

Community-based Learning Approaches for Early and Continuous Interventions for Preventing ESL

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Abstract

ET 2020 objectives include a renewed target of reducing ESL to less than 10% by 2020. ESL may have a significant impact on personal and professional development as learners who do not complete upper secondary education, which is the definition that the EU adopts on ESL, may be exposed to reduced opportunities to pursue a satisfying career, to become fully active in society, and to fulfill their dreams. While ESL causes may diverge from one community to another some key factors emerge as significant: socio-economic background, parental educational levels, attitudes towards education, parental interest in their children's education, social exclusion particularly for migrants, poor understanding of school curricula especially for migrant parents, teacher skills in identifying ESL risk factors and effectively intervening, quality of communication between teachers, learners, and parents, parental capacity to effectively help children in homework, and more. Many of these factors are related to the extended supporting environment of learners and go beyond school curricula-related issues. Rather than working with individuals that are already at risk of ESL, LINC introduces early and continuous interventions that start in primary school and follow learners through lower secondary education aiming at preventing the risk of arising. Specifically, LINC develops an analysis of factors affecting ESL in Greece, France, the Czech Republic, and Sweden, and generally in Europe; experiential, community-building learning approaches that support learners, parents, and teachers in connecting school to real life; on-line communities, joint parent-learner educational activities, good practice recommendations, teacher skill building content, and resource links targeting parents; strategies for the adoption of the proposed learning interventions into school structures. Activities will be validated in Greece, Sweden, France, and the Czech Republic. This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This communication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

1. Introduction

Early school leaving (ESL) still challenges European economies influencing significantly personal, professional and societal growth. Among the headline targets set in the Europe 2020 strategy is the reduction of the EU average rate of early school leaving to less than 10% by 2020 [1]. At EU level early school leaving rates are defined by the proportion of the population aged 18-24 that has only lower secondary education or less and are no longer in education or training. Early school leavers are therefore those who have only achieved pre-primary, primary, lower secondary or a short upper secondary education of less than 2 years or having only pre-vocational or vocational education that does not lead to a qualification equivalent to the upper secondary level. Although the early school leaving rates in Europe has decreased since 2001, there is still lot to be done; as a matter of fact according to Eurostat, in 2012, approximately five and a half million young people did not complete upper secondary education and did not participate in any educational or training programme **Error! Reference source not found.**

Early school leaving should not be perceived as an event but rather as an 'evolving process' **Error! Reference source not found.** This is due to the fact that this process may be initiated much before the drop out action while in many cases the seeds for school disengagement have been cultivated during early school years or prior to the child's entrance in the school. In other words, early school leaving is a long process of school disengagement. Profoundly, this disengagement process is rarely the result of a single factor. The factors that lead to school disengagement vary from one country to another and from urban to rural areas. Learners may be attracted out of school by jobs with low entry level skill requirements, for example in the tourism sector. Other factors include socio-economic background of the family; the value the

family places on education and the perceived cost-benefit ratio; the educational level of parents, their interest in their child's education, and their capacity to help with homework; the time parents have available for communicating with their children and the teachers; teacher capacity to identify and address ESL; the quality of teacher communication with their students, relationships with peers, school atmosphere, lack of intercultural content and more. The factors are usually dynamically linked together and lead to drop out behaviors. This fact is also stressed by Walther and Pohl who introduced the 'All-Factors Framework' which demonstrates the range of factors that influence a drop-out behavior within five levels: Family and Community, Schooling, Pupil and Peers, The Education System, Employment and Training **Error! Reference source not found..**

Even a quick reading of the factors reveals family factors as an important dimension of the problem. Research shows **Error! Reference source not found. Error! Reference source not found.** that dropouts come often from special parenting attitudes that are characterized by 'lack of supervision', 'poor aspirations regarding children's schooling', 'poor or limited engagement to school practices', 'negative reactions to school underachievement', 'low level of verbal interaction with the children' and irresponsible attitude or lack of scaffolding when students' are taking initiatives or decisions **Error! Reference source not found..** Family structure, parent education and professional status may also drive forces towards drop-out behaviours **Error! Reference source not found..**

However, directly linking these factors to ESL without exploring carefully the context in which they were generated can be misleading and daunting in understanding the ESL problem. Addressing ESL requires a thorough understanding of the factors that contribute to leaving school in various contexts. It further requires strategies that address the life conditions, social web, educational background, perceptions, and resources available to learners, to their parents and families, and to their teachers. Based on the fact that ESL is a multifaceted problem, LINC project aims to create a supporting environment for teacher-parent and parent-students' interactions towards early school leaving. The project explores the challenges faced by learners, teachers and parents and engages the all players involved in school education in specific activities that fight early school leaving well before this becomes a visible risk.

1.2 Why LINC?

Rather than working with individuals that are already at risk of ESL, LINC introduces early and continuous interventions that start in primary school and follow learners through lower secondary education aiming at preventing the risk of arising. A holistic, inclusive learning model and community building methodologies strengthen the supporting extended school environment of learners, help teachers become community leaders in managing activities on ESL prevention and support parents in building confidence and being better equipped to help their children in learning and schooling. Special attention is paid to the needs of migrant learners and their families aiming at their effective integration into their adopted communities. Towards this direction LINC makes strategic use of ICT introducing a digital community and storytelling experiential learning design that fights social exclusion and promotes intercultural communication. More precisely, LINC objectives are four-fold:

- Enhanced support of learners with the objective of achieving higher school completion rates
- Enhanced confidence of parents to become involved in their children's education
- Increased capacity of teachers to integrate early interventions for reducing ESL
- Positive attitudes in relation to the value of education and the promotion of intercultural interactions and content

2. LINC methodology and activity design

The project starts with the analysis of current status quo in ESL trends and existing practices for addressing or preventing early school leaving in Greece, France, Sweden and Czech Republic. Teachers and parents' needs in relation to ESL are brought also into focus. Early school leavers' perceptions and voices are also taken into account aiming at alleviating inherent needs and requirements. This input leads to the development of a methodological framework for early and continuous interventions towards early school leaving. The outcomes of the analysis and the LINC methodological framework are validated in practice

through the design of a set of activities and the development of a social networking community that brings together teachers, parents and students.

The LINC methodological framework is grounded in principles of community- building, pedagogical theories of experiential learning design and storytelling practices. The suggested framework guides the design of the LINC activities that foster parent involvement in the school community and provide opportunities for reflection upon the value of education. Concurrently, an attempt is made to link the activities with real-life situations and to offer opportunities for interaction with intercultural content. The activities will be designed by the teachers with the support of the LINC work group. They will be blended in nature and they can take place in the school, outside of school and online. Activities may include: regular visits to sites of interest and follow up tasks and discussions, interaction with experts or involvement in communities of practice, story-telling tasks that require parent contribution, small case studies about specific social problems, interviews with people from varying backgrounds, experiential interventions related to the environments in which parents are professionally active, organization of cultural events or art exhibitions and more. From the suggested activities, 10 will be selected for deployment in real educational settings.

In parallel with the activity design, supporting multimedia content and good practice recommendations will be developed targeting teachers and parents. The aim is to support teachers in deploying the proposed activities in schools as well as parents in engaging with confidence in activities with the objective of early tacking drop-out behaviors.

3. LINC community- building approaches

Although educational theorists have not agreed to a single definition of the term *community*, there is a research agreement that a community cannot be described as a physical entity but as a social phenomenon **Error! Reference source not found.** The social phenomenon of community revolves around a unique sense; 'a sense that members have a belonging, members matter to one another and to the group and have a shared faith that member's needs will be met through their commitment to be together' **Error! Reference source not found.** Each community offers a context within activity takes place. That is why community experiences are often described as context-specific **Error! Reference source not found.** According to MacMillan and Chavis **Error! Reference source not found.** a four dimensional model underpins the community construct. The model consists of the following elements: 'membership, influence, fulfilment of needs and shared emotional connection' **Error! Reference source not found.** All these elements can contribute to the social construction of knowledge within the community. With the advance of web technologies and social networks, communities took a new online form. Online communities have no borders and do not set time- restrictions **Error! Reference source not found.** They can bring together people from varying cultural, educational and professional backgrounds and from different geographical areas **Error! Reference source not found.**; they can provide avenues for collaboration with experts and pioneers; they can offer access to multimodal information and resources (text, animation, image, sound).

LINC community aims at bringing teachers, parents and students together through inclusive activities that have been designed for joint participation. A variety of services, social networking tools and features will be integrated in the digital community in order to promote intercultural communication and to foster positive attitudes in relation to the value of education. The foreseen services are: teachers, parents and students' accounts/profiles, school alumni groups, services for monitoring students' performance, communication tools such as forum and chat. The members of the community will be able to access digital resources, media content, documentaries, educational applications, scientific and research reports as well as public bodies information. Regular updates about scheduled meetings, workshops, seminars for parents, cultural events and school activities will be available through the community calendar.

The technological services and ICT features can offer opportunities for communication and interaction but they cannot guarantee that communication and interaction will actually occur. Specific policies and strategies should be carefully considered and employed to foster '*rational will*' towards community membership and meaningful community development **Error! Reference source not found.** With this as the major challenge, the LINC group expects to launch the community in June 2014. By that time the LINC validation strategy will have been developed aiming at evaluating the digital ESL intervention in an ongoing manner engaging

meaningfully teachers, parents and primary school students from Greece, Sweden, France and Czech Republic.

3. Instead of conclusion

This work addresses the need for early and continuous intervention strategies and a holistic, inclusive ESL prevention approach that starts in primary school and follows learners throughout primary and lower secondary education focusing on the engagement and support of learners, their families, and their teachers in a community environment. LINC views school as an extended supportive community and aims to empower learners, parents, and teachers to better understand and project to others in their community the value of education. The LINC project, is funded with the support of the Comenius Action of the Life Long Learning Programme and runs from December 2013 to November 2015.

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