Naming and blaming early school leavers: an analysis of educational policies, discourses and practices in Spain[1].

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Forthcoming publication:

Tarabini, A. (2014) "Naming and Blaming Early School Leavers: an analysis of educational policies, discourses and practices in Spain' In: A. Kupfer (ed.) Power and Education. Contexts of Oppression and Enabling. Palgrave MacMillan.

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1. Introduction

Early school leaving (ESL) is one of the main challenges facing the Spanish education system. With 24, 9% of the population between 18 and 24 years old who has not completed compulsory secondary schooling or who is not enrolled in post-compulsory education[2], Spain doubles the ESL percentage regarding the UE-27 (12, 8%) and it is far from the European Benchmark fixed in this area: having no more of 10% ESL in the whole UE by the year 2020 and 15% for the Spanish case.

Given the importance of the phenomenon, several discourses, policies and practices at both the national and the regional level have proliferated and are evidence that combating ESL has become a priority. At first glance, there appears to be general consensus on the priority of this issue that goes beyond specific policy options and specific territorial contexts. As Escudero and Martínez (2012) argue, however, this general consensus vanishes when we get down to details, when we look at responses to such fundamental questions as who early school leavers are, why they leave school and

[1] This paper has been produced within the project ABJOVES "*Early School Leaving in Spain: An Analysis of Young People's Educational Expectations, Decisions and Strategies*" (Spanish Ministry of Economy 2012-2015). See http://www.abjoves.es

[2] The official formulation of the European Strategy 2020 is the following: "percentage of the population aged 18-24 with at most lower secondary education and not in further education or training". Consequently, the concept of ESL includes both dropping out of school before concluding the secondary compulsory schooling and the post-compulsory one.

how to solve the “problem”. ESL is a phenomenon designed with certain words and meanings, interpreted and valued according to different perspectives and discourses. “The concepts to define or sanction it entail different meanings for different involved actors, sometimes ambiguous and even arbitraries” (Escudero, 2005: 1).In this context, the aim of the paper is to explore "what is taken for granted" in the policies, discourses and practices in the fight against ESL, and to respond to the following questions: How is the risk of early school leaving defined? What is the profile of students at risk of ESL? What are the main factors in causing ESL? What are considered to be the main solutions to this “problem”? The initial hypothesis is that the answers to these questions are not neutral. On the contrary, they involve important technologies of power linked to the normalisation, psychologisation and self-responsibilisation of the risk of dropping out of school, and they ignore the class relations, class identities and class subjectivities hidden behind this phenomenon.

To carry out the analysis certain analytical tools from the work of Michael Foucault (1977, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1983,.) are used; in particular, the paper illustrates the way in which "regimes of truth" are constructed in relation to both the "problem" of ESL and its “solution”. In addition, it is explored the construction of "common sense" regarding what a "good" or "bad" student is and what the role of the school is in both cases. As a result, the analysis is not only focused on education policy, but also on schools, focusing in particular on the discourses and practices of teachers and other school staff regarding students at risk of dropping out of school. As authors such as Rumberger (2011) and Enguita et al (2010) point out, it is essential to study the role of the school and teachers in the “decisions” students make to continue or drop out of school, as it is often not a question of deciding to leave school but of being "pushed out". Obviously, schools and teachers act within a broad structural, political and institutional framework that conditions their actions. However, it does not reduce their importance as active agents in the production and reproduction of educational inequalities. Educational disadvantages can be constructed and reconstructed through pedagogy, the curriculum, evaluation processes and daily relations within the classroom (Bernstein, 1985). As a result, it is fundamental to study micro-processes within the school, where educational inequalities are produced and reproduced, placing the focus on the practices and expectations of teachers and other school staff members.

The paper is organized into the following sections: The first section analyses the "regimes of truth" that are hidden behind current policies to respond to ESL in Spain

and Catalonia. The second section explores how school staff explains ESL and identifies three major explanatory factors in their discourses: students' lack of commitment, family deficit and the pathologisation of diversity. The third section reflects, as a conclusion, on the importance of identifying the power relations hidden beneath current policies, practices and discourses regarding ESL . The analysis is based on current research being carried out as part of the ABJOVES Project [Early School Leaving in Spain: An Analysis of Young People's Educational Expectations, Decisions and Strategies]. The ABJOVES project has carried out rigorous analysis of policies to combat ESL at different levels of policy making and has interviewed teachers, school principals and academic coordinators in secondary schools. The project also includes interviews with students at-risk of dropping out of school and those that have already done so. For reasons of space, however, the perspective of these students has not been included in this paper.

2. The construction of regimes of truth in policies to combat early school leaving

In December 2013, Spain passed the Organic Law for the Improvement of the Quality of Education (LOMCE), the country's seventh educational reform since the establishment of democracy. The law was passed with only the votes of the governing Partido Popular (PP) (Conservatives), as it was opposed by all the other political parties in the parliament. In fact, the LOMCE has been widely criticised, not only for its content, but also for a process that failed to take the views of the educational community into account and for a lack of political and social consensus regarding its measures.

As explicitly stated in wording of the law, "the main objectives of the reform are to reduce the rate of early school leaving, improve educational results based on international criteria and improve the employability of students and stimulate their entrepreneurial spirit" (Ministry of Education, 2013: 97862). Given the importance attributed to reducing ESL in the objectives of the LOMCE, it is essential to explore how this "problem" is constructed and framed. In other words, what are considered to be the causes of the high level of ESL in Spain? How was this new education law justified? How are the reforms of the education system required by this law legitimated?

According to the text of the law, the educational reform is based on five principles:: "increasing the autonomy of schools, strengthening the management

capacity of school administration, introducing external evaluations at the end of each educational stage, rationalising the educational offer and the flexibilisation of the educational trajectories" (Ministry of Education, 2013: 97862). Supporters of the reform believe that these measures will increase the quality of education and permit Spain to achieve the European benchmarks regarding ESL.

In fact, both the adoption of these specific measures and the need to reform the education system itself are presented as purely technical and rational issues having nothing to do with political ideologies. Educational reform is presented as the best way to improve students' knowledge and skills and, thus, to face the challenges of the so called 'knowledge society'. In turn, specific policy options are presented as if they are in the national interest and for the development of the country. As stated by Spain's Minister of Education, José Ignacio Wert, in the context of the publication of the first draft of the law: "This is a reform that looks outward, that is sensible, gradual, instrumental (it will improve employment), and in no way ideological" (Grau, 2012: 1-2). Following the same logic, the text of the law justifies the necessity of reform based on "the objectivity of comparative international studies", "recommendations of the OECD" and "the practices of education systems with the best results" (Ministry of Education, 2013: 97861-97862), framing the reforms in exclusively technical and rational terms and avoiding the political dimensions involved in its design and implementation (Bonal and Tarabini, 2013). Moreover, following Steiner-Khamsi (2004), we would argue that in a context of globalisation, national educational reforms have increasingly relied on external forms of legitimation. In this case, results of other European countries in international rankings are used to legitimate specific Spanish educational reforms and to present them in a non-controversial way.

In what follows the analysis explores how one of the specific principles of the law is explained and justified: the flexibilisation of educational trajectories. The reason to focus in this principle is because it is, according to the law, the most directly related to the expected reduction of ESL. In fact, one of the main objectives of the LOMCE is to end the "demonstrated failure of the educational structure and the principles established by the LOGSE [the ERA approved by the Socialist Party in 1990]". According to the PP, the previous educational reforms passed by the Socialist Party consolidated a mediocre educational system with low levels of excellence. In this sense, the new law is intended to change one of the main principles of the LOGSE: the model of comprehensive compulsory secondary education until 16 years of age. With this aim,

the LOMCE develops programmes to improve performance in the second and third year of compulsory secondary education, introduces basic vocational training starting at 15 years old, advances the choice of pathways in both the baccalaureate and vocational training and consolidates two clearly differentiated trajectories in the last year of compulsory secondary education. This 'diversification' of trajectories "will permit students to receive personalised attention to guide them toward the educational path that best suits their needs and aspirations" (Ministry of Education, 2013: 97864). In fact, the new law is based on the following premise regarding the needs, aspirations and talents of students:

> *All students have talent, but the nature of this talent differs among them. As a result, the education system must have the necessary mechanisms to recognise and foster this talent. The recognition of this diversity among students in their abilities and expectations is the first step toward developing an education structure that contemplates different trajectories. The logic of this reform is based on the evolution toward a system capable of steering students toward the trajectories most suited to their capabilities* (Ministry of Education, 2013: 97858).

As can be seen, this clearly omits the role of social class hidden behind both the development of "talents" and the choice of certain educational itineraries. Everything is reduced to a question of individual preferences, capabilities and abilities. . The diversity among students (and the consequent levels of inequality in their academic results and educational trajectories) is explained by their talents and abilities –conceived as purely natural and biological- and not in relation to their opportunities.

Consequently, discourses regarding the inequality of opportunities that students from different backgrounds experience are relegated to the "domains of validity, normativity and actuality" (Foucault, cited by Ball, 2013: 23). In addition, all research that demonstrates that social class continues to be the variable with the most explanatory power to understand students' different educational itineraries is ignored (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993). Also ignored is research which shows that separating students in academic versus vocational tracks does not necessarily lead to an improvement in educational quality, and much less to reducing inequality (Van Houtte, 2004). Hence, what we find is a strategic selection of research to legitimise certain political choices and to make invisible or to ignore other research that points in a different direction than the planned reform model.

In the case of Catalonia, there isa framework document available that brings together all the policies and actions taken to combat ESL: *Ofensiva de país a favor de*

l'èxit escolar, [National drive to increase school success] presented by the Catalan Minister of Education (Convergència i Unió –CIU-, conservative/ nationalist party), Irene Rigau, in the Catalan Parliament in June 2012. This document represents a broad plan addressed to increase the school success of the population that contemplates nine lines of action including elements such diverse as the professionalisation of teaching and school management, measures of academic support for students with difficulties or fostering reading in the classrooms.

In fact, , the starting point of the Catalan Education Department is the replacement of the concept of school failure with that of school success. As explicitly mentioned in the document, school failure implies social exclusion and puts the focus entirely on students' final results. In contrast, the concept of success "allows emphasize on the aspects of the educational process that refer to the development of student potential, promoting a change in the outlook toward education" (Departament d'Ensenyament, 2012: 4). In addition, the document argues that focusing on success involves a proactive perspective, which, far from being a fact-finding mission, attempts to directly intervene in the education process. In this sense, the Education Department argues that in order to foster school success it is essential to intervene in the educational process and not only in the results. However, in deciding which factors to intervene in, we can clearly see the choice of certain elements over others. This is a choice that is clearly political and ideological, but that again is presented in purely technical, objective and neutral terms (Tarabini, Curran, Montes and Parcerisa, 2014 forthcoming).

Actually, some of the factors that the Department considers key to achieving educational success are "the professionalisation of the teaching staff and school management, teaching and learning strategies, guidance, early detection of educational needs and the involvement of families" (Departament, 2012: 4). As can be seen, intervention is focused almost entirely on the school and, in particular, on the organisational and pedagogical aspects of the school. In addition, a central role is given to the family in school success. The school and the family are clearly key agents for reducing ESL. It is also known that pedagogical strategies can contribute to increasing students' opportunities for success and that teachers are key to fostering students' commitment to their education. And there is no doubt that families have a significant role in determining the educational trajectories of their children. However, what is the context that makes these relationships possible? This broader context is missing. Thus, in *Ofensiva de País,* such central issues as school segregation and the effects of

cutbacks on teaching are ignored, as are the broader questions of educational equity and quality. We fully agree with Bonal and Verger (2013: 349) when they argue that "it does not make sense to focus solely on the school and the family and to ignore the environment as a space containing educational agents that are essential for combating school failure".

In addition, it is clear that the Department's strategy is framed within the specific perspective on success that Martinez and Albaigès (2012) identify 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 factors: what is taught in school and the individual merits and effort of students. In fact, it assumes a direct and linear relationship between better performance and lower rates of ESL, ignoring that - as national and international research has shown (Enguita, et al 2010; Rumberger, 2011) - leaving school is not only linked to instrumental issues of learning, but fundamentally to expressive issues[3] and in particular to students' lack of connection and commitment to what the educational system is offering.

As can be seen, educational success is not a straightforward or universal concept, but it is subject to specific political and ideological views conceptions. And the same occurs with the policies planned to achieve success. As a result, understanding ESL from a purely instrumental perspective linked to performance, and assuming that the solution to this 'problem' will essentially come from family involvement and the organisational and pedagogical improvement of schools is to ignore other significant explanatory factors, such as social inequalities or exclusionary practices (streaming, labelling, etc.)[4] within schools, among others.

In short, the analysis of the LOMCE and the *Ofensiva de País* allowes to identify the existence of "regimes of truth" hidden under the definition of the 'problem' of ESL and its potential solutions e; problems and solutions which are understood to be the only possible, plausible and even thinkable ones. Presenting political options as merely technical and objective questions –as made both by LOMCE and the *Ofensiva de País*- denies all possibilities to argue, to discuss, and to disagree, and omits that what counts as "the truth" is always a product of power. The power to produce discourses, to

[3] According to Bernstein (1977), the instrumental order is concerned with the transmission of formal school knowledge (learners are intended to acquire knowledge and specific vocational skills) while the expressive order is concerned with the transmission of values and norms (learners are intended to develop particular kinds of conduct and character).

[4] For more information about school exclusion practices and processes see for example Gazeley (2010)

create realities, to settle the agenda; the power to produce knowledge as the legitimated one, to distinguish between ‘true’ and ‘false’, between priority and non priority ‘problems’, between ‘right and wrong’ solutions.

According to Foucault the organisation of the discourse itself is and exercise of power; controlling and preventing what can be said and who has the right to speak. As Foucault asserts: "in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a number of procedures" (Foucaut: 1981, 52). Consequently, the discursive rules are inseparable of the exercise of power. “Discourse itself is both constituted by, and ensures the reproduction of, the social system, through forms of selection, exclusion and domination” (Young, by Hook, 2001: 2).

In fact, in the foucauldian proposal, knowledge and power are indissoluble: all forms of power are embedded within knowledge and all knowledge domains are infused by power relations. Power and knowledge are then two aspects of the same process.

> *Perhaps we should abandon a whole tradition that allows us to imagine that knowledge can exist only where the power relations are suspended and that knowledge can develop only outside its injections, its demands, its interests. We should admit rather that power produces knowledge; that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations* (Foucault, 1979: 27).

Following this approach, it is essential to problematise the very construction of the concepts of school "failure", "abandonment" and "success", bringing to light that which is invisible, naturalised and taken for granted. Why is it expected that larger flexibility of educational trajectories will led to less ESL? According to what evidences is it argued that streaming would lead to larger educational success? Why focusing on school performance measures instead of, or all together with, school support and accompaniment policies? What does educational success really mean? Success for who and how? The answer to these questions is far from being neutral or merely technical but all their political connotations are mainly avoided in the public debate.

The analysis conducted leads to the same conclusion as Escudero and Martínez (2012), who argue that the hegemonic logic behind Spanish policies to combat ESL continue to see success and failure as questions mainly related to individual merit, leaving aside other broader educational and social factors. In this way, far from being neutral, objective and impartial, the framing of the issue of ESL and its possible solutions forms part of specific political and ideological frameworks, which respond to

a clearly conservative logic, as can be seen in the case of both the LOMCE and the analysis in *Ofensiva de País*.

3. **Teachers' discursive practices regarding potential ESLers students.**

The theoretical tools that Foucault offers us are of great use in analysing the way in which teachers' discourses and practices bring into play power strategies that normalise, legitimate and/or punish certain educational practices and attitudes on the part of students. Which students are teachers thinking of when they design pedagogical strategies? What types of behaviours do they encourage or repress? How do they explain the emergence of different attitudes toward school among the students? The answers to these questions are not independent from the analysis of power and knowledge stated by Foucault and, in particular, from teachers' belief systems regarding what it means to be a "good" or "bad" student and what is a "correct/normal" or "deviant" attitude toward education.

In fact, one of the characteristics of the disciplinary penalty is the definition of behaviour and performance on the basis of the two opposed values of ‘good’ and ‘evil’. Consequently, all behaviour falls into the field between ‘good’ or ‘bad’ marks, ‘good’ or ‘bad’ attitude, etc. As Foucault declared, “school justice carried this system very far” (Foucault, 1979: 180), organising a whole micro economy of privileges and impositions. Teachers and the other school staff are key agents in defining and systematizing these power mechanisms.

Specifically, the analysis conducted in the paper attributes crucial importance to teachers' expectations as the basis upon which boundaries are set regarding what a "good student" should be and should do; as a fundamental starting point for exploring teachers' discourses and practices related to the risk of ESL. As Rist (2000) demonstrated in the 1970s, teachers' initial expectations are key in explaining students' opportunities for success or failure in school because of their effects on students' educational performance and experience of school. In addition, Rist's study showed that teachers’ image of the “ideal student” was closely linked to social class criteria. Thus, the characteristics of middle-class students were those that determined the "pattern of normality" that other students had to fit in order to be successful in school.

Based on this classic study by Rist, numerous studies have revealed how students from families with low socio-economic status are over-represented as *targets*

of teachers' low expectations. As Dunne and Gazeley (2008) argue, teachers' identification of students with "problems or learning difficulties" tends to overlap with their implicit conception of their social class. Auwarker and Aruguete (2008) came to the same conclusion, adding that teachers' negative expectations regarding students from lower socio-economic classes were especially strong in the case of male students[5]. Thus, the lower academic expectations of teachers regarding students of lower socio-economic status often generate a "naturalisation" and "normalisation" of their possible academic difficulties and even their failure and possible school dropout. In contrast, it is expected that middle-class students, with greater family educational capital, will have better attitudes, greater abilities and better academic results. In addition, as Grant (2006) has shown, for young white middle-class male students, it is easier to conceive themselves as "good students" because the characteristics of their social position fits better with the hegemonic image of the "ideal student".

The following analysis focuses on three important discursive practices among teachers regarding students at risk of dropping out of school: lack of commitment, family deficit and the pyschologisation and/or pathologisation of learning difficulties and behaviour. Obviously, these are not the only discursive practices among teachers. These practices are connected with different teachers' ethical and political attitudes. They are also connected to both the school culture and the social composition of different educational institutions. However, beyond these factors, these are discursive practices that have great importance - both quantitatively (for the frequency with which they appear) and qualitatively (for their impact on students' educational opportunities) - in the discourses of the teachers interviewed[6].

Lack of commitment as a cause of ESL

One of the principal techniques of power described by Foucault is responsibilisation, in other words, attributing ultimate responsibility to individuals for their own situation at the same time as de-responsibilising other social agents (Foucault, 2008). This assumption assumes that individuals are free and rational in deciding on their own

5 Although the focus of this chapter is on social class, it is important to point out that class is clearly articulated with gender and ethnicity (Reay, 1998). Thus, the negative expectations of teachers regarding students of low socio-economic status are especially strong in the case of male students and those of immigrant origin.

6 Our analysis is based on the results of the interviews carried out with teachers, principals, counsellors, and academic coordinators as part of the previously cited ABJOVES project, as well as from a complementary project carried out during the 2012-13 -2013-14 academic years on the situation of secondary education students in an average size municipality in the province of Barcelona (Catalonia).

actions, eliminating the effect of structural conditions on individual practices, strategies and decision-making. The student, therefore, constructed as an autonomous, competitive and rational individual, is the primary agent responsible for his/her school success or failure.

This type of discursive practice is clearly revealed when the school staff is asked about what they believe are the causes of the academic and/or behavioural difficulties of certain students. Thus, lack of motivation, effort and commitment appear as central factors in their explanations of the educational results and trajectories of these students.

> *It is very difficult with some of them [students]. They begin missing classes and when they are old enough [16 years of age] they leave school.... Others don't take advantage of the time because they simply refuse, refuse.... There is no way to get them to see that in the short-term or the long-term it will be beneficial for them to continue in school, to get a diploma or for whatever. They choose to leave and that's it.* (Academic coordinator of a publicly subsidised private school with a student body of working class origin).

> *What do you think is hidden, that explains this student profile? Okay, first it is their attitude. That's clear, isn't it? it's very difficult to change their attitude. First, because they have no interest, none. But of them, no interest of any type. Then, it is very complicated because they arrive from primary school with this attitude.* (Academic coordinator of a public high school with a very heterogeneous student body).

As can be seen in these comments, the student's interest in what school offers is presented as a merely a question of personal decision. The assumption is that the content and methodology of the education are correct and that, therefore, it is the student who must adapt to them. Thus, it is exclusively an issue of a student wanting an education or not; the effect of social origin on students' attitudes, dispositions and educational practices is ignored. In addition, discursive practices based on lack of commitment tend to hide a strict separation between the instrumental and expressive dimensions of educational attitudes, considering that although the former is not only the responsibility of the individual, the latter is perfectly manageable and controllable. In other words, it is understood that students consciously, freely and rationally "decide" to behave well or badly in school, while having good or bad grades is more than just a matter of choice. In that sense, the whole indefinite domain of the 'non-conforming', of the 'non-adapting', to the established 'good attitudes and rules' become punishable. In Foucault's own words: "a pupil's offence is not only a minor infraction, but also an inability to carry out his tasks" (Foucault, 1979: 177)

Based on this strict separation between ‘good’ and ‘bad’, ‘performance’ and ‘attitude’, an image is constructed of students "deserving and undeserving" of specific educational interventions. Those who are deserving are those "who make an effort", "who try", who behave as is expected. They are, in short, those who do not doubt or question the school order. The "others", those that do not behave according to the established pattern of the "ideal student", are not considered apt for receiving certain educational resources.

The policies of behaviour then hierarchize the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ subjects not only in relation to one abstract, ideal, supposed ‘normal’ pattern, but also in relation to one another. Moreover, differentiation between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ students, between ‘deserving’ and ‘non deserving ones’ is not only linke to students’ acts and attitudes but above all to the individuals, to the subjects, themselves; to their nature, their potentialities (Foucault, 1979: 181)

> *We will never propose a group with an adapted curriculum for students with behavioural problems. The idea is to give an opportunity to the student that we really see can and wants to take advantage of it. The student that has learning difficulties, but not the one with behavioural problems (...) to be in this group, students must prove their commitment and dedication because the school invests its time in them, it is an opportunity for them, so in this contract we make it very clear: if the student does not take advantage of this resource he/she returns to the regular group.* (Principal of a public high school with a social body mostly from low middle classes).

> *If a student behaves very badly, he or she won't go to 3rd A or 4th A [adapted groups]. Students are in these groups because of their grades. It is for students that, for whatever reason, have a poor base or lack ability. It is for people that want to be in the normal group but cannot be (...) If there is someone that disrupts class and doesn't let others work, we don't let them join [the adapted group]. The commitment is clear: going to the adapted group is an advantage for the student, because having a teacher for 10 students is a luxury, because it is adjusted to their level, they help them to pass, but then [the student] has to commit to controlling himself, to behaving well, if not he has to go to a normal group.* (Teacher in a public high school with a social body mostly from low middle classes).

In this way, specific attention for students with difficulties is conceived as a reward and not as an educational right that all students should have. As a result, from this perspective, it is assumed that devoting specific resources (in the form of teaching staff, organisation of the timetable, etc.) to respond to the existing educational diversity of the student body is an exception and not the basis upon which to organise the day to

day activity of schools. In addition, as Escudero and Martínez (2012) have shown, the dominant focus in Spain to deal with school failure has been to design special programmes for at-risk students, partial and non-systemic programmes: Practices and mechanisms parallel to the "standard" structure and functioning of schools that serve to manage the school day of the students with the most difficulties.

According to the Foucauldian perspective, this process has a double effect: on the one hand, it allows distributing students according to their aptitudes' and conducts' proximity to the established pattern of 'normality' ; on the other hand, it exercises over the students a constant pressure to conform the same model, so that "they might all be subjected to subordination and docility... they might all be like one another' (Foucault, 1979: 182).

Lastly, it is highly significant that many of the school staff interviewed ignored the responsibility of schools and teachers in explaining students' attitudes toward school, above all, those students that were the most difficult. As Auwarker and Aruguete (2008) showed in their study, school failure is often perceived as outside of teachers' control.

> *We are secondary school teachers, we have university degrees, we know our subjects, but we are not psychologists. I can explain whatever you want in my field, but I studied psychology and pedagogy, so I do what I can with the students. I try to understand what I can, but you can't ask the impossible.* (Academic coordinator in a public high school with a very heterogeneous student body).

Family deficit as an explanation for ESL

The lack of commitment attributed to the students as a cause for their academic difficulties extends to the family sphere as well. Referring to a "lack of interest", "lack of involvement" and "lack of support" from families becomes common in explaining why some families do not behave as expected by the school. Thus, working class families, those with lower socio-economic and educational status, are often blamed for delegating the education of their children to the schools, without questioning what their real opportunities are for carrying out the educative tasks that teachers expect. To what extent do families understand and share the demands of the school? What are the educational expectations of families regarding their children? And in relation to the school? To what extent is the school perceived as a space that is "ours", a space where families have a right to make decisions and express an opinion? The concept of "family

otherness" regarding the school, used by Bonal (2003), is of great usefulness in responding to these questions, as it puts the focus on the distance that some families feel, perceive and experience in relation to the demands and expectations of the school. Social origin shapes different models and ways of relating with the school, so that what is "normal" for some is absolutely "impossible" for others. As a result, it is essential to consider the effect of social class on families' educational practices. This is an issue that is not always considered when teachers discuss the educational situation of their students.

> *What do you think is behind, explains, this student profile? Okay, first is their (students') attitude. And second is the parents. Collaboration with the parents is basic. That parents think what we do here is important, that parents value teachers, that they take seriously what is said, what has to be done. If the parents don't do this..... it's very complicated.* (Academic coordinator in a public high school with a very heterogeneous student body).

> *It's happening more and more, the students with the most social and academic problems come from families with problems. At the beginning of the school year we have a meeting with the parents; they only have to come for an hour in the afternoon. But in one class maybe 7 come, in the other, maybe 12. There's a lack of interest. Not always, but there is a very clear cause and effect relationship between dysfunctional families and learning.* (Academic coordinator of a publicly subsidised private school with a student body of working class origin).

Clearly, the image of the ideal student that we referred to previously has its parallel in an ideal family. This ideal family is middle class with a high level of cultural capital and capable of collaborating with the school in the educational process. In addition, family models that are far from this "norm" tend to be perceived from the logic of deficit. In other words, the norms of the western middle class tend to be considered universal and, therefore, variations from them are considered to be deficits, rather than differences resulting from social inequality. As Gay (2002) states, "these presumptions of universality and deficiency are some of the major causes of inequities in the educational opportunities provided to students from diverse ethnic, racial, cultural [and socio-economic] backgrounds (Gay, 2002: 617).

Moreover, this is not just a question of school staff omitting and/or ignoring the influence of social class on families' educational practices, but rather of the adoption of practices, perceptions and biased educational expectations based on stereotypes and stigmas. Stigma, as Goffman has pointed out, is not directly associated with the possession of specific attributes in themselves, but rather in the social conceptions

linked to those attributes, with the social construction of concepts of "normal" and "abnormal". In this way, it is presumed that certain family "problems" are what explain the educational difficulties of the student, although the specific characteristics of these families are often not known. The assumption is that certain families, those with lower socio-economic and cultural status, do not have the necessary resources to guarantee the educational development of their children. It would seem that without realizing it, teachers adopt the classic thesis of the "culture of poverty", based on which they presume that all poor people share a series of values, norms and practices that are different from the ideals and requirements of education.

> *[Regarding student behavioural problems] This is closely related to family situations. There are even studies that say that on many occasions school phobia is related to single parenthood, to that lack of authority, from a father figure.* (Principal in a public high school with high proportion of students from households with socio-economic difficulties).

> *Well, behind absenteeism and dropping out, there tend to be very dysfunctional families, extreme family situations, alcoholism, even violence (...) it's the parents who allow this situation.* (Principal of a publicly subsidised private school with a student body of working class origin).

The psychologisation and pathologisation of ESL

According to Foucault, norms in contemporary society are grounded in medical notions, and "infractors" of these norms and "deviants" need to be cured. In fact, on Foucault's account the transition to modernity entailed the replacement of the law by the norm as the primary instrument of social control. That means that, apart from punish or sanction the 'deviant' behaviour has to be increasingly controlled through standards of 'normality'. Penalty becomes about correcting deviations from the norm, organizing people into ranks and classifications according to their 'normality'.

> *This is opposed to a judicial penalty whose essential function is to refer, not to a set of observable phenomena, but to a corpus of laws and texts that must be remembered (...) The disciplinary mechanisms created a 'penalty of the norm' which is irreducible in its principles and functioning to the traditional penalty of the law (...) Like surveillance and with it, normalization becomes one of the great instruments of power at the end of the classical age. Privilege and affiliation were increasingly replaced by a whole range of degrees of normality* (Foucault, 1979: 183-184).

The power of 'normalisation' is, then, to impose homogeneity among people, but also to measure the differences between individuals; to hierarchize these differences

according to the very ‘nature’ of the individuals. Based on this perspective, students' learning and behavioural ‘problems’ are not necessarily explained by questions of attitude but are directly associated with innate and biological factors. These kinds of discourses can be clearly observed in some of the interviews conducted with the school staff.. Essentially, students that do not meet expectations regarding behaviour or performance (the ‘normal’ and expected behavior or performance, the one that marks the ‘correct homogeneous rule’) end up being the target of medical-psychological diagnoses and interventions, under the assumption that the "unsuitability" of the school context can be explained by a mental disorder. In this way, the practices, behavior and attitudes that do not fit in the school culture are defined as pathological, are psychiatrised, andconsequently, the possibility of changing them is externalised. If the lack of commitment to school is an issue linked to psychological problems there is little that teachers can do to reverse the situation. The solution is shifted to the medical-psychological sphere, whether through the use of medications or psychological therapy to modify the behaviour of students.

> *There is a significant group of students, the most unmotivated there are. I would say it is not so much a problem of being unmotivated as much as a problem of attention deficit, more a psychiatric issue, you know. They are students that have very low abilities to respond, to be able to focus, to... to have the optimal conditions so they can learn, no? But of course, here you/we are a little bit lost because it is more a medical problem, I think.* (Teacher in a public high school with a student body mostly from high middle classes)

Given this understanding, it is essential to question the proliferation of diagnoses of mental health problems among children and adolescents. It must not be forgotten that the classification of mental disorders is extremely sensitive to socio-historical valorisations and conceptualisations. In other words, it is related to the construction of "normality" and "abnormality" in different historical, temporal, social and territorial contexts. Thus, as Foucault argued, the pathologisation of certain behaviours is a response to a demand for disciplinary and social control, which, despite being presented as "natural" or "normal", is based on specific political, valuative and ideological assumptions. The psychologisation of social problems is a key mechanism within this logic:

> *Hidden behind the behavioural problems of some students are mental problems, school phobias, depression, Asperger's, psychosis.... What we have noted in recent years, with the crisis.... with all the social problems, families without work, there are so many problems and so much anxiety at*

home.... the behaviour of the students we are getting is worsening. There is a relationship with these families that are stressed out, without work.... all of this results in unhealthy behaviour in the students.... with kids that suddenly refuse to go to school, that are seriously psychologically impaired. They can't come. It is beyond them. They can't even make it to the door.... (Principal in a public high school with high proportion of students from households with socio-economic difficulties).

The psycho-pathologisation of certain attitudes toward school is, in short, a powerful mechanism for exerting power and the grounds for exempting schools, "ordinary" pedagogical mechanisms and teachers themselves from responsibility for the risk of certain students leaving school. When a clinical discourse is constructed on the lack of students' commitment to education, when diversity is pathologised, only medical responses to a "problem" of a clearly social nature appear adequate.

4. Conclusions

The analysis conducted in this paper demonstrates the inseparable relation between power relations and the production of knowledges in contemporary societies and the role that education policies and practices plays in it. As Foucault stated: "power produces knowledge (…) Power and knowledge directly imply one another (…) There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitutes at the same time, power relations" (Foucault, 1979: 93). In this way, the power-knowledge couplet allows distinguishing between 'true' and 'false' statements, defining the techniques and procedures which are valorised for obtaining the truth, setting the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true or establishing the mechanisms for sanctioning (Foucault, 1977: 112-13).

The educational field is one of the privileged areas in the production of scientific knowledge embedded with the creation of 'truths', as it was analysed in the case of the policies addressed to reduce ESL in Catalonia and Spain. In this sense, the very meaning of educational failure or success is presented as a merely objective question, not related to specific political and ideological options. And the same happens with the 'solutions' proposed to solve the defined 'problem'. The regimes of truth created around ESL, thus, are clearly related with the propagation and selective dissemination of specific discourses by political actors representing particular ideological interests.

At the same time, the Foucauldian perspective proposed in the analysis allows understanding power in the everyday life, in the mundane practices and in the social relationships embedded in the field of education. According to this conception, the paper has attributed key importance to the micro-processes where educational inequalities are produced and reproduced and specifically to teacher's practices and expectations. Teachers are not neutral actors in dealing with inequality and in providing educational opportunities for their students. Their practices and discourses shape pupil's experiences, identities and opportunities. As has been analysed, the power of teachers lie in its enormous capacity to decide who is a 'god' or a 'bad' student and to create different rewards for each of them. The pattern of 'normality' within a specific classroom or school is created by the school staff, which has the capacity (the 'pedagogic authority') to define different types of intelligences and abilities with different values; which can create different curricula and pedagogical organisation forms according to the different established group of students. As Ball indicates: "the use of testing, examining, profiling, and streaming in education... are all examples of such dividing practices. (...) through the creation of remedial and advanced groups, and the separation of the educationally subnormal or those with special education needs, abilities are stigmatized and normalized" (Ball, 1990: 8)

Finally, the analysis seeks to demonstrate the widespread "advent of individualisation" existent in contemporary policies, practices and discourses related to ESL. That is the effect of power technologies: to omit the effect of the social class relationships, identities and subjectivities hidden under the process of ESL; to put the focus on the individual as the solely and the ultimate responsible of their educational risk and even failure. The three main causes attributed to ESL by the school staff interviewed for this paper - lack of commitment, family deficit and pyschologisation or pathologisation of learning difficulties- are with no doubt clear examples of this process.

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