EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IN PORTUGAL
Policies and actors' interpretations

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Abstract: This article focuses on the emergence and development of early school leaving (ESL) as a political issue in Portugal, from 2000 to the present. It considers three distinct periods in which the rationales of «social inclusion», «educational quality and effectiveness» and «qualifications for work and the labour market» took on different characteristics and onus. Educational stakeholders in different positions were heard at the European, national and local levels. The argument is that the enactment of ESL related policies and measures is influenced by the interpretations of the actors located at these levels.

Keywords: early school leaving, education policies, social inclusion, qualifications for work

O ABANDONO ESCOLAR PRECOCE EM PORTUGAL: POLÍTICAS E INTERPRETAÇÕES DE ATORES

Resumo: Este artigo foca a emergência e desenvolvimento do abandono escolar precoce (ESL) como questão política, em Portugal, entre 2000 e o tempo atual. Considera-se a existência de três períodos distintos, nos quais os racionais de «inclusão social», «qualidade e eficácia educativa» e «qualificação para o trabalho e para o mercado de trabalho» assumiram características e ónus diferencia-dos. Foram ouvidos atores educativos, em posições distintas, ao nível europeu, nacional e local. O argumento é que o desenvolvimento das políticas e medidas direcionadas ao combate ao ESL é sig-nificativamente influenciado pelas interpretações de atores/as situados/as nesses diferentes níveis.

Palavras-chave: abandono escolar precoce (ESL), políticas educativas, inclusão social e qualifica-ção para o trabalho

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LE DÉCROCHAGE SCOLAIRE AU PORTUGAL: LES POLITIQUES ET LES INTERPRÉTATIONS DES ACTEURS

Résumé: Cet article se concentre sur l'émergence et le développement du décrochage scolaire (ESL) comme une question politique au Portugal, de 2000 au présent. On considère trois périodes distinctes dans lesquelles les rationnels de «l'inclusion sociale», «qualité et efficacité de l'éducation» et «qualifications pour le travail et pour le marché du travail» ont pris des caractéristiques et des charges différents. Ont été écoutées des acteurs éducatifs dans des positions différentes aux niveaux européen, national et locale.

Mots-clés: ESL, politiques éducatifs, inclusion sociale, qualifications pour le travail

Introduction

This paper aims to analyse the emergence and the development of early school leaving (ESL) as a policy issue in Portugal and the way it was dealt with by the actors involved. It draws on data gathered under the framework of an ongoing European research project (Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe – RESL.eu) and argues that the enactment of policies and instruments (Ball, 2004; see also Cortesão, Magalhães, & Stoer, 2001) and their effects largely depend on actors' interpretations and agency. While refusing the analytical dilemmas brought about by the top-down/bottom-up debates in policy analysis, the paper focuses on the contexts, on the actors at different levels and on their interpretation and putting into practice of policies aimed at reducing ESL. European, national and local actors involved with reducing ESL as well policy documents stemming from these political and social contexts are central to this interpretation and enactment.

Some studies in Portugal have focused early leaving from school, within different views on the subject. The study of Ferrão, André, and Almeida (2000) accentuated that ESL in Portugal might be seen as reflecting the deep transformation the Portuguese society was undergoing. Azevedo (2012) analyses education at the macro level to emphasise that ESL affects mainly European countries that have more difficulties to promote schooling of the younger population. Estevão and Álvares (2013) stress that early school leaving is an indicator used by Eurostat to measure school dropout. The European Union on its basis establishes targets for education policies. As such is an indicator related to school certification and «a measure of school achievement based on a comprehensive perspective of educational/training activities, including informal and non-formal learning» (Estevão & Álvares, 2013: 2).

Keeping in mind that there is «no single, comprehensive strategy to tackle the problem of early leaving from education and training as defined at European level» (European

Commission, 2014: 55), and that the problem is «addressed indirectly through other policies and programmes concerning education and young people» (GHK, 2011: 67), the first part of this paper brings forward the context of the rise of ESL as a policy concern at the EU and national levels as well as the related rationales influencing social and education policies. The analytical focus is on ESL-related policies, measures and instruments designed under EU recommendations, on those configured at the national level and on those developed by local actors. The second part identifies the methodological processes of data collection. In the third part, the paper focuses on actors' views about the development of ESL related policies and instruments at the European, national and local levels.

The rise of ESL as a political issue: contextualising ESL policies

The rise of early school leaving (ESL) as a political issue must be understood in a multi-level framework at the European, national and local levels as a key problem that moves beyond the frontiers of Europe to affect the whole developed world and that actors' agency and perspectives on the purposes of education are relevant in its study (Dale, 2010).

The main EU explicitly political rationales endorsing ESL policies underline sustained economic growth based on «more and better jobs», greater social cohesion, promotion of equity and active citizenship to respond to the needs of the knowledge-based economy:

> The Union has set itself *a new strategic goal for the next decade: to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion.* Achieving this goal requires an overall strategy aimed at: preparing the transition to a knowledge-based economy and society by better policies for the information society and R&D, as well as by stepping up the process of structural reform for competitiveness and innovation and by completing the internal market; modernising the European social model, investing in people and combating social exclusion. (European Council, 2000, Lisbon Presidency)

The qualification of young people to participate in the highly competitive knowledge society is assumed to play a major role in the achievement of these goals. ESL populations' risk of marginalisation, poverty and economic and social exclusion is perceived as putting at risk the whole EU desideratum traced by the Lisbon Strategy, i.e., being the most competitive and socially cohesive region in the world. This is reinforced by the Europe 2020 Strategy (COM, 2010b), with the focus on delivering «smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, to find the path to create new jobs and to offer a sense of direction to our societies». Reducing ESL by providing qualifications and certifications to a greater number of young people is assumed as essen-

tial for full employment and social cohesion and, consequently, as key-factors for socio-economic development[1].

The need to meet the European goals has been a crucial factor influencing the most recent educational policies in Portugal. The concern with the enhancement of qualifications within the «knowledge society» is a major rationale orienting Portuguese education policies. For instance, the recent expansion to 12 years of compulsory schooling was built upon the idea that the country needs extended education to develop the economy and to position individuals in the new labour market (Justino, 2010; Rodrigues, 2010). The completion of upper secondary education was pointed out as a means to increase qualifications and as a path for young people's employability (Silva, 2012).

The ministers David Justino (2002-2004) and Maria de Lurdes Rodrigues (2005-2009) justified the decision to extend compulsory schooling in different ways. Justino assumed that the levy for the benefit of the citizen would be justified particularly for the poorest and most socially excluded in a European country with high poverty rates and one of the most unequal distributions of income. The extension of compulsory schooling would bridge the educational backwardness in relation to other European countries and would increase families' schooling expectations for their children (Justino, 2010). In turn, Rodrigues (2010) argued that the effectiveness of the extension of schooling required consolidation of other advances in education such as the spread of professional courses in public schools, as well as support, particularly for the families most in need, in order to allow the entry of children into the labour market to be postponed. In 2009, the extension of compulsory education came hand-in-hand with the effects of other measures to improve secondary school, which aimed at reducing school failure and dropout. This view calls for the action of the state as provider of the educational service on the assumption that education is a social right (Rodrigues, 2010).

The concern about the rationalisation of the educational structures and resources is also in line with the EU policy rationales (Stoleroff & Pereira, 2009). This concern has influenced, for instance, the reorganisation of schools into clusters; a process of reorganisation of schools in blocks, including schools from prep education up until the last year of upper secondary school; implying sharing of managerial staff and resources. The school clustering aims to i) adapt the school system to the objective of a 12-year education for all; ii) adjust the size and conditions of schools to promote school success and combat school dropout. This restructuring, that implies the reduction in school staff, follows the process of reorganisation started in 2005. Hence, the Ministry of Education also argued that they were aiming to ease students' transition between school cycles and simultaneously to create conditions for more students to com-

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[1] Council Recommendation, 28 June 2011.

plete their formal education, at least up to upper secondary education or equivalent. Additionally, by involving the municipalities and by diversifying the educational offer, the Ministry aimed at «localising» and adapting to context education processes and structures[2].

However, since 2011 these developments have happened under the aegis of a trend towards privatisation and commodification in education and training. In fact, the former government has been promoting neoliberal conservative policies favouring market-like competition between schools (Araújo, Magalhães, Rocha, & Macedo, 2014a; Magalhães et al., 2013; Neves, Pereira, & Nata, 2012), such as school rankings (Macedo, 2012), privatisation of education (Belfield & Levin, 2004) and what we may term as the vocationalisation of school failure, i.e., by means of the early school selection of students who – supposedly – cannot learn and that are induced to follow differentiated educational tracks in such a manner that are seen as fit to – early vocational education (Silva, 2012, 2014). In spite of the criticism from some education stakeholders, one may say that, after the Lisbon Strategy, the main ESL education policy drivers in Portugal follow the major concerns of the EU, as expressed in the initiative *Youth on the Move* (COM, 2010c): reducing ESL, promoting more flexible learning pathways and developing ICT competencies. With the new socialist government, running since Nov. 2015, political improvements are to be expected.

In line with other European countries, in the last decades Portugal has invested in education. Education policies have focused on the expansion of the educational system, its diversification and the school achievement of children and youngsters. This process was dependent on the influence brought about by European Union membership as well as on the discourses and instruments of transnational institutions such as the World Bank or the OECD. This is a case of OECD's dissemination of comparative data (OECD, 2010, 2011, 2012) and of political instruments, such as, for example, PISA. OECD has pointed out the need to improve the Portuguese performance in some indicators related to school attendance, high rates of ESL and the enhancement of learning outcomes. In this context, as argued above, policies aiming to tackle ESL have assumed three main rationales: (a) social inclusion, (b) educational quality and effectiveness and (c) qualifications for work and the labour market, which emerged in our analysis from the matching up between legal documents and the narratives of the interviewees.

ESL: Related policies and measures in Portugal

In Portugal, as already mentioned, three phases can be identified in the development of these rationales. This section shows how they were conceptualised and addressed in these periods.

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[2] Dispatch 4463/2011, 11 March.

I. 2000-2004

In this period, the Ministry of Education explicitly identified ESL as a national education political issue and the investment in upper secondary education as a central political strategy (Rodrigues et al., 2014) attested by the publication of the first reports on school dropout (ME/ MTSS, 2004).

Social inclusion

In this period, in Portugal the main policies and measures related to ESL and aiming at social inclusion can be shown as the comprehensive National Plan for Inclusion for two years (PNAI, 2001, 2003) and the Choices (*Escolhas*) Programme. Other programmes were reformulated. This was the case for the Programme to Prevent and Eliminate Child Labour (PEETI – *Plano Nacional de Prevenção e Erradicação do Trabalho Infantil*)[3], which put in place mechanisms to identify children in labour situations and to promote the completion of compulsory education and vocational training, and the Programme for Educational Intervention Priority Areas (TEIP – *Territórios Educativos de Intervenção Prioritária*). Also worth mentioning is the creation of the Intercultural Secretariat in 2001 to meet the objectives for education and training, as described in the Report on Education from the Council of the EU (CEU, 2001) concerning immigrants and ethnic minorities.

Educational quality and effectiveness

Curricula and the management of general and technical secondary education were reorganised with a view towards quality and effectiveness[4] (COM, 2001, 2010a; see also Matos, Lopes, Nunes, & Venâncio, 2006; Macedo, 2012). Changes in the evaluation processes and in the national curricula promoted the links between basic, higher education and work (e.g., the syllabi of the subjects Area of Project and Education for Citizenship introduced new contents, openness to local communities and hands-on learning methodologies).

On the other hand, the Guidelines for Curriculum Review and the Reform of Secondary Education[5] stressed the need for stronger investment in schooling for the population aged 16 to 24 years, in line with the Lisbon European Council (EP, 2000), where EU ministers agreed that by 2010 the percentage of ESL students should be reduced to 10%.

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[3] Council of Ministers Resolution 37/2004, 20 March.

[4] Law 31/2002.

[5] Decree-Law 7/2001, 11 May.

Qualifications for work and the labour market

In this period, Education and Training Courses (CEF – *Cursos de Educação e Formação*; ME/MSST, 2004) were created and the National Plan to Prevent ESL (*Plano Nacional de Prevenção do Abandono Escolar*, PNPAE, 2004) underlined the key-role of education and training in stimulating a competitive knowledge-based economy. The CEF were aimed at promoting school success to students younger than 15 and preventing ESL. Their curricula were vocational and covered different socio-cultural, scientific, technological and practical training areas, providing both qualification and certification. The National Plan to Prevent ESL (ME/MSST, 2004) aimed at developing systematic initiatives to combat ESL and creating Social Support Centres for Schools (CASE).

One may say that the measures that were launched in Portugal in this period reflected the European vein in that ESL was seen as an individual and social problem with negative impacts on human development and the economy. Moreover, these attempts to confront ESL in its educational and social dimensions did not take into account either regional disparities or the unequal contexts of social class. In this period, the concern about social inclusion seems to be the main rationale at stake, nuanced with some focus on the qualifications for work and the labour market of the less successful students.

II. 2005-2010

Under the government of the Socialist Party, the Ministry emphasised the effectiveness of the extension of compulsory schooling in parallel with the implementation of measures directed to the consolidation of public school. In 2009, the extension of compulsory education up to the age of 18 or 12 years of schooling was a milestone in Portuguese education. It represented a major change at the level of the curriculum, together with the formal establishment of universal pre-school for children from 5 years old as a pre-condition for school success and the reduction of ESL[6]. The extension of compulsory schooling came hand-in-hand with other political measures to reduce dropout rates, such as the provision of resources to schools and attention to the system's inefficiencies targeted at increasing young people's skills and competences (Rodrigues, 2010). This period was characterised by high investments in modernisation and technological innovation (Rodrigues, 2010; Silva, 2012, 2014; Martins, 2014).

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[6] Law 85/2009, 27 August.

Social inclusion

Financial support to low-income families should be emphasised among these measures as it helped ensure schooling and postpone children's entry into the labour market. It included measures such as the progressive provision of free school textbooks and of other pedagogic-didactic resources[7], the articulation of school social work with social policies, particularly those whose goal was to support families[8] and the ascription of scholarships for secondary students with low socio-economic status[9].

A set of programmes were reformulated and expanded. This was the case for the Programme of Educational Intervention Priority Areas (TEIP – *Territórios Educativos de Intervenção Prioritária*), whose territorial action was extended so that more schools in risk areas were included by means of expanded resources and new pedagogical interventions. The area of action of the Choices (*Escolhas*) Programme that had emerged in the former period was greatly expanded in its geographic coverage and shifted from dealing with the avoidance of criminal behaviour to the wider promotion of social inclusion. The reformulation of the national plans for social inclusion on a more individual basis should also be mentioned (PNAI, 2006, 2008).

Educational quality and effectiveness

The Education Initiative of 2006-2007 summarised *70 Measures to Improve the Quality of Public School Education* (Rodrigues, 2010). The Ministry of Education launched specific measures in the first cycle of basic education (4 years) to overcome school maladjustment in the face of demographic changes and the inequality of access to education and educational resources for diverse groups of the population[10]. Prevention measures such as the Curriculum Enrichment Activities (AEC – *Atividades de Enriquecimento Curricular*), including sports, music and English lessons as part of mandatory school offer are worth mentioning[11]. The Ministry also defined the elaboration of more than 200,000 improvement plans for students who had shown risk of failure at school early in the year. These measures included: prioritising, reorganising and improving school networking and generalising full-time school, extra-school time and study support; early detection of risks of underachievement; maths and

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7   Law 261/2007, 17 July.
8   Decree-Law 55/2009, 2 March.
9   Decree-Law 201/2009, 28 August.
10   Dispatch 50/2005, 9 November.
11   Dispatch 14460/2008, 26 May.

reading plans. The technological plan for education and modernising school buildings[12] are to be emphasised for their national dimension and the investment of resources it implied.

Qualifications for work and the labour market

After the approval of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning as a common translation device for the member states' qualification systems, the National Qualification Framework (QNF – *Quadro Nacional de Qualificação*) was established[13]. It identified learning outcomes allowing for comparison of competences and skills in the EU. In its turn the expansion and diversification of training that provides a professional qualification and the expansion of the National System of Recognition and Certification of Competences (RVCC – *Reconhecimento, Validação e Certificação de Competências*) allowed adults over 18 years old to achieve certification of educational, professional skills and competences acquired in social professional contexts and personal life-learning situations as a formal, academic or vocational qualification. Also worth mentioning further compensation measures to help students after they left school, such as the New Opportunities Initiative (PNO – *Programa Novas Oportunidades*) which aimed at including young adults in education and training and to guarantee that 50% of the educational offer would be vocational by 2010 (ME/MTSS, 2006). The increase of many students in basic education attested the government's investment in reducing dropout and the consolidation of basic education as a pillar for success (ME, 2008). The Portuguese Economic and Social Council evaluated as very positive the expansion of the PNO and the consequent increase in attendance of vocational programmes at the upper secondary level (CES, 2008).

In this period, the focus on the quality and effectiveness of education by means of a large set of interventions in the structures, curricula and organisation of schools come hand-in-hand with the concern with social inclusion, both through the involvement of the local community, and the concern to qualify and certify the less favoured students in the attempt to assure their insertion into the labour market. One may argue that the implementation of this set of measures by the government appears to more clearly reflect the influence of European guidelines for education and training in tune with the Lisbon Strategy (2000), even if it raised some conflicts within society, for teachers in particular.

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[12] Council of Ministers Resolution 44/2010.
[13] Decree Law 396/2007, 31 December.

III. 2011-2015

In this period, the Ministry of Education and Science has rhetorically put the emphasis on the quality of basic and secondary schooling with a strong emphasis on measurable results to the detriment of the process of teaching and learning. This is clear, for example, in the implementation of national exams in the early years (grade 4)[14] and in the nomination of a national exams jury that responds to the directorate of the Ministry of Education. Moreover, vocational education has been presented as a solution for those students whose learning performance did not fit the patterns of mainstream education. An early vocational path was piloted in 2011 and has been developed since then to enrol apparently less successful children as early as 12 years old. As Silva (2014) underlines, there is, more or less directly, support for an early school selection and early tracking. It is worth noticing that throughout this period, the financial crisis gave rise to high rates of unemployment, affecting particularly young people, together with the general impoverishment of the population.

Social inclusion

The TEIP Programme in its third version ruled over programme contracts between school clusters and the Ministry of Education to develop projects aimed to improve the quality of education, academic success, transition to working life and community integration It implies the provision of evidence by the schools of their knowledge about the life conditions of the populations in the surrounding neighbourhoods[15]. As a matter of concern, in a time of economic crisis, the endowment of conditions to enable school attendance by means of financial and social support from the Ministry of Education has assumed an «assistentialist» character (Araújo et al., 2014; Abrantes, Mauritti, & Roldão, 2011; Rodrigues, 2010). However, inclusion policies ascribe some responsibility to local authorities and other stakeholders. Implying pedagogic, curricular, administrative and cultural autonomy, the so-called autonomy contracts were extended and said to be essential tools to guarantee both diversity and the merit of schools. The contract of autonomy[16] is an agreement between the school, the Ministry of Education and Science and other community partners, where appropriate. The law applies to public pre-schools, and primary and secondary schools who want to take over and develop greater pedagogical, curricular, administrative and cultural autonomy interested in it. Itdefines the objectives and conditions for the development of the educational project presented by the

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[14] Decree Law 139/2012, 15 June.
[15] Normative Dispatch 20/2012, 3 October.
[16] Decree-Law 137/2012, 2 July.

Board of Directors and management of a school or school cluster. The rhetoric of decentralisation prevailed but the changes were not so extended (Araújo et al., 2014b).

Educational quality and effectiveness

The reduction of staff and more efficient use of material resources were implied in the constitution of school mega-clusters. Building on the rules of the law of 2005 and 2010, the procedures were developed regarding also role of agents involved in the new aggregation of school clusters. This was justified by the Ministry of Education and Science as aiming to progressively adapt the school network and facilities to the 12 years of schooling for all and to promote school achievement and the reduction of ESL by easing the transition between school cycles. Even if we can admit that such clustering may make sense in pedagogic and management terms, there is a risk to be avoid that the logics of cost reduction may rein in detriment of good pedagogy and management (Silva, 2014).

Measures were applied in basic education when learning difficulties were detected such as the monitoring of outstanding students and the constitution of temporary groups of students with relatively homogeneous school performance in the «structural disciplines» – mathematics, Portuguese and sciences. One may say that the focus on assessment was expanded with the claim of embedding the culture and practice of evaluation in all dimensions of education and training[17]. National exams that before only addressed grade 12 students were extended to grade 4, 6 and 9, in 2011-2012. A Framework of Indicators for Education provides data for analysing the education system, monitor trends and provide information. The school evaluation includes self-evaluation and external evaluation by IGEC, every four years. The evaluation of students includes summative and formative assessments as part of the tests at an intermediate stage and at the end of cycles and also in national testing. The concern about the reduction of ESL is present in the preamble of most legal documents on this matter.

Qualifications for work and the labour market

The former government (2011-2015) has given priority to the articulation between education and work with consequences for the investment in areas such as project work, citizenship and artistic education[18]. Centres for Qualification and Vocational Education (CQEP – *Centros para a Qualificação e o Ensino Profissional*) for young people aged 15 years or more and the extinction of the PNO were justified on the basis of more rigorous and demanding perfor-

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[17] Dispatch 5/2013, 8 April.
[18] Decree-Law 125/2011, 29 December.

mance" and quality assurance of qualification and employment[19]. The CQEPs were said to aim at providing guidance to young people and adults (*ibid.*).

The focus on the relation between education and the labour market becomes clear, for instance, by the investment in early vocational training in basic education, piloted in 2012-2013 and extended in 2013-2014, anticipated by the previous offer supply of vocational education directed to students in secondary education. Hence, one may argue that the educational system has become increasingly selective in determining the students who can and cannot learn what is considered to be valuable knowledge, thus increasing social inequalities by means of the increasing streaming of students. Even if a discourse on social inclusion still appears in some of the preamble to the law, the reduction of funds for education and its negative impacts on schools seem to counteract this «well-intended» claim.

Gathering data on ESL as a political issue

We have based our analysis of the enactment of ESL related policies on semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions led at the European, national and local levels. Such methodological procedures were developed under the assumption that the *fabrication of the European space of education* is a rescaling process at diverse levels (Nóvoa & Lawn, 2002), supported on a diversity of discursive and political apparatus (Dale, 2009; Delanty, 2014; Landri & Neumann, 2014; Lawn & Grek, 2012) and political technologies (Magalhães, Veiga, Ribeiro, Sousa, & Santiago, 2013) that need questioning due to its potential impact on young adults' learning and lives. At the European level we interviewed one Portuguese member of the European Committee for Education and Culture, and we have received a written statement from another Portuguese member. At the national level, we interviewed the vice director of the Directorate-General for Innovation and Curriculum Development and the director of the Vocational Training Department of the Institute for Employment and Vocational Training. We also interviewed representatives of local governing bodies for education, and the vice-director of the Directorate Services of the Northern Region. Two directors from the training department of the Entrepreneurial Association of Portugal were also interviewed. Additionally, educational stakeholders expressed their views in two focus-group discussions, one per selected research area with representatives of institutions and intervention projects in local education focusing on ESL policy implementation, including alternative learning

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[19] Ordinance 135-A/2013, 28 March.

arenas[20]. Amadora and Porto were selected as research areas based on common criteria of the RESL.eu project. These criteria included the selection of urban contexts with a high level of ESL, with a population between a density of population and presenting ethnic diversity and high rate of youth unemployment.

We triangulated the data from the interviews and focus group discussions with the academic literature on the matter and with the analysis of documents issued by the government and other relevant stakeholders such as teachers' unions, parents' associations and professional and entrepreneurial organisations. In order to understand the views of the different actors on ESL and its development, we analysed data under the lenses of the rationales of «social inclusion», «educational quality and effectiveness» and «qualifications for the labour market».

Views from the actors involved in ESL related policies

European, national and local actors voiced their perspectives both on ESL and on the policies, instruments and measures developed to deal with it. Actors' perspectives were analysed by means of the categories presented above. One type of diagnosis becomes apparent when the interviewees identify the problems and issues, and another type – voiced mainly by local actors – emerges as the actors make clear the aims and instruments of the intervention proposals. New configurations emerged from this analysis such as: «low level of qualifications for work and the labour market»; «educational quality and effectiveness – different power positions, different perspectives and initiatives?»; «local initiatives in the struggle for social inclusion?»

One of the recurrent concerns from the actors' perspectives fits in one of the categories referred to above and concerns the emergence of ESL as a political issue: the qualifications for the labour market perceived as a major social and educational need. The other refers to the clash between European guidelines, their interpretation by the national government and local realities with negative impacts on the quality and effectiveness of education and social inclusion.

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[20] The participants from the Porto FGD represented *Qualificar para Incluir* [Qualify to Include] – Association for Social Solidarity; the School of Commerce of Porto; the northern region of the Choices Programme; the educational services of the House of Music; the training and consultancy firm Metamorphosis; the Second Chance School (Matosinhos); the Northern Region of the Portuguese Institute of Sports and Youth; the youth project *Lagarteiro e o Mundo*. In the Lisbon/Amadora FGD were: the vocational school Chapitô; the Gustave Eiffel Professional School; the youth association *Moinho da Juventude*; EPIS, Entrepreneurial Association; the *Orquestra Geração*, a youth inclusion project; APEDI, the Teachers' Association for Intercultural Education.

Low level of qualifications for work and the labour market

A Portuguese member of the European Committee for Education and Culture underlined the attempt to improve qualification for the needs of the labour market:

> Many people talk about a «competences mismatch» between what our economies need and the workforce pro-
> file. In Portugal, the lack of qualification of the workforce is our main tragedy. The reason why we cannot
> change our production profile rapidly is because most of our workforce is poorly qualified, although in recent
> years some efforts have been made to enhance qualification. (Interview, October 2013)

This perspective is quite often underlined and there is a large consensus on the «poorly qualified» workforce as shown in the Portuguese and the European official documents, as well as those from OECD. For instance, An Agenda for New Skills and Jobs: A European Contribution Towards Full Employment (COM, 2010) emphasises the link between education and labour and recognises the mismatch of skills of workers in the EU in the face of the new needs of the labour market. In 2012, Portugal was the EU country with one of the highest rates of youth (15-24 years old) unemployment at 37.7%, above the EU-28 member states average (22.9%) and the Portuguese adult population (25-64 years old) unemployment rate of 14.5%. Portugal was also among the countries with more than 20% ESL, together with Spain and Malta.

This «competences mismatch» between the needs of the economies and the profile of the workforce is also mentioned by other stakeholders. An officer of the Portuguese Institute of Youth and Sports underlined that this «mismatch exist[s] between the two realities». And the director for vocational training at the Institute for Employment and Vocational Training goes along these lines stressing that

> EU educational policies related to ESL aim to provide training to young people, and the organisation of diffe-
> rent responses with wide reaching dimensions; and a qualification that, if they wish, will allow them to enter
> the labour market. (...) I evaluate this type of initiative very positively. However, there is a mismatch between
> affirming the concern to find solutions to combat ESL and the rationality of the solutions that are in place.
> (Interview, October 2013)

With regard to the goal of qualifying for work and the labour market, some initiatives deal-ing with early school leavers (ESLers) have been developed. This was the case at the School of Commerce of Porto (SCP) that works with young people over 13 years old, some of them immigrants. Following the mainstream model of apprenticeship courses, SCP offers vocational courses in sports, commerce and tourism for the ninth year and a set of vocational courses, allowing the attainment of the twelfth year, both targeted to entry into the labour market.

Educational quality and effectiveness: different power positions, different perspectives and initiatives?

One might argue that there is a mismatch between the EU guidelines for more school autonomy and the interpretation by the government, which takes the opportunity to enact its own policies according to its own standpoint disregarding the EU. According to one director of training at the Portuguese Entrepreneurial Association emphasised the EU inspired measures and the inadequacy of the governmental policies in dealing with «reality»:

> One of the initiatives proposed by the European Commission is that more autonomy must be attributed to schools. This is a good way for local principals to gain visibility because there are different realities! When they say all classes must have 30 students, they are not aware that there will be schools that do not even have 30 students. The reasons for ESL in certain counties are different from big cities! (Interview, October 2013)

Central government is often perceived as an obstacle to school autonomy and as damaging the search for quality, on the basis of the assumption that local interpretation and political action may respond more effectively to local needs.

Moreover, resistance to change in educational institutions with regard to preventing ESL is often justified by the fact that most of the measures have been centrally designed, often without provision of resources and without an adequate perception of the true conditions of «real» schools. Another interviewee from the same institution claims for effective decentralisation, beyond central control:

> Measures must be decentralised! Despite the effort that has been made and some openness to decentralisation, the Ministry has mostly given responsibilities to town halls in some matters. This is not decentralisation at all (…) There is an obsessive control of content and regulation. (Interview, October 2013)

The interviewees underline the lack of school autonomy and the state's regulatory role over the schools. This participant characterises this control as «obsessive», something that goes beyond specific policies, a historic characteristic of Portuguese state regulation.

This view is contended by representatives of local government such as the vice-director of Directorate Services of the Northern Region who attributes the weakness of school autonomy – as a tool to reduce ESL – to the routines established in the peripheries of the system:

> There are many spaces in autonomy. Their big enemy is routine, one way of organising school as the easiest. We need to look at the school and think: «What is its essence?». It exists as an education public service. This change is being achieved with a huge effort but cannot be achieved from one day to another. We must assume that those who have autonomy take risks and responsibilities. (Interview, October 2013)

Moving from a centralised logic to a local planning, the Choices Programme is pointed out as an example of the change towards more local intervention. Actually, in 2015 Choices has been developed through agreements with consortia of 110 local social inclusion projects. The programme coordinator explained that localisation and networking was crucial for its success:

> Its mission is the inclusion of children and young people from vulnerable contexts, young people who are in situations of school disengagement and ESL. The programme makes an inter-relational approach to the various systems. It currently supports initiatives in quite diversified and expanded consortia, with local institutions that are aware of the local reality and problems: schools, youth and emigrant associations, parishes, local power. (FGD, Porto, October 2013)

In fact, the programme has been recognised as the most effective and efficient public policy in the social inclusion of children and young people at risk, particularly with respect to the second generation of immigrants and ethnic minorities. In 2011, the European Commission selected it as a good practice in combating ESL.

The mismatch between measures and outcomes has been also stressed concerning upper secondary education from 2000 onwards. The FENPROF (2003), a national federation of teachers, underlined the government's lack of clarification on the various educational paths, the distortion between student demand and the courses supplied by the Ministry of Education (ICT in particular) and the need to replace the evaluation system that promoted underachievement and ESL. Upper secondary education was seen as the most selective sector of Portuguese education, producing high levels of social exclusion and certainly contributing to lessen the quality of education.

More recently, critical points have also been advanced concerning the policies of the present government. A Portuguese member of the European Parliament stresses that

> In the last two years a brutal shift in some aspects has emerged. From about 2011 the focus on increasing academic qualifications in the field of new technologies and scientific research was the dominant trait. With the Minister of Education Nuno Crato, the orientation to early vocational training, with lower academic qualifications and a growing concern in lowering wages, began to guide the decisions on education policy of the Portuguese government. (Interview, October 2013)

We may say that the rationale *educational quality and effectiveness* is emphatically present in the statements of the interviewees, even when they address different notions of *quality.* The perspectives above are good examples of how the diverse power positions of the educational stakeholders impact on their interpretations of policies and measures and their enactment.

The Director for Training of the Entrepreneurial Association of Portugal underscored the inclusive features of initiatives aiming to prevent ESL:

There is an initiative to recuperate kids who are getting behind. At the beginning of the year the school makes a re-composition of the classes according to the level of intellectual development … putting together those who are weaker to give them a series of compensation [measures] (…) It is precisely those with whom a team of teachers will make an extra effort (…) It is an inclusive perspective! (Interview, October 2013)

A similar perspective is voiced by the director of EPIS[21], as he states that educational institutions need to compensate the «background differences» that young people bring to school, meaning social inequalities and different cultural capitals:

EPIS works more with intervention but is entering remediation. All these systems coexist. We are making a pilot in the first cycle. We want to understand how to potentiate young people from the age of six as they bring background differences to school. It is up to the educational systems to compensate for the family capital. (FGD, Lisbon, October 2013)

These perspectives appear to focus on «quality» and on its links with inclusion, even if one assumes a «remedial» one – those students who are weaker in school results followed with compensation measures. Basil Bernstein's (1971) analysis of compensation measures is still accurate regarding these perspectives as they put aside the specificity of cultural pathways, knowledge and experiences young people from different backgrounds bring to schools. If the need for public accountability has been proffered in the EU guidelines, and if there has been inter-municipal and international cooperation in diagnosing ESL, according to the director of a Second Chance School, more effective practices need to be developed in identified specific cases:

The approach to ESL owes much to the Portuguese good will, but there is no public accountability. There should be a device to identify children and young people without training and needing intervention (…). Our school has sought to make this identification. People should draw up the plan of intervention and ensure that there is effective integration of the young person in these responses (…). We are a project that has worked specifically in the field of early school leaving for six years already. (FGD, Porto, October 2013)

«Educational quality and effectiveness» appears more nuanced here as it challenges the focus on efficiency and measurable results and brings inclusion to the fore. The emphasis is put on the processes of teaching and learning with the involvement of local communities so that students have the possibility to be actors in the construction of their own lives.

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[21] EPIS, the Association of Entrepreneurs for Social Inclusion, provides scholarships to students in need and internships in enterprises.

Local initiatives in the struggle for social inclusion?

Local actors are clearly focused on social inclusion. They are aware of the opportunities that policy measures can bring to the fight against ESL. The Director of the Second Chance School that provides upper secondary education to students with a story of failure in main-stream schools, pointed out that

It is important to promote diversification, mixing, for example, our young students with university students, with international projects (…). We are one of the ten case studies in the European Report among the models to be replicated and funded in Europe[22]. (FGD, Porto, October 2013)

Students' inclusion is at the core of local initiatives. For instance, the consultant for educa-tion at the Vocational School Chapitô stresses the value of meaningful learning to keep stu-dents in school:

Chapitô is a second, third, and fourth chance school for many – a place for inclusion. Our concern is rigor and excellence, hetero-esteem, and socio-moral development. We have to make school routes meaningful. This implies social and civic engagement. (FGD, Lisbon, October 2013)

Prevention and compensation measures may combine formal and non-formal learning. The same educational expert explains:

Chapitô focuses on building highly motivating curricular paths in which they [students] feel valued. The inci-dence in the content, organisation of the courses and learning processes, and teacher-student relationship is vital. We have a more formal education, equivalent to the 12th year, and a set of non-formal routes at wee-kends, afternoons, workshops, ateliers, as prelude to reconciliation with the more formal route. (FGD, Lisbon, October 2013)

In the view of the director of the vocational school Gustave Eiffel, in Lisbon, there is a need to build alternative learning that overcomes the lacunae of mainstream school:

Vocational education appears as alternative because we link them [students] to a profession they like. They cease to be listening to the teacher, and they learn by doing. That makes all the difference. In Gustave Eiffel there is no selection: we fill up the classes as students arrive. We work in a region that is not easy, with many cultures, many socio-economic realities. We have to make sure they enjoy being in school. (FGD, Lisbon, October 2013)

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[22] This participant is referring the EU 2013, *Preventing early school leaving in Europe: Lessons learned from second chance education* (COM, 2013).

Alternative educational processes are a choice for these local actors. Pedagogical devices are central to bridge between the different knowledge and experiences of students. As underlined by Mills and McGregor (2014: 6) «processes that reject deficit constructions of young people and have certain principles of social justice at their core». Other actors underline the investment in teacher training to improve learning, as indicated by the Board of Direction Intercultural Teachers Association (APEDI):

> We have a training centre that has provided training for teachers outside Europe, PALOPs, Sao Tome and Principe, etc. Teachers will work and collaborate with students. The aim is specifically inclusion; working valences as new activities and social inclusion. (FGD, Lisbon, October, 2013)

Social inclusion may be understood in different ways and for some is seen as veiling social conflicts. However, local actors appear to search for pedagogical forms that take into consideration the social, educational, economic needs of students, particularly those with pathways of disengagement and experiences of conflict with and in schools. Flexible learning is probably relevant for their reinvestment in educational sites and to profit from the learning opportunities that these local initiatives present.

Conclusion

The analysis of ESL-related policies, measures and instruments in Portugal has shown that the enactment of these policies is widely dependent on the actors at different levels. The rationales and drivers orienting these policies – social inclusion, educational quality and effectiveness and qualifications for work and the labour market – set up at the European and national levels, were more or less successfully implemented at the local level depending on the degree of embeddedness of the instruments in the contexts and their appropriation by local actors.

In the three periods we have identified the influence of the government's political options as visible. If the adhesion to and convergence with European educational policies focusing on social inclusion and educational quality and effectiveness were stronger in the first and second periods, i.e., until 2010, in the third period, in a context of financial and economic crisis, and under a conservative and neoliberal oriented government, the emphasis of ESL policies and instruments has been put on the qualifications for work and the labour market. There seems to be some kind of consensus among the actors at different levels about the use of education as a tool for insertion into the labour market even if dissonances could be found in what concerns the practice and the potential exclusionary dimensions inherent in these processes. However this focus has increased significantly in more recent years.

The period between 2011-2015 was strongly influenced by the German vocationalist approach to education and its «dual system». Vocational programmes were introduced with the aim that 13-year-old children – mainly those with learning difficulties – enrol on this educational path. There was a shift from the discourse, measures and practices based on equal opportunities and from increasing social and economic development and social inclusion to policies and instruments focusing on the enhancement of the relationship between qualifications and the labour market. On the one hand, educational quality and effectiveness has been largely dependent on cutting the cost of education; on the other hand, the vocationalisation of school failure and ESL is a visible characteristic grounded on ideological assumptions about the role of compulsory education.

The interviews and focus group discussions brought to the fore diverse interpretations of the current educational policies illustrating and detailing how the priorities shape national and local realities and vice-versa. They also showed different and conflicting views about what values and purposes education should pursue. The interviews and focus group discussions also highlighted the need for effective change at the level of educational practices. Placing young adults at the core of their own learning and as responsible stakeholders, civil society's mobilisation of material and human resources in developing local, small-scale educational community projects are the conditions the stakeholders most valued. There seems to be room in education to promote social inclusion, educational quality and effectiveness and to strengthen young adults' insertion into the labour market as well. Even if there is no recipe, the allocation of resources throughout diverse levels of decision-making and action seem to be important dimensions of such a change.

To sum up, the EU concern to promote young people's qualifications to keep them in education or training and foster the transition to work is interpreted differently by the stakeholders, and some local entities appear to be more concerned with social inclusion in a different light than the predominant European policy drivers.

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