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Tarabini-Castellani, Aina; Parcerisa, Lluís; Curran, Marta; [et al.]. «The politics of educational success : a realist evaluation of early school leaving policies in Catalonia (Spain)». Critical Studies in Education, Vol. 59 (2018), p. 364-381.  
DOI 10.1080/17508487.2016.1197842

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**Postprint of:**

Tarabini, A., Curran, M., Montes, A., & Parcerisa, L. (2018). The politics of educational success: a realist evaluation of early school leaving policies in Catalonia (Spain). *Critical Studies in Education*, 59(3), 364-381, DOI: [10.1080/17508487.2016.1197842](https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2016.1197842)

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2016.1197842>

# **The politics of educational success: a realist evaluation of Early School Leaving policies in Catalonia (Spain)**

## **1. Introduction**

Early School Leaving (hereafter ESL) is one of the major problems of many European countries, especially Southern ones (European Commission, 2014). Spain, and Catalonia in particular, are not exceptions to this picture. With 22.2% of the population between 18 and 24 years old having left school without having completed post-compulsory secondary education (MEC, 2015)<sup>i</sup>, Catalonia doubles the ESL rate of the European Union (11.2 %) and is still far from the goal of 10% projected for the EU in 2020 (15% for Spain).

In this context, ESL has become one of the main topics of European academic debates and European education policies. Several reports have been published in order to analyse the diverse causes and dimensions of the phenomenon and numerous proposals have been launched to tackle the multiple faces of ESL (NESSE 2009; European Commission, 2013, 2014). In Spain and Catalonia, this has also been the trend in recent years. Nowadays, combating ESL is one of the most important policy objectives of most national, regional and local governments. It is the main rationale of the new Spanish Educational Act – launched in 2013, and it is the locus of multiple programmes and plans explicitly designed to address what is socially and politically perceived as one of the most important problems of our education system.

At first glance, there seems to be a general consensus on the priority of reducing ESL, which goes beyond specific policy options and specific geographic contexts. Combating ESL has become an almost unquestioned part of policy agendas and political discourses in education today. However, this general consensus disappears when we look at the details and, more specifically, at the answers given to fundamental questions regarding ESL, such as what it is, why it occurs, how to solve it and who should intervene (Escudero & Martínez, 2012). Furthermore, in the name of combating ESL, essentially contradictory educational policies and interventions, in terms of their logic, design and implementation, have been justified and legitimised (Author, 2015a).

The aim of the article is to examine the logics and assumptions explaining the design of the policies aimed at combating ESL in Catalonia, analysing the hypotheses about the meaning and the causes of the phenomenon and how political decisions in this field are legitimised. The objective, therefore, is not so much to identify what policies

have been introduced in the Catalan context in recent years, but rather to understand why and how they have been launched, what the logic for intervention has been and how it has been justified. As the NESSE (2009) report on ESL explicitly suggests, ‘the ESL industry has failed at building a rigorous body of knowledge because there has been little effort expended on determining why and how interventions work, and the processes through which they bring about the hoped-for changes’ (NESSE, 2009, p. 51).

In particular, we want to identify the political priorities and discursive logic of governmental action underlying the objective of fostering school success. In fact, this aim has been one of the common characteristics of recent governmental action in this field: replacing the concept of school failure with that of school success. The concept of school success, however, has different meanings and connotations according to different actors and contexts. What do Educational Administrations refer to when they state that their priority is to promote school success? How is this priority translated into specific policies and programmes? What conditions and requirements are assumed to be necessary for success to be possible? The approach of the article is that these questions cannot be answered without understanding the different political perspectives underlying the definition of school success. These perspectives, whether explicitly or implicitly, explain why the same policy problem can be addressed with entirely different logics and assumptions, leading to essentially different programmes and foci of intervention to deal with ESL.

The structure of the article is as follows. The first section deals with the theoretical approach behind the analysis. The second section provides a picture of ESL in Catalonia. In the third section, the methodology of the research and the selection of cases for analysis are explained. The fourth and fifth sections present the analysis of the findings, comparing the discourses, priorities and policies of two key agents in defining policies to combat ESL in Catalonia: the Catalan Department of Education (Regional Government body) and the Barcelona Education Consortium (Local Government body). In the conclusions, we discuss the need for a critical analysis of policies to combat ESL and to promote educational success.

## **2. Theoretical perspective**

The theoretical perspective adopted in this article is based on Pawson's (2002) realist evaluation approach and focused on identifying the causal assumptions on which social policies are based. According to Pawson, all public policy is based on a hypothesis about

social behaviour and, therefore, all policies are based on a more or less explicit theory of change. In other words, all social programmes and, in the case we are dealing with, all policies or programmes to combat ESL, are based on a series of statements about the causes of the phenomenon they are attempting to address and what the best solutions would be.

Thus, all public policy is based on underlying conjectures about the conditions required to guarantee the policy's success, such as the characteristics of its beneficiaries, the requirements for its implementation, the involvement of local agents, etc. This is precisely the objective of the realist evaluation proposed by Pawson: to identify and carefully analyse the ontology of the programmes. That means to recognise the 'generative mechanisms' and the 'contiguous contexts' on which programmes are based. According to this perspective, 'it is not programmes that work: rather it is the underlying reasons or resources that they offer subjects that generate change' (Pawson, 2002, p. 342). Understanding the 'Context-Mechanism-Outcome pattern' embedded in different education policies is then the locus of the realist evaluation.

In this respect, realist evaluation must be understood as an interrogative approach that leads to a specific form of inquiry. It is a type of evaluation that moves away from the dominant questions, techniques and methodologies in the field of policy evaluation and attempts to identify, as a baseline for inquiry, 'what-works-for-whom-in-what-circumstances' (Pawson, 2002, p. 342). As Dale (2009) argued, we must be able to problematise the concepts we use to analyse education policies and systems without taking their meanings for granted. We have to identify the different representations and interpretations underlying educational concepts and proposals that, at first glance, may seem similar or even identical. Ultimately, we must capture the interests – both manifest and latent – underlying the conception, design and implementation of educational policies and programmes.

From this perspective, the study of education policy must incorporate an analytical approach whose main aim is to understand the theoretical-philosophical foundations and normative references underlying the introduction of specific reforms (Cox, 1996). In other words, beyond evaluating whether or not a programme has achieved its objectives, the focus of analysis must be to understand how, why and under what conditions it has or has not achieved the expected success. It is a question of going beyond analyses that approach educational reforms from the exclusive logic of 'problem-solving', without questioning their origin, logic and nature.

This not only involves asking questions about the diversity of connotations supporting the design of one policy or another, but also problematising the very concepts of success, failure and ESL on which these policies are based. Actually, adopting Pawson's methodology for the analysis of ESL policies is one of the explicit proposals of the NESSE (2009) report in order to overcome the shortcomings of most of the evaluations in this political field. This is one of the most analytical novelties and contributions of the present article. In fact, although in recent years research using realist evaluation has increased (Bonal & Verger, 2013; Jackson & Kolla, 2012), this strategy of inquiry has not yet been applied to the analysis of ESL.

With this objective, the article draws on Albaigés' theoretical proposal (2008) to analyse the meaning of the concept of school success. As Albaigés has pointed out, educational success has become a concept of consensus, which at first appears removed from particular political connotations. However, a comprehensive analysis of policies to improve school success reveals diverse perspectives and conceptions hidden behind the adoption of such policies. In addition, the objectives and strategies of such policies vary in accordance with the perspective adopted. Thus, the author identifies five main perspectives of school success (table 1). Although these five perspectives are not mutually exclusive and rarely exist in a pure state, they allow identification of radically different conceptions of education and their related strategies for intervention.

*Table 1 here*

From our perspective, Albaigés' approach is an excellent mechanism for applying a realist evaluation to the analysis of policies to combat ESL, and it is the perspective that will be adopted here to carry out the empirical study that is the basis of this article.

### **3. A picture of Early School Leaving in Catalonia**

As pointed out in the introduction, ESL is one of the main challenges of the Catalan education system. According to Eurostat 2014 data, Catalan ESL rates (22.2%) are slightly higher than Spanish ones (21.9%), but they are well above the EU average, which was 11.2% in the same year.

In fact, one of the main paradoxes of the Catalan education system is its highly polarised structure. A significantly higher percentage of the population in the 25 to 64 age group has a basic or low level of education (47.4%) than the average for the EU (27.3%) but, at the same time, a higher percentage of the population has university education (30.8% versus 25.9%). Similar results are found for the population between 18 and 24

years old (Martínez & Albaigés, 2013). In comparative terms, therefore, Catalonia has significantly more students who leave school once they have completed the compulsory stage, but those who continue to study tend to remain in the system longer. These data point to post-compulsory secondary education (in terms of the structure of the educational supply, the curricular, pedagogical and evaluative practices, the orientation mechanisms and so on) as one of the major critical points of the Catalan education system.

The second major paradox of the Catalan system is found in the discrepancy between the level of student academic performance and the percentages of ESL recorded. According to Calero, Escardíbul & Choi (2012), PISA skill levels make it possible to establish a threshold for risk of school failure, which is situated between level 1 and level 2. Students who do not reach level 2 of PISA are those who do not acquire the skills needed for educational success. If we look at the results in Table 2, the percentage of students in Catalonia that fall below level 2 on PISA skills is lower than both the Spanish average and the OECD average for all the areas assessed. These results seem to be in contradiction with the worse relative position of Catalonia in terms of ESL and indicate that the level of ESL is higher than would be expected based on the level of skills acquired.

*Table 2 here*

The same contradiction is indeed found when comparing the relatively positive results of Catalonia in the PISA tests with the poor results obtained as measured by compulsory secondary education graduation rates. In fact, the Catalan graduation rate at the end of secondary compulsory schooling (79.3%, in 2011) is not only below the Spanish average (81.2% in the same year), but also places Catalonia in one of the worst positions in comparison with the rest of Spain's autonomous regions, revealing a highly strict system in terms of providing compulsory education certificates in comparison to other Spanish regions and European countries.

According to these data, it can be argued that ESL is not just a matter of not performing well enough but rather there are other factors involved. As previous research has shown (Fernández Enguita, Mena & Riviere, 2010; Rumberger, 2011), dropping out of school is not just a question linked to instrumental issues of learning or, in other words, to the transmission of formal school knowledge, but also to the expressive dimension of schooling, meaning the transmission of values, norms and manners (Bernstein, 1996). We will return to this subject when the results of the analysis are presented.

#### 4. Selection of cases and methodology

The analysis performed in this article is based on two case studies, which are used to compare the approach of programmes to combat ESL carried out by two different Education Administrations in Catalonia and identify the perspectives on school success underlying their interventions.

The two case studies selected are the Catalan Department of Education and the Barcelona Education Consortium. It is important to take into account that Spanish and Catalan law has granted increasing responsibility to municipal governments for planning and implementing education policies. For example, local education departments play a key role in preventing and combating ESL by planning and implementing vocational training programmes, providing adult education and promoting educational programmes to support families. Thus, it is essential to focus on the role of both regional and local governments in Catalonia in order to properly address ESL policies.

The analysis is based on intensive fieldwork that includes 10 interviews with key education stakeholders from both the Catalan Department and the Barcelona Consortium, that were conducted between April 2013 and November 2013, as well as documentary analysis of policy briefings, press releases, and legal documents. In the case of the Catalan Department of Education, the analysis is mainly based on the *Catalan Plan for School Success* [*Ofensiva de País a favor de l'Èxit escolar*], published in April 2013, and encompassing all of the regional programmes to combat ESL. In addition, interviews were conducted with three stakeholders with important responsibilities for the design and implementation of this *Catalan Plan*: the Secretary for Education Policies, the Directorate of Secondary Education in the Catalan Department of Education and a senior official in the Directorate of Secondary Education. In the case of the Barcelona Education Consortium, a systematic analysis of three key programmes was conducted: the 'Youth Job-Training Plan' (focused on providing guidance), 'Success Programme 1' (providing academic reinforcement support) and 'Success Programme 2' (curriculum diversification). In addition, in-depth interviews were held with the personnel responsible for all three programmes, as well as the person responsible for the Area of Secondary Education. In total, 7 interviews were conducted in the Consortium.

At this point, it is important to mention the different attitudes of both Administrations during the research process. Whilst the Consortium showed much more predisposition and willingness to collaborate with the research, the Department bureaucrats were much more reluctant. This is one of the reasons why the analysis



presented in the following sections shows different degrees of detail, depending on the institution analysed. The local analysis is backed up by several quotations taken from the interviews, whereas the regional one presents more evidence from the documentary analysis, due to the refusal to record all the interviews. This circumstance, rather than diminishing the value of the analysis, indicates two very different ‘starting points’ that are in high coherence with the results presented in the following section.

## **5. The Catalan Department of Education and its focus on academic performance**

The publication in 2013 of the *Catalan Plan for School Success* represents a key moment in defining the strategy of the Catalan Department of Education to combat ESL. The *Plan*, produced by the Conservative/Nationalist party ruling the Catalan government at the time (Convergència i Unió – CIU), is understood to be a compendium of all the policies applied thus far in this field, as well as a position on what action the government should take in the coming years to increase levels of school success.

The Catalan Department of Education's starting point in defining its strategic plan to combat ESL was to replace the concept of school failure with that of school success. As explicitly stated in the document, the concept of failure implies social exclusion and places the focus entirely on students' end results. The concept of success, on the other hand, ‘makes it possible to highlight aspects of the educational process that refer to the development of students' potentials, promoting a change in the social outlook toward education’ (Catalan Department of Education, 2013, p. 4). In addition, it argues that the concept of success entails a pro-active vision that goes beyond fact-finding and attempts to intervene in the educational process. In this regard, the Catalan Department of Education states that, in order to promote school success, it is essential to intervene not only in regard to final results but in the overall education process. We shall now discuss which aspects of the educational process are selected for intervention. This analysis will allow us to identify the very discursive construction of the ‘problem’ of ESL and the assumptions regarding its causes and solutions.

According to the *Catalan Plan*, school success basically entails increasing the students’ level of educational skills, and ten action lines are proposed to achieve this: 1) professionalisation of teaching; 2) professionalisation of the principal; 3) school autonomy; 4) methodological and didactic innovations within classrooms; 5) academic support for students with learning difficulties; 6) fostering reading; 7) multilingualism; 8)

families' involvement and commitment; 9) relations with the community; and 10) tackling school absenteeism (Catalan Department of Education, 2013, p. 24). According to these lines, key priority is given to school intervention policies and, in particular, to organisational and pedagogical aspects of schools. As can be seen, seven of the ten objectives are related to these aspects. In this respect, the discursive construction of the problem is as follows: improving managerial, organisational and pedagogical school assets will lead to an improvement in educational success by understanding how to improve students' academic skills.

In fact, the emphasis of the Catalan government on the 'school level' has been a constant throughout the educational mandate, not only in the fight against school dropout and ESL. The conservative government has demonstrated on several occasions both the practical and the political reasons for this focus. On the one hand, it is related to the distribution of political competences between Catalonia and Spain. In this respect, the Catalan government has always argued that the school level is one of the dimensions of the school system in which it has more room for manoeuvre (Verger & Curran, 2014). On the other hand, previous research (Bonal, 2014) has demonstrated that the governance of Catalan education policies, under the current government, is based on the politics of 'conservative modernisation' (Apple, 2001; Dale, 1989). This entails a combination of a high level of public control and intervention on learning and teaching assets with low levels of regulation of school choice. It is therefore within this framework that the National Plan for School Success should be analysed, specifically in its regard to the school level focus.

Certainly, school interventions play a crucial role in preventing ESL (NESSE, 2009). It is known that pedagogical strategies can contribute to increasing students' opportunities for success and that teachers are a key to fostering students' commitment to their education (Dupriez, Dumay & Vause, 2008; Reay, David & Ball 2001; Van Houtte 2011). However, a critical analysis of the *Catalan Plan* reveals an omission of the context and the conditions explaining and generating this 'school effect'. In fact, nowhere in the *Plan* is there any reference to the structural conditions aimed at the development of 'proper' school strategies in the field of educational success. In coherence with the classic proposals of School Effectiveness Research Theory, no mention of the impact of the school social context on generating 'innovative' pedagogical practices is found in the *Catalan Plan*. This is, therefore, one of the principal omissions of the proposal, since

school academic and organisational practices cannot be understood independently of their social intake (Dupriez, Dumay & Vause 2008; Thurpp, 2001).

Moreover, the analysis of the *Catalan Plan* allows us to claim that the Catalan strategy is framed within a perspective of educational success that Albaigés (2008) identifies as focused on performance. This perspective sees school success as intimately tied to academic results and the annual promotion of students, and attributes great importance to two main causes: what is taught in school and the individual merit and effort of students. In fact, as is proven from our interview with a senior official in the Catalan Department of Education, ‘the three pillars of action framing the strategy to combat ESL are: school autonomy, basic skills, and strategies to manage students’ heterogeneity’ (senior official in the Directorate of Secondary Education). Based on these three pillars, the aim of the strategy is to progress towards a common goal, which is to improve students' basic skills, understood to be the basis for school success and, therefore, for reducing ESL.

The first pillar refers to a focus on the autonomy of schools and their professional leadership. The policy-makers and experts we interviewed argue that autonomy is essential; it is the basis upon which schools are able to develop their own proposals to ensure the maximum skill level of all of their students. Thus, pedagogical, organisational and management autonomy are seen as the basis for establishing projects and interventions in schools that will permit them to reduce ESL. Through this approach, the school itself becomes the nucleus for improving the system and the key factor in achieving school success, as the responsibility for developing proposals to ensure the highest level of skills among students and reducing the ESL rate falls upon it.

In fact, school autonomy has been presented in recent years as a political solution to improve the efficiency of many national educational systems. However, school autonomy entails different political approaches with different impacts in terms of educational equity (Calero, 2010). Basically, the specialised literature in this field identifies two main approaches to school autonomy: the pedagogical and the managerial one (Verger & Curran, 2014). The first one delegates more competences to the schools to develop their own pedagogical projects and to adapt them to their specific social intake. The second one delegates more administrative and managerial responsibilities to the school and attributes a key role to the principal as a school manager. This managerial approach conceives schools as a ‘*small business*’ (Gunter & Forrester, 2010, p. 57) and is related to the current neoliberal reforms of school governance (Gobby, 2013, p. 274). As demonstrated by Verger and Curran (2014), the normative development of school

autonomy in Catalonia has taken place within the managerial approach, and our analysis shows that the *Catalan Plan for School Success* is also framed within the same logic. Actually, the action lines of the *Plan* aimed at school autonomy give special importance to reinforcing the leadership and managerial skills of the school principal, to supporting the accountability and the evaluative culture of schools and to the ‘autonomous’ management of schools (Catalan Department of Education, 2013, pp. 31-32).

The preference for school autonomy as the strategic axis in the plan for school success is, therefore, by no means trivial, as it has important policy implications. What is the evidence that greater autonomy will lead to better academic performance, which in turn will translate into a decline in ESL? What are the conditions under which schools can make use of such autonomy? What effects does school autonomy have on inequality in education? These questions have been the object of ongoing political debate in Catalonia but, surprisingly, are not addressed in the *Catalan Plan*. Moreover, as Bonal and Verger (2013) demonstrate, there is no direct relationship between school autonomy and academic performance. Despite this, autonomy continues to be presented as a panacea for achieving success. As the high level experts and senior officials interviewed said:

At the international level everyone knows that the quality of education depends on three key factors, which are autonomy, school leadership and evaluation (...). All the countries in the world pivot around these three factors (Secretary for Education Policies in the Catalan Department of Education).

Autonomy is a key vector (...). It has long been noted as a reference to improve the quality of education systems by Europe and the OECD (...). All of the international reports refer to this axis as a key factor (The Directorate of Secondary Education in the Catalan Department of Education).

The second pillar, transverse to the other two, is reflected in the emphasis on achieving basic skill levels. In fact, four of the five main objectives of the *Catalan Plan* refer in a quite redundant manner to this issue: 1) improve the skill level of primary school students, 2) improve the skill level of students in compulsory secondary education, 3) improve the academic performance of compulsory secondary education students and increase the graduation rate, 4) improve the skill level of students in foreign languages and 5) reduce the rate of Early School Leaving (which is understood to be the result of meeting the four previous objectives) (Catalan Department of Education, 2013, p. 22). Thus, the

conception of school success as measured by performance, which we referred to earlier, arises from the objectives themselves. Consequently, a direct and linear relationship between better performance and less ESL is assumed, which surprisingly contrasts with the educational data presented for the Catalan case. Moreover, this assumption (more academic performance will directly lead to less ESL) ignores the fact that, in order to prevent ESL, actions aimed at the expressive domains of schooling and not only at the instrumental ones are needed. As demonstrated by the research of Van Houtte and her colleagues (Van Houtte, 2011; Van Houtte Van Maele, 2012; Van Houtte, Demanet & Stevens, 2013), students' sense of belonging to their schools is a crucial predictor of the risk of dropping out, and this is not always directly explained by students' academic achievement. In this respect, articulating a *Catalan Plan* to combat ESL that does not introduce specific reflections and measures related to students' bonding and belonging seems to be insufficient to achieve educational success in the broad sense.

Finally, the third pillar refers to the mechanisms aimed at managing pupils' heterogeneity and at detecting learning difficulties. Of course, managing heterogeneity can be specified in highly different measures and policy interventions. This is the objective of the realist evaluation: to identify the specific meaning of the discourses and the concepts in different contexts, as mobilised by different political actors. In our analysis, the final objective of managing heterogeneity – as explicitly declared in the *Catalan Plan* - is to improve the skill level of students. In this respect, one of the main plans proposed within the *Catalan Plan* to address students' diversity is the so-called 'Intensive Improvement Programme' (in Spanish, PIM). The PIM is a specific measure that targets students in the first year of secondary school (Grade 7) who finished primary schooling with low performance grades (Catalan Department of Education, 2014). Its objective is to improve students' basic skills, in the specific areas of language and mathematics.

To do this, the PIM provides academic reinforcement in these basic skills through flexible ability grouping mechanisms featured by low student-teacher ratios. This measure, therefore, could imply significant modification of the Spanish and Catalan education 'comprehensive' system, as the legislation does not contemplate the possibility of grouping students according to their abilities (Authors, 2015b). Actually, the PIM has been the object of great controversy within the Catalan education community, as it may result in segregating students in school based on their level of learning difficulties. Moreover, considering that participating in this programme involves students spending

half of the school hours doing academic reinforcement (13 hours per week), the question is: which subjects do these students have to give up – mainly elective courses - and how can this affect their educational motivation and, consequently, their educational trajectory. Another important aspect regarding the programme is to question whether there is a social pattern of the students participating in the PIM because, as many studies have demonstrated (Dauber, Alexander & Entwisle, 1996; Gamoran, 2002), the likelihood of being in the lower-performing groups is higher among working-class students and ethnic minorities, thus resulting in a reproduction of social inequalities. Despite these concerns, the answer of the Catalan Secretary for Education Policies when asked about them was as follows: ‘the *Plan* just organises in a better way something that already happens in the classrooms’, thus naturalising and legitimising the practice of ability grouping.

In short, the results of the analysis demonstrate that the logic underlying the intervention of the *Catalan Department of Education* in the area of Early School Leaving is based on three main pillars: school autonomy, compensatory strategies to manage pupils’ heterogeneity, and skills reinforcement as a way to increase students’ academic performance and therefore reduce the risk of ESL.

## **6. The Barcelona Education Consortium and its focus on school attachment**

The educational policies and programmes of Barcelona city are designed and implemented by the Barcelona Education Consortium, an administrative body co-managed by the Government of Catalonia and the Local Government. One of the priorities of the *Consortium*, since its establishment in 2002, has been to combat ESL, which is reflected in the great amount and variety of programmes it manages in this regard.

Conceptually, the *Consortium* understands ESL to be a complex and multi-factorial phenomenon and an indicator of the success of the whole education system. Although the *Consortium* also prefers to speak of success rather than failure, its conception of success is different from that of the Catalan Department of Education and, as will be seen, can be framed within a logic that, according to Albaigés’ (2008) proposal, falls somewhere between attachment and equity. That is, on the one hand, it focuses on the form of the connection students have with the education system, which goes beyond academic results and, on the other, it focuses on overcoming educational inequalities. As stated by a high level official in the *Consortium*:

Dropping out of school is not just a matter of failing, of failure, but rather it is a problem that leads us to question whether or not what we are doing as a system is valid. It is not only whether we are teaching something well, but whether all of the tools serve for what they are in principle set up to do (Head of the area of secondary education in the Educational Consortium of Barcelona).

On a descriptive level, 'Success Programme 1' is a preventative programme that aims to improve basic skills and to *accompany* students throughout lower secondary schooling, providing tutoring in non-school hours for students in the last two years of primary school (Grades 5 and 6) and the first two years of secondary school (Grades 7 and 8). 'Success Programme 2' falls within the regulatory framework of curricular diversification, and is based on workshops with an alternative curriculum within and outside school for students in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> years of compulsory secondary education (Grades 9 and 10). Finally, the 'Youth Job-Training Plan' is a support programme for secondary schools, students and families to promote vocational training and guidance for young people between 16 and 18 years old who have not graduated from compulsory secondary education.

Beyond a description of these three programmes, what is their intrinsic logic? What elements do they have in common? What differentiates them – if there are differences – from the programmes promoted by the Catalan Department of Education in the *Catalan Plan for School Success*? In fact, these three programmes, like those implemented by the Catalan Department of Education, give central importance to the acquisition of students' skills. 'Success Programme 1' and 'Success Programme 2' in particular aim to improve student academic performance as one of their imperative objectives. Thus, at first sight it could seem that local and regional educational administrations share the same concept of school success focused on achievement and performance. However, a more accurate analysis of the discourses and programmes of the Barcelona Education Consortium bring to light certain particularities, certain intrinsic elements in their philosophy, that demonstrate that they go beyond a concept of success based on academic performance and that they are framed within a perspective that defines success as attachment and equity, as mentioned earlier.

We must first take into account the *Consortium* recognition of social inequality as a fundamental factor for understanding ESL and for framing possible forms of intervention. This recognition was precisely one of the omissions of the Catalan Department of Education, much more focused – as we have seen - on school level factors as main causes

of educational failure and success. On the contrary, all the experts interviewed in the *Consortium* made explicit reference to social inequality as the primary explanatory factor in students' learning difficulties and stated that all the programmes implemented aim in one way or another to compensate for or mitigate the educational effects of inequality:

For us the philosophy of the programme must be understood as a compensatory resource in a social sense. Consider, for example, that if all your classmates have their homework done the next day and you do not because in your house nobody can help you, this is clearly a source of inequality (...). In the end, it is a question of equality, of equity (...). We are trying to compensate a little for this inequality ('Success Programme 1' Officer).

In fact, in all of the interviews conducted in the *Consortium* there are explicit and constant references to the broader social and educational contexts in explaining specific within school educational dynamics. In this respect, they advocate interconnected and interrelated pre-emptive, preventive and compensatory measures able to address the multiple and structural factors associated with ESL. Consistent with this understanding, most of the *Consortium* programmes are concentrated – at least initially – in disadvantaged neighbourhoods where social inequality is predominant.

If you want to change the dynamics of educational failure in the city, you need to act on its multiple causes. There are families living in poverty, there are neighbourhoods with not enough offer of vocational training, there are overwhelmed teachers... Several things. It is not only the kid or the school. It is the conditions they have to learn, to stay within the system, to not drop out, you know? (Head of the area of secondary education in the Educational Consortium of Barcelona).

Along the same lines, the *Consortium* also stresses the need for a greater connection between schools and the different social and educational actors in the region, emphasising that the broader social reality goes beyond the strict boundaries of the school. Thus, the *Consortium* could be characterised as a local educational administration that acts based on the principle of co-responsibility among different education agents. This educational approach being open to the environment beyond the school itself is reflected in the involvement of private firms and social organisations in curriculum diversification programmes based on the principle of shared responsibility.



Secondly, what arises from the analysis of the Consortium's documents and interviews is the need to move from a targeted and compensatory approach to a more systemic, comprehensive and holistic type of intervention to ensure better prevention of ESL and greater school success. In this regard, a change in school culture is proposed, thus questioning some of the so-called 'within school exclusionary practices', such as ability grouping, ('Success Programme 1' Officer) that currently generate and reproduce educational inequalities. In this way, the *Consortium's* approach, involving educational reinforcement or curriculum diversification, aims to go beyond a residual response focused exclusively on those students with greater difficulties. As expressed in the following statement:

We have a dual objective: to respond specifically to the students with learning difficulties but also to work for a different organisation of the schools, for different methodologies (...). We are proposing organisational spaces of *open classrooms*<sup>ii</sup>, but we think that these are methodologies that can also be good for the rest of the students ('Success Programme 2' Officer).

In this regard, the mechanisms for the management of students' diversity occupy a paramount place in the Consortium's discourses. Specifically, the focus on diversity is understood as going beyond acting exclusively on students with learning difficulties, thus requiring a global approach that should guide the everyday practices of schools in relation to all students. As one of the people responsible for 'Success Programme 2' stated, it is about letting go of the 'hospitalisation of the school' (Balaguer, Coquard & Marí, 2010). The following expression summarises the model for addressing diversity defended by the Consortium: it does not act exclusively on the 'sick' but also on the 'healthy'. With this logic, the model of curriculum diversification implemented by the *Consortium*, far from considering diversification as a deficiency or the basis for separating students according to their abilities, is designed to be inclusive and enable greater focus on the different expectations of students and in this way decrease disengagement from school:

For me, the theory of the *open classroom* or diverse classroom is very good as long as it works to help the student return to the normal classroom, for this to be possible. But to do this, there have to be high expectations for each student and that is not always possible and look, I always work with very motivated teachers and who really believe in this, but it is still complicated ('Success Programme 2' Officer).

This is where the third characteristic feature of the Consortium orientation appears: the focus on school attachment and educational support. School attachment refers to fostering the identification of students and their families with the expressive values of the school, that is, with the overall values, norms and behaviour that the school as an educational agent promotes (Bernstein, 1988). In this regard, the *Consortium* goes beyond academic performance *per se* and understands that the foundation for improving performance is attaining a greater emotional bond between student and school. This can be seen in the reflections of all the experts interviewed:

It is a matter of connection. To prevent students from quitting school, they have to feel rooted in the school and committed to the educational process. The question is how to make them feel connected. And this has to do with emotional relationships. It is an emotional, relational issue (Expert from the Barcelona Education Consortium).

What that student needed was this: to begin to learn in a different way, to feel different, that they demanded something else from him or her. Not on a cognitive level, but about attitudes toward life and work. Because they need to find meaning in what they do, right? (Expert from the Barcelona Education Consortium).

As pointed out above, the mechanisms proposed by the *Consortium* to attain greater student attachment involve precisely bringing about a transformation in school culture, whether from the organisational and pedagogical perspective – making educational and vocational trajectories more flexible, implementing more transversal and attractive learning mechanisms – or from an expressive and symbolic perspective, involving a more personalised orientation and greater attention to the individual needs of students.

Based on this logic, the experts from the *Consortium* give great importance to providing support to students throughout the educational process as a means to combat ESL. This refers not only to involvement at the instrumental level, in their learning, but to involvement in the educational process itself. In this regard, particular importance is given to offering personalised guidance and support in school, which will help to increase students' confidence and expectations throughout their educational trajectory. Examples of this approach are found in the following statements:

Supporting the students is basic, a bond, that which connects [the students] (Expert from the Barcelona Education Consortium).

In general, after repeating again and again, they end up feeling really useless... it is so complicated and confusing that when you clarify it a little and find a solution to failure, they see a way out and can relax and they say: man, this is what I was looking for (Expert from the Barcelona Education Consortium).

Indeed, not only must students be supported at each educational level, but also the combined action of the three programmes mentioned – ‘Success Programme 1’, ‘Success Programme 2’ and ‘Youth Job-Training Plan’ – is specifically intended to support them through educational transitions in order to avoid processes of school disengagement. In this regard, the different programmes managed by the *Consortium* aim to provide solutions to the ‘black holes’ of the different stages that structure the educational trajectory. ‘Success Programme 1’ focuses on the transition from primary to secondary education, ‘Success Programme 2’ on compulsory secondary education and the ‘Youth Plan’ on the passage from secondary education to the different training and occupational itineraries that may be alternatives to post-compulsory secondary education.

In short, the approach underlying the *Consortium's* intervention in the field of ESL is based on three main pillars of intervention: recognising social context and, in particular, social and educational inequality, the transformation of school culture, and a focus on support and school attachment as the foundation for achieving success.

## **7. Conclusions**

Comparative analysis of the *Catalan Department of Education* and the *Barcelona Education Consortium* in their work to support school success has demonstrated the usefulness of a realist evaluation to properly understand education policies, specifically ESL policies. Although both institutions state that their main objective is to foster educational success, this objective is pursued through significantly different types of intervention, particularly in regard to their underlying logic. The very concept of educational success mobilised by both institutions is rather divergent. Consequently, although both institutions have programmes that are very similar in form (consider academic tutoring, for example), they are different in their logic. While those of the *Department* focus almost exclusively on schools and improving academic performance,

those of the *Consortium* extend their outlook to the broader educational and social context in which the schools operate and specifically focus on strengthening all that precedes student performance: trust, connection, support and engagement. The underlying assumptions framing the intervention of both institutions are, then, hugely different. In the case of the Catalan Government, the explanatory pattern for educational success is as follows: the school level actions frame the context, the academic skills reinforcement informs the mechanism and the increase in educational performance is the outcome to be achieved. In contrast, in the case of the local government, the context is framed by a more systematic approach to educational inequalities, the mechanisms are mainly based on fostering school attachment and the expected outcome, even if difficult to measure, goes beyond performance in itself and includes elements such as raising expectations or improving opportunities for successful educational transition.

This article, therefore, stresses the need to strengthen critical analysis of the policies employed to combat ESL and promote school success (Author, 2015a). In other words, an analysis is required which is capable of escaping from widely held positivist conceptions of education policies and reforms that address them exclusively from the logic of a ‘problem-solving approach’, without asking about their origin, logic and nature. Such an analysis, following the approach of Dale and Robertson (2012), must be oriented toward a critical examination of policies able to place them in their broader context and to question the ontologies, logics, ideas and interests underlying contemporary education reforms and policies.

The application of this perspective to the study of Early School Leaving and school success has a crucial relevance precisely because of the increasing importance of these items in national and international policy agendas. ESL is undoubtedly a ‘problem’ with very important individual, social and economic implications (NESSE, 2009), but the definition of this ‘problem’ and its possible solutions is not at all a neutral matter. On the contrary, it is a political-ideological issue that must be questioned and de-naturalised. In this respect, applying a realist evaluation to the analysis of ESL policies is not only useful to reinforce critical and complex analysis of education policies from an academic perspective, but also to inform politicians and stakeholders about the importance of searching for ‘complex solutions’ to ‘complex problems’, thus understanding the broad ‘Context-Mechanism-Outcome pattern’ embedded in different education policies.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> The compulsory age of schooling in Catalonia is from 6 (Grade 1) to 16 (Grade10) years old.

<sup>ii</sup> For Grades 9 and 10, secondary schools can organise smaller groups of 10-15 students called Open Classrooms. In these groups, teachers offer a diversified curricular content, pedagogical methodologies and evaluation criteria. The rationale of such a device is to promote more holistic learning and offer more manual activities in order to stimulate students' motivation for learning while strengthening core competencies.