

The potential role of career guidance and career education in combating early school leaving

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Early school leaving (ESL) can be costly for the individual, and for the society. Not just in economic terms, but also in terms of low self-esteem, and the risk of social exclusion. ESL can be viewed as an individual drop-out issue, or as an issue related to a range of push-out factors. The article has a focus on the potential role of career guidance, and in particular on the aspect of developing career management skills in combating ESL. No single initiative or policy will provide the end solution to ESL: early school leaving is a complex issue, a 'wicked problem'. Three approaches are suggested: prevention which seeks to combat the causes of ESL; intervention which addresses emerging difficulties at an early stage, and seeks to prevent them from leading to ESL; and compensation which aims at offering guidance and opportunities for education and training for those who have interrupted their education.

Keywords: early school leaving, lifelong guidance, drop out, push out

Introduction

Early school leaving (ESL) is a serious issue in many EU countries, and has attracted the attention of many researchers, policy-makers and educators (Oomen & Plant, 2014; Eurydice, 2014). ESL can be costly for the individual, for society and for the economy. Not just in economic terms, but also in terms of low self-esteem, and the risk of social exclusion. According to the European Commission, the benefits of young people staying longer in school are improved employment prospects, higher salaries, better health, less crime, improved social cohesion, lower public and social costs and higher productivity and growth (Eurydice, 2014, p. 3).

In short, a current EU initiative requires a shift from implementing separate ESL measures to introducing comprehensive policies that focus on the causes of ESL. Twelve key policy messages identify the critical conditions for successful policies against ESL, one of which (#11) is concerned with guidance and counselling: 'Strengthen guidance to ensure young people are aware of the different study options and employment prospects available to them. Ensure counselling systems provide young people with both emotional and practical support' (EC, 2013a, p. 5).

Theoretical framework

This article will focus on the potential role of career guidance, and in particular that of career guidance with a focus to develop career management skills in combating ESL, being aware that no single initiative or policy will provide the end solution to ESL. This reservation is based on an understanding of early school leaving as a so-called wicked problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Rittel and Webber's 1973 formulation of wicked problems in social policy planning specified ten characteristics:

1. There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem.
2. Wicked problems have no stopping rule.

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3. Solutions to wicked problems are not true-or-false, but good or bad.
4. There is no immediate and no ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem.
5. Every solution to a wicked problem is a 'one-shot operation'; because there is no opportunity to learn by trial and error, every attempt counts significantly.
6. Wicked problems do not have an enumerable (or an exhaustively describable) set of potential solutions, nor is there a well-described set of permissible operations that may be incorporated into the plan.
7. Every wicked problem is essentially unique.
8. Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem.
9. The existence of a discrepancy representing a wicked problem can be explained in numerous ways. The choice of explanation determines the nature of the problem's resolution.
10. The social planner has no right to be wrong (i. e., planners are liable for the consequences of the actions they generate).

Wicked problems are also characterised by the following:

The solution depends on how the problem is framed and vice versa (i.e., the problem definition depends on the solution)

1. Stakeholders have radically different world views and different frames for understanding the problem.
2. The constraints that the problem is subject to and the resources needed to solve it change over time.
3. The problem is never solved definitively.

In our opinion, ESL is an example of a wicked problem. An understanding of the wickedness and potential different agendas among stakeholders in the problem formulation is an important starting point in search of good solution. ESL is a result of personal, social, economic, community, education and/or family-related reasons: a gradual process that cumulates over time (EC, 2013b, p. 8–9). Mingers (2014) calls this the problems of open social systems, where the influences among reasons (what comes first and have an impact on what) not easily are schematized. Social processes are seen as links, both inside and in interconnection with other systems, where outputs in one system become input in other systems. Krogstrup (2003), similarly distinguishes between 'wild' and 'tame' problems: wild problems are many -faced and complex, and have no simple solutions'.

In connection with the potential different agendas among stakeholders, it is also important to bear in mind that a fundamental aspect of career guidance has been, and still is, how to balance the needs of the individuals and the need of the society. As Watts suggests, a distinction may be made between career guidance being viewed as 'a worthy private good, which bestows benefits to individuals who should have a civic right to have access to it regardless of the resources at their private disposal, and as a public good which generates social and economic benefits over and above those accruing to the individuals who receive it' (Watts, 1999, p. 13). In a holistic perspective, one might say that a strategy should reflect the aspects of benefits to both users and to society as a whole. However, Plant (2012) argues that there is an ongoing power struggle between representatives of the different needs in relation to defining the priorities between the private and the public good. He concludes that the capability of the society to utilize the productive potential of their inhabitants, via guidance, is the current prioritized agenda. This can potentially have an impact on both how the problem and the solutions are defined. As Krueger and Gibbs says: 'The process of translating 'big public ideas' into practice is a messy, highly politicized one' (Krueger & Gibbs, 2007, p. 9). In this understanding it is difficult to see where the problem centres are, and less apparent where and how we should intervene. Following Bacchi (2009), the most intractable problems is that of defining problems and finding where in the complex causal networks the problem really lies.

Therefore, before getting to the potential role of career guidance in combating ESL, it is important with some backdrop of the concept of ESL, both how it is understood and expressed among different political stakeholders, and how it is operationalized into practice in different countries. We start with defining ESL. In this section, we also involve a description of some corresponding concepts to ESL.

What is Early School Leaving?

ESL is not a fixed concept. In some contexts it is used interchangeably with alternative terms: ELET (Early Leavers from Education and Training), interrupted learners, school dropouts, NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) (Oomen & Plant, 2014). All these phenomena are defined slightly differently, but at the same time grasping some corresponding elements of what the problem and possible solution might be.

Eurostat looks at the percentage of 18-24 year olds that attained lower secondary education or less (ISCED 0, 1, 2 or 3c short) and who did not take part in education or training during the four weeks preceding the survey (EC, 2013b, p.8). The OECD looks at the percentage of adults who have attained at least upper secondary education (ISCED 3, excluding 3c short) (OECD 2013, p.36).

And on a national level, governments may apply different yardsticks. The Netherlands, for example, applies the term ESL to the percentage of students who left education before they attained qualifications on ISCED level 3 (Oomen & Plant 2014).

School dropouts/ interrupted learners

Recently the European Commission distinguished ESL/ELET from school dropouts or interrupted learners. As the latter term suggest, these notations refer to those who discontinue an ongoing-course during a school term (EC 2013a). However, the published numbers on the ESL/ELET amount relate to recent ESL, i.e. at the point of school leaving. This tends to disregard the fact that some of the ESL find their way back into education, and actually reach the projected level of schooling and training.

NEET

There is some overlap between ESL and NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training), as the NEET category is defined by Eurostat: 'NEET encompasses all unemployed and inactive young persons (15–24 year olds) who are not in education or training'. The NEET is a heterogeneous group with a wide variety of backgrounds: from disadvantaged, disengaged youth to highly educated young people. The reasons for the NEET status range from becoming NEET as a school dropout, losing a job, or deciding to be NEET. The NEETs include young people who have none or little control over their situation: e.g. being unemployed, ill, disabled, or a young carer. Some sub-groups of NEETs, however, do have control over their situation, such as youngsters who are not seeking work, education or training, and are not constrained from doing so by other obligations or incapacities. The NEET category also includes those youngsters who are involved in activities such as unpaid voluntary work, art projects, and travelling during a 'gap year' (Eurofound, 2012).

In 2013, according to Eurostat, the EU28 average NEET rate was 13%, slightly decreasing since 2012 but still high compared to the 12.8% in 2010. These rates vary considerably as well across the EU with rates from below 5.2% to above 18%, and notably across the regions in each country (Oomen & Plant, 2014).

The different definitions have in common that they focus on the attainment of a certain level of schooling and learning of the population as a solution. This reflects the overall view that the potentials of youth should be utilized and developed through learning. In addition ample evidence shows that different groups of school leavers are more at risk of unemployment and social exclusion, resulting in monetary and non-monetary costs to themselves and, in the longer run, to society (EC, 2013b, p. 25). In correspondence with the focus on lifelong learning, the focus on fulfilment of education and training for young people may be a conflicting issue. We will come back to this in the discussion section of this article.

ESL across Europe

Since 2011, each EU Member State has set their national ESL target, and yearly submits a National Reform Programme to the European Commission to show progress in this area and the way how this is accomplished. In 2014,¹ according to Eurostat, the EU28 average ESL or ELET rate was 11,1%, a decrease compared to the 14.0% in 2010 and 14.8% in 2008. However the rates vary considerably across the EU with rates varying from below 6% to above 17%.

- Some Member States have ESL rates above 10% with little progress or stagnation in recent years.
- Other Member States with ESL rates above 10% show a significant progress since 2009.
- Member States with ESL rates below 10% that met with increase or stagnation recently.
- More than half of the EU countries have ESL rates below 10% and made further progress in recent years.

What the countries have in common, when it comes to aims to combating ESL, is the effort to motivate students to stay on in education, to be motivated to continue their education, and to find meaning in learning. Schools and other educational/training institutions, on the other hand, struggle to develop educational inclusion in making space for students with complex learning, social, and economic challenges.

Initiatives on an European policy level

In Europe 2020, the European Union's ten-year jobs and growth strategy, decreased ESL is one of five headline targets to achieve by the end of 2020. More specific, the goals are to reduce the rates of early school leaving below 10%. Beside the targets in Europe 2020, The European Commission has dealt with ESL on several occasions. These are some examples:

- In June 2010, the EU education ministers agreed on a framework for coherent, comprehensive, and evidence-based policies to tackle early school leaving. This was followed up June 2011, when the Education Council adopted a recommendation on policies to reduce ESL (EC, 2011). They define the comprehensive strategies on early school leaving as follows:

'comprise a mix of policies, coordination across different policy sectors and the integration of measures supporting the reduction of early school leaving into all relevant policies aimed at children and young people. In addition to education policies that promote high-quality school systems, these are principally social policy and support services, employment, youth, family, and integration policies. Horizontal coordination between different actors and vertical coordination through different levels of government are equally important. Strategies on early school leaving should com-

1. <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tsdsc410&plugin=1>

prise prevention, intervention and compensation elements. Member States should select the detailed components of their strategies according to their own circumstances and contexts' (Page 4).

- A Thematic Working Group on ESL, bringing together policy makers and practitioners from nearly all EU countries has looked at good practice examples in Europe and exchanged experiences in reducing early school leaving. A report was produced in November 2013 (EC, 2013a) and states that policies to tackle ESL need to address all levels of education.
- A more recent report from Eurydice (2014) gives a comprehensive overview of the state of affairs across Europe in addressing strategies, policies and measures to combat ESL.
- Current EU policies related to ESL cross-link the issue of ESL with employment, health, economic and other issues (EC, 2013c).

The potential role of career guidance and career education in combating ESL

As mentioned above, there are several political initiatives pointing to the importance of integrating guidance in combating ESL. Beside the European Commission's inclusion of guidance and counselling in their list of key messages for policy development in combating ESL, several other correlating initiatives has been made on a European policy level. The European Council of Ministers of Education, first in 2004, and then again in 2008, have adopted EU Council Resolutions on Lifelong Guidance with a view to better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies. As a lifelong strategy the definition of career guidance adopted for a vast number of OECD/EU/World Bank reviews a decade ago encompasses a number of activities, often conducted in formal settings, such as schools or public employment services (PES), but social media, games, roles plays, work experience programmes, and other activity-based approaches are increasingly part of these efforts (OECD, 2004). In short, guidance is much more than a face-to-face interview. It includes informing, advising, assessing, teaching, enabling, advocating, networking, feeding back, managing, innovation/system change, signposting, mentoring, sampling work experience or learning tasters and following up (Ford, 2002).

As with the problem (ESL), career guidance is not a fixed and unified concept. As delimitation, we will focus our discussion on the development of Career Management Skills (CMS), organized in formal school based career education. This delimitation is based on findings that suggest that career guidance traditionally is delivered through school-based guidance services, often defined as career education (Oomen & Plant, 2014; Guichard, 2001). It is also based on the recommendations that career guidance in a lifelong perspective should focus on the development of CMS (EU, 2008; ELGPN, 2012).

Career Management Skills

In the most recent Resolution (EU, 2008), the importance of developing Career Management Skills (CMS) for all European citizens are highlighted. Since 2007, CMS has been one of the four focal points of action of the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network's recommendations for lifelong guidance provision (Sultana, 2012). Outside Europe, similar initiatives have been taken. In Canada, CMS are explicitly connected with combating drop out (Jarvis, 2003). Jarvis argues that: 'Those with career management skills are more likely to choose education, training and employment that meet their own unique needs, and those of the evolving workplace. In turn, indi-

viduals who find suitable work are more likely to be productive and remain in their jobs longer. This results in higher productivity and lower recruitment and training costs for employers. People capable of self-reliantly managing their career because they have acquired a strong set of transferable skills are less likely to be under-employed or unemployed for extended periods, to need social assistance, to require health care due to work-related stress, to flounder in arbitrarily chosen education and training programs, or to drop out' (Jarvis, 2003, p. 1). In a European survey, ELGPN found two linked rationales that underpin the interest in promoting CMS (Sultana, 2012). Both to increase employability, and to promote social equity and inclusion. A third rationale is a greater awareness of the skills needed in managing non-linear career pathways in knowledge-based economies, where relatively frequent job changes are likely to take place (Herr, 2008).

As a concept, CMS is defined as 'a whole range of competences which provide structured ways for individuals and groups to gather, analyse, synthesise and organise self, educational and occupational information, as well as the skills to make and implement decisions and transitions' (Sultana, 2012). It is important to notice, that what this 'whole range of competences' are, differs among countries (Hooley, Watts, Sultana, & Neary, 2013). In a recent report (2014), Thomsen suggests that in a Nordic perspective career competences would be a better label, based on the following definition: 'Career competences are competences for self-understanding and self-development; for exploring life and the worlds of learning and work; and for dealing with life, learning and work in periods of change and transition. Career competences involve being aware, not only of what you do, but also what you could do, and of how individuals are formed by their daily activities and their actions while simultaneously affecting their own opportunities for the future' (p. 5).

Career Education as prevention to ESL

As pointed out in the section on political initiatives, the political ESL strategies (2011) are three-fold with a focus on prevention, intervention or compensation:

- *Prevention* seeks to avoid the conditions from arising where processes leading to ESL can start and requires initiatives at system level.
- *Intervention* addresses emerging difficulties at an early stage and seeks to prevent them from leading to ESL. Intervention takes place at individual school level and includes student-centred measures.
- *Compensation* measures offer opportunities for education and training for those who have interrupted their education: second chance opportunities, re-entering education and training, comprehensive support.

In terms of preventive aspects, on which it is worth focusing (Sultana, 2012), career education in its many forms may play an important role in terms of preventing ESL. Career education may include a number of varied activities, many of which point to the importance of broadening the scope of educational and vocational career decisions in a lifelong perspective, including for example, work experience programmes, job shadowing, career games, or taster courses in other types of education. All such structured activities aim at encouraging students to see their career in terms of lifelong development, and to look beyond their immediate limitations with a view to create a higher level of meaningfulness in relation to their current and future educational paths (Guichard, 2001). They are encouraged to view their career work in terms of Career Management Skills (Sultana, 2012) or, rather, to develop their Career Competences (Thomsen, 2014).

In both understandings, skills to manage transitions are a main topic. One major transition is school to work transitions. In relation to ESL, preparation to the next step can be of importance. As a preventive effort, the linkage between where you are (school or training) and where you are going to be (preferably work) is an important

issue. This can be supported in multiple ways. In Norwegian lower secondary school, pupils have a compulsory subject called Educational Choice (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2006). As part of the subject, students are invited to local enterprises, and to upper secondary schools, to see 'what it is like to go in that vocational or educational direction'. The pedagogical underpinnings of the subject are influenced by learning theories with an experimental learning approach (Kolb, 1984).

Another preparing or preventive approach is to integrate CMS in the curriculum. Hooley and his colleagues recommend that teachers can, and should play an important role in career education (Hooley, Watts, & Andrews, 2015). They argue that there is 'a strong consensus in the literature on what comprises good-quality career and employability learning: it should be integrated into the mission and ethos of the school and delivered through the curriculum; it requires the involvement of both qualified specialists and the wider teaching and school staff; it is underpinned by good information, resources and technologies; and it requires the involvement of external stakeholders including post-secondary learning providers and employers' (Hooley et.al., 2015, p. ii).

Still, one might need to add a dimension to these efforts. With the 'glasses' within the concept of CMS, it is also important to conceptualize transition (both small and large) as an issue most likely to occur several times during a life course. Traditionally, career education and guidance has been heavily influenced by rational thinking and preparing for the next transition (Brown, 2002; Sultana, 2012). More recent theories (Gelatt, 1989; Krumboltz, 2009) have introduced concepts like planned happenstance and positive uncertainty. Their mission is to remind both practitioners and pupils, that the future can not be one-hundred percent foreseen, and that it is ok not to know and articulate their future plans in detail. This gives an example of the wickedness of ESL. What should a guidance practitioner do and say to a pupil who wants to leave because they have gained awareness (or self-knowledge which is an important career management skill) that the subject or program chosen is wrong? Given the overall political goals of decreasing ESL, they should try to motivate the student to stay. Still, another alternative would be to listen to the student, AND inform them about the options as a 'second chance learner'. In Netherland, for example, 33% returned to formal education within three years, often with success (Van Wijk et al., 2011). In Australia 82% of the ESL returned within five years (Oomen & Plant, 2014).

Potential issues with Career Management Skills as a remedy for preventing ESL

In essence, CMS is about developing individual skills to navigate in its own career path, both here and now and in a lifelong perspective. It is based on the principles of self-determination, and the freedom to take meaningful action in one's life (King, 2004). Still, the potential options for meaningful action are connected, and sometimes limited by societal issues. Following the 2008/2009 recession in most of Europe, the opportunities for decent work have decreased (Eurydice, 2014). Although positive intentions with an increasing focus on CMS in times of recession, the unintended sub-text could be that if you do not manage navigating your career in times of social difficulties, you as an individual are responsible (Sultana, 2012). Ball (2008), calls this 'responsibilisation' of social issues, a reallocation of functions and responsibilities to the individual that previously were regarded as the responsibility of institutions and collectives (Watts, 1996). Problems relating to the individuals' interactions with the labour market are structural problems with the demand side, and therefore require *structural solutions*. CMS programs tend to construct these problems as susceptible to solution through individual agency by targeting the supply side. Therefore, 'CMS, unless critically approached, can easily become yet another way by means of which the state reframes its deficit by projecting it as personal failing, with the victim blamed for problems that

are structural in nature.' (Sultana, 2012, p. 233). One might add that in this scenario, the actions and non-actions of the individual become both the problem and the solution.

Drop out or push out?

In recent years there has been a growing recognition that cross-sectoral policies and programs can and should play a growing role in efforts to prevent young people from leaving education early. This means that ESL is understood as a problem of the educational system, society and the school, rather than as a problem caused only by the young person and their family, background or peers (Nevala and Hawley 2011).

Mainstream education does not fit their needs. The latter sentence highlights the point that they may in fact be push-outs, rather than drop outs. Rather than having 'dropped out', the latter may often have been 'facilitated out'. In other words, driven out of the common education system by teachers' and other personnel's low aspirations and incitements to leave. Career education cannot teach competences as much as it can provide rich, varied and pedagogically appropriate experiences and environments that facilitate their development (Atkinson & Murrell, 1998). This is an alternative representation of the problem, and it calls for alternative answers.

Following the potential issues in focusing too much on the individual lack of CMS this is important, as the framing and conceptualization of the problem at hand also determines the strategies and interventions to solve the problem. Perhaps the focus should not so much be on dropping out as a problem of perceived or actual failures of pupils, schools and the costs associated to it, but on dropout as an indication and origin of fundamental inequities (Smeyers & Depaepe, 2006). This perspective shifts the focus towards school attendance and completion as a right of citizens that is to be safeguarded in any democracy and calls for a more nuanced view on the many determinants of dropout. Teachers and guidance workers acting in a preventive mode may be seen as playing the role of the Trojan Horse in the very institutions of which they are an integral part (Plant, 2005). In these terms, two important guidance roles should be highlighted: *advocacy* (speaking on behalf of the student/client, and *feedback* (feeding guidance experiences and evidence back to the very systems/institutions which produced ESL in order to change procedures, approaches, and policies) (Haug & Plant, 2015).

Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that Early School Leaving should be conceptualized as a wicked problem, and therefore should be followed up by a multitude of solutions. We have argued for a closer look at the different elements in the system (both organizations, societies and at a global level), in search for the main drivers for ELS. Also, especially seen in connection with the focus on the possibilities and needs for lifelong learning, shade the 'common fact' that leaving school early always is problematic. As showed in this article, there are second options back into training and education, and there is evidence that some individuals need a different path into and through education and training (Oomen & Plant, 2014).

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