'problematic' nature of most of these changes mainly stems from the fact that the young people encounter problems when making these 'new' choices. Due to a lack of career guidance and/or resources within social networks, many of these choices are not based on a long-term vision or clearly defined aspirations, nor do they necessarily



reflect youngsters' (intrinsic) interests, skills and capabilities. The need for such career guidance and useful information becomes particularly apparent when, as is often the case in many educational systems, there is insufficient communication or a lack of a well-established guidance network that advises youngsters across educational sectors, programmes and tracks and follows them throughout their entire educational career. Moreover, many of the youngsters indicated that they not only made educational choices during the expected, institutionalized transition moments in their educational career (i.e., the choices that all students – successful or not – have to make, such as the transition between primary and secondary education or when refining educational choices over time). It is exactly these 'unforeseen' transition moments, for instance when having to choose a new school/track after being expelled/excluded, that are often insufficiently guided, but greatly impact young peoples' future educational and occupational opportunities. Because of the eagerness of some educational institutions to 'get rid' of students that show low levels of school engagement, the rigidity of the educational systems, and the difficulties youngsters face when making 'unforeseen' educational choices, some of these youngsters felt that their 'imagined futures' became impossible to reach, which made them feel that following their educational and career aspirations was meaningless. Consequently, these very complex, non-linear educational trajectories that often contain many non-anticipated though crucial educational and occupational choices, did not add to the youngsters' abilities, knowledge and motivation, which was an additional complexity when searching for work-based learning opportunities or redefining future goals.

### *Relationship status with school: "it's complicated"*

The high(er) number of (educational) choices youngsters had to make and the difficulties when making them were clearly reflected in the diverse educational trajectories, but cannot be seen independently from the relationships the youngsters develop with institutional actors. These relationships can be seen as a marker of how these youngsters experienced overall school life and the prevailing school culture. The school environment was frequently interpreted as a somewhat artificial place with a lot of 'childish' rules and practices that do not allow one to truly prepare young people for their future lives on the labour market, which in some cases was perceived as pushing young people away from school. Youngsters frequently evaluated their treatment in school in

terms of not feeling acknowledged or treated as a real and equal person – often expressed in terms of feeling treated like a child – which invariably led to a lot of negativity and frustration. This sense of powerlessness often appeared to stem from the discordance between the school and teacher culture and that of the young adults. The feeling of not having a voice or not having a sense belonging was mentioned to diminish the youngsters' desire to put any effort into school. For some students, this unequal power relation between them and their teachers inflicted stress and frustration upon them as they feel treated unfairly, while for others it resulted in oppositional school behaviour. Additionally, due to grade retention and changing institutions/programmes/tracks and other delays in youngsters' school careers, many youngsters feel 'too old' to be enrolled in (regular) secondary education. Simultaneously, when growing older, they felt they were becoming more 'mature' and for them it seemed that this almost automatically made them value education to a higher extent.

When youngsters have developed complicated relationships with the schools in which they are enrolled, or do not feel they fit in, they are more likely to reject schooling as such and do not conform to the school culture. As a consequence, and due to this sometimes oppositional or disturbing behaviour, many youngsters experience even more troubles at school and are more likely to be expelled, which in turn affects the educational choices they have to make. For instance, suspension or expulsion from a particular school is sometimes used by school staff as a disciplinary rule when youngsters behave in what is considered 'inappropriate' ways, or achieve insufficiently, which disrupts their overall school career. Such school changes often lead to changes in the youngsters' educational careers. In the end, not fitting in at school has considerable effects on youngsters' overall school careers – for instance leading to more heterogeneous educational trajectories – or could be the starting point of a (long) search for a place to finally fit in. Strict educational practices combined with negative treatment in school, were particularly experienced by youngsters facing difficult living circumstances outside of school. These private factors are actually perceived to hinder youngsters during their educational career, since the majority of welfare and supporting mechanisms of schools do not take these private factors into account.

### *Education vs work vs education*

In general, the youngsters perceived economic and financial challenges to be the most dominant and the most difficult to deal with. The perceived (limited) economic perspectives and financial difficulties at home were clearly considered when making important choices in young people's lives and when trying to figure out where to invest and which pathways they wanted to pursue in their future lives. Whether in the context of achieving a concrete plan or for more abstract aspirations or 'imagined futures', not having the necessary financial means was often mentioned as one of the most important obstacles to achieving those goals. Hence, there appeared to be a clear feedback mechanism – sometimes experienced more as communicating vessels rather than a mutually reinforcing mechanism – between education and work, as all choices made in one domain had an impact on the other domain. Depending on the kind of experience, working or doing internships could work as both motivating *and* demotivating for youngsters in terms of (re-)engaging in school. In some cases, it made youngsters re-think their future prospects and/or helped them to refine their aspirations; however, when the work load was too heavy, their jobs could hinder young people from putting effort into school. Furthermore, some practical complications were mentioned as hindering the – in theory – beautiful and interesting marriage between work and education. Many of the young people indicated that their initial thoughts on the importance of obtaining work experience for their future careers were hampered by the difficulty of finding proper work experience (both school- and non-school-related).

To conclude, we should add that, in many countries, most changes during youngsters' educational careers stem from practices that are based upon a widespread opinion that low-performing students will find it easier to achieve in more practice-oriented learning. Nevertheless, there are many very specialized fields of study that apply practice-oriented learning, all with a very specific focus. Despite the search for more practice-oriented learning and to gain some work experience, youngsters do not necessarily know which field of study or which career to pursue, which in many cases results in frequent shifting between programmes. Additionally, VET programmes are not always directly associated to former industrial jobs and are in some cases also very theoretical. Thus, the idea that youngsters are reoriented towards more

practice-oriented learning does not necessarily mean that these youngsters easily find their way in education or see a better connection with the labour market. This finding could partly explain the more diverse and heterogeneous educational trajectories of our respondents.

### *Early school leaving as a multi-faceted and volatile social phenomenon*

In the introduction of this publication we already touched upon the idea that 'early school leaving' should be approached from a more processual point of view that focuses on different phases and life spheres of young peoples' lives, the changes between those different phases, and the relative importance of each life sphere. Our study furthermore indicates that many youngsters appear to encounter particular tensions, e.g. between family life and education, or between gaining work experience and education. To move away from the rather inadequate categorization of 'early school leaving' as currently defined by the European Commission, policy makers could approach this matter by focussing more on these particular tensions youngsters are faced with as a starting point to prepare young people better for their future lives through the provision of some kind of training and education. To do so, educational policy makers could collaborate with policy makers of other fields to focus upon the specific aspects of the issue of 'early school leaving' they want to tackle. Do they want to reduce the proportion of unskilled labour forces on the labour market? Or do they want to tackle 'early school leavers' heightened vulnerability on the labour market', as this group is more likely to face insecure and instable working conditions? Do policy makers aim to empower all students and therefore want to make sure they all find the appropriate track or programme that fits their interests and capacities, as well as educational institutions that make them feel they belong/a sense of belonging? By asking these kind of questions, policy makers could further question the increased importance of educational credentials in current societies and anticipate how they see this trend developing in the future. Furthermore, it could be interesting to reflect on the importance and valorization of information- or knowledge-based competences (e.g. social competences or transferrable skills) and whether these skills should be credentialized as well. A more critical stance should be taken towards whether the increasing importance attached to workplace learning has the expected

effects, how unintended side-effects should be dealt with, and whether it is also effective for young people without clearly defined occupational aspirations. Moving the focus away from 'early school leaving' as such towards more specific 'issues' and tensions in distinct phases and life spheres of youngsters' (educational) trajectories may provide more practical and policy-oriented tools for the actual reduction of early school leaving in Europe and also ease and facilitate the lives and trajectories of those 'at risk of early school leaving'. If not, the finding that factors contributing to early school leaving are complex may work as paralyzing and could more easily result in a status quo with regard to policies on early school leaving. A cautionary remark that has to be made here is that these priorities have to be carefully weighed against each other and should not contradict each other.

In sum, our findings indicate that the concept and measurement of 'early school leaving' as it is currently used in European policy does not seem to fully grasp the complex, transitional, processual and temporary nature of this phenomenon. This does not mean that early school leaving does not have far-reaching consequences for young peoples' (future) lives. However, for policy makers that work towards reducing 'early school leaving', it is important to identify which aspect(s) of this complex phenomenon are seen as problematic to be able to design particular policies that are targeted at this/these particular aspect(s). Along this same line, it is crucial that policy makers develop a long-term perspective on the issue of early school leaving that goes beyond the numerical reduction of young people that leave school without an educational qualification.

# Final Reports - RESL.eu Project

## *Publications*

Publication 1: Ryan, L., Lórinç, M., D'Angelo, A., Kaye, N., Araújo, H.C., Magalhães, A., Rocha, C. & Macedo, E. (2013). Policies on Early School Leaving in nine European countries: a comparative analysis, Middlesex University,

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Publication 2: Kaye, N., D'Angelo, A., Ryan, L., Lórinç, M. (2016). Attitudes of school personnel to Early School Leaving, Middlesex University,

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Publication 3: Nouwen, W., Van Praag, L., Van Caudenberg, R., Clycq, N., & C. Timmerman (2016). School-based Prevention and Intervention Measures and Alternative Learning Approaches to Reduce Early School Leaving. CeMIS, University of Antwerp,

[https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/RESL\\_Publicatie\\_A4\\_v5.pdf](https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/RESL_Publicatie_A4_v5.pdf)

## *Project papers*

Project paper 1: Araújo, H.C., Rocha, C. & Macedo, E., Magalhães, A., Oliveira, A. (2013). Formulation of a Common Working Definition of ESL: International Contributions, University of Porto, Centro de Investigação e Intervenção Educativas (CIIE),

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Project Paper 2: Clycq, N., Nouwen, W., Timmerman, C. (2014). Theoretical and methodological framework on Early School Leaving, CeMIS - University of Antwerp,

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