

Early School Leavers and Social Disadvantage in Spain: from books to bricks and vice-versa

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Introduction

According to the latest Eurostat report (2012a) on early school leaving (ESL), Spain has twice the EU-27 rate with 28% of those aged 18 to 24 having completed no more than lower-secondary education and not being involved in further education and training. The same report shows that only 61% of the Spanish population aged between 20 and 24 have completed higher secondary education, compared to the EU-27 average of 79%. At a time when government austerity measures are in place and unemployment is rising, ESL rates in Spain converge with the highest level of youth unemployment of the EU. The fact that 51.68% of Spanish young people aged between 20 and 24 are unemployed is extremely alarming, and the percentages increase among those with less training. These worrying levels have made both ESL and youth unemployment subjects of concern, debate and analysis in the Spanish educational and political agenda.

In the context of Spain's particularly acute crisis with respect to both ESL and employment, this article describes the causes and effects of ESL in Spain, bearing in mind current social, political and economic circumstances in both Spain and Europe. An analysis of the causes for the high level of ESL in Spain is a complex task that must take into consideration both structural (exogenous) factors, such as socioeconomy and class, gender, ethnicity or parents' cultural capital, and endogenous circumstances of the Spanish educational system. The article then looks at ESL and social inequality, especially in relation to the labour market, and ends with a few words on possible paths to follow for a more equitable future for all.

Before exploring the reasons and consequences of ESL, one must provide a brief overview of the Spanish educational system in order to understand ESL in its historical and political context.

The Spanish Educational Context and ESL

The current educational system is the fruit of the need to modernise education following dictator Franco's death in 1975. One of Spain's major challenges was to ensure universal free education for all children from 6 to 14 years (extended to 16 years in 1990). This has been documented as one of its biggest educational successes — especially since half the nation's population was illiterate at the beginning of the 20th century (Tiana, 2009, p. 66). However, this has meant a deficit in funds spent in other areas, such as programmes to overcome student failure and to promote retention of students at risk of ESL (Dooly & Vallejo, 2008).

The rapid pace at which universal education was achieved has also resulted in continuous policy changes. In the last three decades, six education laws have been passed (plus a new proposal by the current conservative government — the 'LOMCE'), generating a feeling of instability. Many professionals in education argue that each new intervention inhibits the necessary maturation of the preceding policies (Prats, 2002; Tiana, 2011a; Colectivo Lorenzo Luzuriaga (CLL), 2012b).

Parallel to these reforms, there has been an incremental decentralisation process, beginning in the 1980s, to transfer governing competences — including education — from the central government to the regional administrations (Prats, 2002). This has had significant consequences for the distribution of government funding, with almost 90% of education expenses now in the hands of the regional governments and inevitably resulting in differences (and inequity) in the way money is spent (Dooly & Vallejo, 2008, pp. 3–4). These differences are visible in the geographical variations of ESL. As a national average, Spain has a 28% ESL rate. However, there are differences across regions, which go from 12.6% in the Basque Country (under the EU average of 14.4%) to 40.7% in Ceuta and Melilla, resulting in what has been called territorial inequality in educational success (Puelles, 2011–2012; Puelles, 2012, Torreblanca, 2010). These differences are so great that some authors consider them a direct cause of ESL, since pupils studying in different regions have unequal opportunities of succeeding (CLL, 2012a, p. 24), although, according to Torreblanca (2010, p. 16), the reasons for this have yet to be analysed in depth. Some of the key factors seem to lie in investment, cultural gaps between the historically better educated regions of the North and the recently literate South, and different labour structures which are based on agriculture, tourism and construction and ‘pull’ students away from further education, since post-compulsory education is not seen as necessary to find jobs (CLL, 2012a, p. 28; Tiana, 2009; Torreblanca, 2010; Puelles, 2011–2012; Martínez, 2012).

Another particular aspect of the Spanish educational system that may influence ESL is the dual network of publicly-financed centres: public schools and ‘dependent state schools’ (OECD, 2004), which are private schools subsidised by the government. This network, designed to homogenise the curriculum, funds schooling in private schools but not the extracurricular activities, resulting in an economic barrier for many and creating specific profiles of students in public schools. Statistics show that 82% of at-risk students, especially of migrant origin, attend public institutions, compared to 18% attending dependent state schools. This unequal distribution is considered one of the most blatant problems of inequity in the Spanish educational system (Dooly & Vallejo, 2008, p. 6).

Causes and Responsibilities: exogenous and endogenous factors

Many experts have analysed the structural and social causes behind the high levels of ESL in Spain (Alegre Canosa & Benito Pérez, 2010; CLL, 2012a; Fernández *et al.*, 2010; Ferrer, 2002, Marchesi, 2003; Muñoz *et al.* 2009; Puelles 2011–2012; Puelles, 2012; Roca Cobo, 2010), which can be categorised as exogenous and endogenous (CLL, 2012a; Puelles, 2011–2012; Puelles, 2012). Exogenous factors are those that affect the educational system but have their origin in the social context, such as socio-economic conditions, the cultural capital of families, gender, ethnic origin, or, as mentioned above, geographical differences of ESL ratios. Endogenous factors are understood as those dependent on the educational norms and regulations (e.g. subjective evaluation procedures to obtain final certificates, curriculum contents and their relation to number of years required for each cycle).

ESL rates have often been framed as the individual responsibility of young people, alluding to personal characteristics such as lack of motivation. However, despite the common social perception that puts the blame on the individual, many

experts frame it as the failure of an educational system that cannot retain a significant number of its students, with the corresponding waste of talent (Tiana, 2009, p. 68; Ross *et al.*, 2012). As Anderman and Kaplan (2008) point out, there is a growing understanding among educational psychologists that academic motivation is not isolated, 'rather it develops and is embedded within a complex web of environmental and social influences' (Fan, 2011, p. 159). Admittedly, however, ESL is a complex issue and both exogenous and endogenous factors will have an impact, although the categorisation is useful to analyse factors that contribute to Spain's high rate of ESL.

When considering the social context (exogenous factor), it has been shown that there was a relatively low 'school life expectancy' among working class students after compulsory education (Poy Castro, 2010; INCE, 2003 in Dooly & Vallejo, 2008, p. 13). They have higher drop-out rates and are less present in post-compulsory levels — and those who do complete vocational studies tend to take less prestigious degrees. Arguably, while the universalisation of compulsory education has had an important and positive role in the access of economically disadvantaged groups to education, it has not had an overall effect on their social mobility — education seems to reflect, more than transform, their disadvantaged position in society (Op. cit, p. 13). This is closely related to what Bourdieu (1998; 2005) referred to as families' 'cultural capital' — the *habitus* of the students' family can play a significant role in students' motivations to continue education, or, on the contrary, leave school early (Puelles, 2011–2012).

Gender also seems to be a significant factor for ESL in Spain (Fernández, 2009). Studies show that women have higher graduation rates than men in compulsory studies (80.6% vs. 69.6%), in entry to post-compulsory education (74.3% vs. 68.2% at age 17) and in graduation from post-compulsory education (more than 10%) (Ministerio de Educación, 2012a). However, the proportion of women choosing careers in the sciences (associated with higher paid and more prestigious jobs) is below 25% (Dooly & Vallejo, 2008, p. 13). Furthermore, in a study of Spanish dropout rates per gender, Casquero and Navarro (2010) found that overall rates of ESL were higher for male students. However, in a sub-group of female students with immigrant parents, ESL rates were higher than for those with Spanish parents.

Other studies also indicate that ethnicity and nationality play a relevant role in ESL. In Spain, the rate of ESL among immigrants is more than 40% of the total (Roca Cobo, 2010, p. 51 amongst others). Fernández (2012, p. 32) highlights that many immigrant and ethnic minority populations are at an educational disadvantage, especially communities such as the Roma (Ross, 2009) and immigrants from Africa and Latin America who show great differences with the OECD average results.

Newcomers to the Spanish educational system face specific challenges. The high concentration of immigrant students in some public centres affects their chances of full integration in Spanish society (Dooly & Vallejo, 2008). Moreover, they may also be pushed towards ESL and the labour market for family economic reasons. In Spain, 32% of children of foreign parents who are not from the EU live below the poverty line (OECD, 2003), a ratio that has increased with the economic crisis. Even when they do graduate from compulsory education, the risk of exclusion is not reduced — children who arrive in Spain through family reunification programmes are allowed into the education system until they are 16, but they

cannot work afterwards, contributing to high youth unemployment among this group (Dooly & Vallejo, 2008, p. 13).

As mentioned in the introduction, the exogenous factor of national and local economy cannot be extricated from the rate of Spanish ESL, along with fluctuations in the labour market. In their study of the discourse (interviews) of students and early school leavers, Mena Martínez *et al.* (2010) found a direct connection between disengagement with the school system (responses included aspects such as repeated low or failing grades, boredom with course content and implementation, sense of having being 'labelled' as failure by teachers and administrators) and a desire to 'migrate' away from a system where they are destined to fail to the adult world where they can succeed by joining the labour market as soon as possible. These individual impressions are supported by other studies. This is discussed in more detail in the next section.

Turning to endogenous factors that depend on the educational norms and regulations, one of the most questioned is the requirement of a Compulsory Secondary Education Certificate as a recognition for obligatory studies (Roca Cobo, 2010). Unlike many other European countries, without this document one cannot continue to further stages of education (academic or vocational upper secondary and university). The gap between compulsory attendance at school and recognition of having completed compulsory education is described by Bernardi and Requena (2010, p. 96):

[E]ducation is compulsory until age 16 but at that age a student might not have finished compulsory secondary education [from now onward CSE] if s/he has not passed one or more of the four courses of CSE on time. Under the Law of General Order of the Educational System (LOGSE) — passed in 1990 by the Socialist Government — if the student failed in attaining the educational goals of the two first courses, s/he could remain an extra year in this first cycle, as well as another year in each of the two courses of the second cycle. Later, the Organic Law of the Quality of Education (LOCE), brought into force by the Popular Party in 2002 and put into effect in 2003, established a new criteria for retaking: at the end of each year at CSE level, if a student does not pass three subjects, s/he has, in principle, to retake the corresponding course. Once the Socialist Party came again to power in 2004, it blocked some of the most controversial measures of the LOCE (for instance, the streaming into separate tracks according to the students' performance at the age of 14) but maintained the criteria for retaking.

The required diploma has been criticised for the ambiguous criteria used for student evaluation (Tiana, 2009; Puelles, 2011–2012; Martínez, 2009; Roca Cobo, 2010; Puelles, 2012) and for its exclusivity as the only means of recognition of compulsory education. Martínez (2009) describes ESL in Spain as an 'administrative failure' since students do not take an objective, external examination to obtain the certificate (the criteria are established according to regions and centres). 'School failure and ESL have nothing to do with what the students know and what the schools teach, rather it is linked to what the schools demand for obtaining the diploma of obligatory studies' (Fundación Alternativas, 2010, p. 146 in CLL, 2012a). Of course, school failure and ESL are two different phenomena; however they are inextricably linked, as school dropout is often conditioned to a large extent by the failure of those students who were unable to obtain the Compulsory

Secondary Education Certificate after finishing their compulsory education (Roca Cobo, 2010). As this author points out, despite the fact that Spain has similar PISA results of lower-achieving students to those of the US, the UK or the Netherlands, in these countries, these students have alternative routes to continue their studies, whereas in Spain opportunities are contingent upon holding the certificate. Moreover, studies have found a close association between academic performance and completion of compulsory secondary education and class:

[S]tudents from the service class are more likely to finish their CSE at the age of 16 and thus avoid retaking some course. Second, class inequality is stronger for retaking in the case of failure at CSE than for moving on to post-compulsory education in the case of having completed CSE on time. (. . .) Students from advantaged social origins are, thus, more likely to have a 'second chance' in the case of previous failure in the educational system. (Bernardi & Requena, 2010, p. 112).

The authors also found that, even when students from different socioeconomic classes had similar positive educational results (completion of CSE without retention), less advantaged classes were more likely to enter vocational education than the more privileged classes, who were more likely to choose the academic track in post-compulsory education.

It is along these lines that the curriculum of compulsory secondary education (12 to 16 years of age) has also been criticised for not taking into account the diversity of students' interests and future options, since it is more oriented towards pre-university than towards vocational training. Fernández *et al.* (2010, p. 23) point out the differences between the German school systems, where different options for successful degrees are provided (therefore policies for educational improvement focus on school dropout rather than on school failure), and the French or Spanish systems that only offer one means of exit (academic) that is considered (socially) as leading to 'success'.

A similar pattern was detected by Bynner (2012) in his historical-perspective study of the relation between early school leavers and the job market in the UK. For instance, the cap on job opportunities for young people worldwide during the 1980s, followed by another recession in the early 1990s, created difficulties for young people to have access to the labour market, especially those with poor education records. According to this author, the conservative British government, under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher, invested in youth training as the solution (rather than examining the underlying inadequacies of British industry to make changes to market demands), thus putting the responsibility for unemployment on young people. Moreover, the apprenticeship jobs that accompanied the government initiative of youth training lacked prestige of accreditation and resulted in exploitable cheap labour for the industries (Coffield *et al.*, 1986a; 1986 b). Similar patterns can be seen in the relation between ESL in Spain and labour market changes following the real estate crash in 2008.

Another endogenous factor which may contribute to ESL in Spain is the amount of time and effort required to complete post-compulsory education, especially when there is a deviation between curriculum content and the requirements for subject completion, as has occurred with the post-compulsory academic track that was reduced to two years as a consequence of raising compulsory education from age 14 to 16. Despite less time to complete post-compulsory

studies, high academic requirements in the subjects were maintained. Similarly, at university level, when some degrees were shortened from five to four years to adapt to the common European Educational System, high academic criteria and content continued. For students coming from public education centres with fewer resources to prepare them for these post-compulsory requirements, the effort needed may seem insuperable (Ross *et al.*, 2012).

Inevitably, recent policy and budget cuts to the educational system have had an effect on Spanish ESL. The current governments (both central and local) have increased the ratio of students per class by 20%, augmented educators' teaching hours, eliminated many scholarships and grants and made the conditions for obtaining the remaining financial aid more difficult, suppressed compensatory tools such as reception classes for newcomers and increased higher education fees (among others measures) — all of which tend to have a more negative impact on the already disadvantaged (Cederberg *et al.*, 2009, p. 7).

ESL and Social Disadvantage: school failure or economic failure?

The relation between ESL and social disadvantage is complex — ESL can be considered both an indicator and a cause of social and/or educational disadvantage (Ross, 2009; Ross *et al.*, 2012). As an *indicator*, it frequently serves as a marker of educational inequality, together with comparisons of the level of functional literacy achieved by specific social groups, participation in post-compulsory education, and access to and participation in higher education. As a *cause* of social disadvantage, the lack of access to these opportunities has been shown to have an effect on future employment.

If specific groups are detected as having higher rates of ESL than others, another question arises. When and how did early school leavers — those who have completed obligatory education — come to be conceptualised as socially disadvantaged and even, at times, as indicative of school failure? Early school leavers are defined by the European Commission as those who 'leave education and training *before* completing upper secondary education or equivalents in vocational education and training' (European Commission, 2011). In strict terms, ESL should *not* be conceived as a form of school failure since it is voluntary and often affects students who have successfully completed their compulsory education. However, the Colectivo Lorenzo Luzuriaga (CLL) gives two reasons to extend the concept of school failure to post-compulsory levels, at least in the Spanish context:

The Spanish educational system is designed as a continuum where the contents and values of primary education lead to secondary education, which in turn leads to post-compulsory tracks (especially academic upper secondary and university afterwards). Secondly, the Spanish society expects students to continue their studies after the compulsory cycle, because this diploma does not prepare students for work and there are not sufficient and appropriate jobs for this particular sector of youth. Therefore, there is now a type of 'hidden coercion' to continue studying. (CLL, 2012a, pp. 5–6).

It has become more and more common, not only in Spain, but worldwide, to link levels of educational attainment of nation-states to their economic and industrial competitiveness. At political levels, this link has become especially salient, thereby implying another concept of school failure and social disadvantage, not only for those who abandon the school system before finishing compulsory education, but

also for students who leave with only the certificate. This accentuates how closely related labour demands and levels of education have become; as markets shift, social and cultural attitudes inevitably follow (Kupfer 2011). Referring once more to Bourdieu's notion that cultural capital consists of familiarity with the dominant culture in a society, and especially the ability to understand and adapt to the demands of the mainstream educational system (related to the implicit values of the middle-class), lower class pupils who do not have access to this cultural capital encounter greater difficulties to succeed in education and subsequently to have access to higher level jobs ('white collar jobs'). In fact, holding a higher degree is a further guarantee of having a job. A recent European report states that in Spain:

Holding higher education qualifications is more conducive to being in employment. On average, 86% of tertiary graduates between 25 and 39 years of age are working, as opposed to 78% of those with upper secondary qualifications at most, and to only 60% of young people with lower level qualifications (EACEA, 2012, p. 177).

At the same time, the labour market also plays a key role in blue-collar jobs — part of the labour market which, historically in Spain, has been easily accessed without need for post-compulsory education. The link between education levels and work opportunities is evidenced in the construction boom in Spain. From the 1980s until approximately 2008 ample job opportunities in construction and related industries implied quick integration of ESLrs into this type of labour. For those who felt disenfranchised from the school system, low-skilled but relatively well remunerated jobs provided the means of leaving behind past 'failures' for a successful 'adult' life (Mena Martínez *et al.*, 2010). The Spanish model of economic growth (massive real estate investment) ensured that lack of post-compulsory formation was not a deterrent to finding a job for ESLrs. However, as this job market shrunk (beginning with the crash of 2008 in housing prices), early school leavers found themselves unemployed and unemployable. National media have been quick to underline a link between a specific national problem (youth unemployment in Spain) and ESL as a disadvantage.

The exodus of students to sectors that provided employment during the boom years now jeopardizes a generation that is labeled as lost. The truth is that unemployment has hit those without training the hardest. The mismatch between the training of workers (offer) and what the market wants (demand) is one of the problems that will persist once the crisis is over. Many young people left their education to join low-productivity sectors that offered juicy rewards (El Economista 24/1/13).

Spain has the highest level of youth unemployment of the EU with 46.4% in 2011, twice that of the EU-27 levels (21.4%), increasing as fast as 6 points between 2010 and 2011 and tripling in the last 6 years (Eurostat, 2012b). Furthermore, the percentage of unemployed young people is much higher among those who have only completed compulsory lower-secondary education (49.6%) than among those who have completed the higher stage of secondary education (34.3%) or hold a university degree (28%). The most recent data on unemployment released in January 2013 showed that Spain had a 26.02% unemployment rate (almost 6 million people). It grew to 55.13% amongst those who were under 25 and to 51.68% amongst the 20- to 24-year-olds (INE, 2013). It should be noted that

these percentages are slightly lower than the youth unemployment rates given by the EACEA report (2012) mentioned above, implying that different factors were calculated in the rankings. However, in both cases, the employment ratio of young people with higher education is significantly higher than for those with basic education. Popularly baptised ‘*generación ni-ni*’ (Ni estudian ni trabajan: Neither study, nor work), these young people were perceived as a sort of lost generation who lacked both ambitions and motivations – at least until recently when youth unemployment has reached a record high. Now the ‘*ni-ni generation*’ is perceived more as a ‘victim’ of the global economic crisis and has been the subject of demographical and sociological analyses and media attention (even as main characters of TV reality shows) and plays an important role in the social construct and general perceptions of ESL and unemployed young people (Barbería, 2009).

Tiana (2012a, p. 357) proposes two explanations for why ESL has been so persistent: the increase in the opportunity costs of studying — together with the still-vibrant construction industry up to 2008- and the high rate of immigrants coming to Spain to join the job market. Arguably, the downturn in job offers in blue collar positions could have a positive effect on ESL: fewer and less attractive job offers for holders of minimum education qualifications could mean that young people are obliged to continue their studies (Op. cit). Encouragingly, official data from September 2011 show that, from 2007 to 2009, both school failure and ESL had diminished in Spain. In 2007, 31% of students in their last year of compulsory education did not obtain the final diploma, compared to 29% in 2008 and 26% in 2009 (Puelles, 2011–2012). However, a more recent EACEA report (2012) showed that the number of graduates from tertiary education (the 20–24 age group) had declined. This implies that the consequences of ESL are not easily remedied, especially for the ‘*ni-ni generation*’ – once out of the education system, there are few probabilities of returning. According to data from the Youth Institute (INJUVE, 2000), the proportion of students having already left the educational system and willing to return or retake studies fell abruptly between 1996 and 2000: from 83% to 62% for 15–17- year-olds, from 70% to 40% (18 to 20) and from 54% to 34% (21 to 24 years), only increasing among the oldest group (aged 25 to 29). As Comas (2003) puts it, this underscores a perverse process where those in the best conditions to get an education despise it and value it when it is too late (Fernández, 2012, p. 17). It also exacerbates a national problem — not only do labour market prospects deteriorate for ESL, but also, upon economic recovery, Spain will have a lack of educated and specialised workers (Cedefop, 2012).

Future Prospects for Early School Leavers in Spain

As it has already been discussed, part of the explanation for Spain’s high ESL can be found in the irrelevance (or limited importance) of the graduation diploma to access the labour market, especially when there was a surplus of offers for low-qualification jobs (Tiana, 2012a). Additionally, degrees and job market have traditionally been decoupled. ‘With the exception of a few cases that require legalized academic or professional degrees (jobs in education, health, etc.) the global production system [in Spain] has always been distanced from academic and professional degrees’ (CLL, 2012a, p. 7). Historically, then, the notion that degrees do not guarantee a good job, or even a job at all has held sway in a large share of the population. In a survey in 2006, the belief that ‘the education that I’m getting is

adequate for what I will need in the future' fell from 91.1% among primary students who said yes, to 54.5% in upper secondary (Marchesi *et al.* 2006 in Fernández, 2012, p. 18). Puelles argues that ESL rates are higher not only due to lack of external options, but also to the limited intrinsic attractiveness of the educational system itself.

Furthermore, having a degree in Spain does not necessarily imply a better salary (Muñoz, 2009 *et al.*, p. 61), especially in the first years of unemployment and with so-called 'contratos basura' (short-term, low-wage contracts). Similarly, García (2011) warns of the consequences of the little value placed on education coupled with the short-term, low-paid employment of over-qualified young people with university degrees. The difficult transition to employment (few job offers, short-term, low-pay conditions, over-qualifications for job profiles, etc.) can have negative repercussions in later work careers. As Krugman (2012) explains, longitudinal studies show that the effect of long-term unemployment or periods in jobs where the worker is overqualified is linked to fewer promotions and lower-ranking jobs over the worker's lifetime. Moreover, young people who leave school early, without participating in youth training, with no qualification and who are subsequently relegated to unfulfilling, often part-time, casual work and unemployment, result in a 'scarring effect' that indicates successive unemployability (Arulampalam *et al.*, 2001).

Since unemployment percentages are even higher for ESL young people (Cedefop, 2012), a large percentage of the Spanish population is at risk of marginalisation and social inequality in the near future. Perhaps one of the most sinister effects of ESL is the creation of a generation of young people that lacks the basic competencies of literacy and numeracy. Since these are becoming increasingly mandatory for any type of employment (Bynner, 2004; 2012), both early school leavers and participants of youth training acquire poor adult basic skills (literacy and numeracy), resulting in 'persistent unemployment' (Bynner, 2012, p. 47).

Proposals for avoiding this marginalisation include the need to promote a new 'habitus' concerning continuing education among the Spanish public, in particular young people. Tiana (2009, p. 71) suggests transmitting to the new generations the idea that getting an education, as well as opportunities for further training are always worthwhile; this must be done through educational administration which creates structures and mechanisms that favour new modes of learning.

Nonetheless, the pathway to school success is not straightforward and transparent. Concerning higher education and access to university entrance, Bourdieu has illustrated the collapsing distinction between supply and demand in education (1998; 2005). For example, it is becoming more and more frequent for universities to form partnerships with well-known multinational corporations — this creates channeled recruitment and placement of students from specific careers from the partner university, which, in turn, ensures enhanced reputations for the partner universities since they can advertise such prestigious career destinations for their graduates. Likewise, the corporations are seen to be recruiting 'the best and the brightest', thus creating a relationship that acts as a barrier for access to university except for a select few (Kupfer, 2011, p. 193).

The question of cultural capital should also be examined from the perspective of how education and labour market are increasingly interconnected, so much so that education institutions may even create the 'need' for credentials for entry into the job market. As Hursh & Henderson (2011) have noted, neoliberal policies that

are closely linked to economic demand are usually promoted by ‘those who are most powerful, and who can, therefore control public debate and present neoliberalism as both the inevitable evolution of capitalism and as a technical and apolitical response to economic and political issues’ (p. 171). They highlight how ‘in education, the corporate or governmental elite who value learning only in terms of its contribution to economic growth use high-stake tests to ostensibly assess and hold accountable teacher and students’ (Op. cit, p. 172). In other words, the promotion of ‘new modes of learning’ should be carefully scrutinised so as not to reproduce existing social inequalities.

The latest proposal for education reform known as the LOMCE, promulgated by the current conservative government (Ministerio de Educación, 2012b) has been criticised for focusing on national economic competitiveness and efficiency and accountability. Tiana (2012b) points out that the first three sentences of the proposed law state that education is the ‘motor’ that promotes economic competitiveness and national prosperity and that the educational level of a nation determines its capacity to successfully compete in the international arena and face the challenges of the future.

The underlying agenda of national economic competitiveness, efficiency and accountability can be directly linked to neoliberal ideals (Hursh & Henderson, 2011; Ravitch, 2010). Tiana points out that the need to ensure that students become responsible, respectful citizens and to inculcate social life competences and respect, diversity and equality are not mentioned in the new law. Critics also warn that the law is based on an educational model that is based on selection, segregation and inequality, competitiveness and employability instead of the students’ personal development (CLL, 2012a, p. 2).

Final Words: looking forward

Taking into consideration endogenous factors, experts on ESL in Spain underscore the role of transparent, coordinated policies and practices. Firstly, there is a need to increase investment in education (unlike the current budget-cutting policies). The latest OECD report states that investment in education will generate greater long-term benefits (CLL, 2012a, p. 4). Budgeting for national research on ESL is also needed — research that takes a critical view of social conceptions of motivation, school failure, etc. and provides more in-depth explanations that explore complex social factors such as geographical and gender differences.

Another important factor is better acknowledgement and management of diversity as an intrinsic trait of quality education, rather than focusing on individual meritocracy (prevalent in current neoliberal policies). This includes examining and improving the system of distribution of at-risk students in the dual network of private and public centres, especially since the lack of equity and inclusion may lead to school failure and ESL (OECD, 2012a). Greater flexibility of school timetables (to allow for part-time jobs) and smaller class ratios to allow for personalised attention have also been suggested as important measures to reach a diverse population, especially those students who are more likely to leave school early (Roca Cobo, 2010).

Policies for qualification and promotion need to be revised. Allowing students to be held back is costly to society and does not improve educational results; instead it stigmatises students and is one of the first symptoms of marginalisation and future ESL (Fernández *et al.*, 2010; OECD, 2012b; Tiana 2011b). Often,

school failure is due to undiagnosed learning or behaviour problems, so early diagnosis is essential as a preventive measure (Tiana, 2012a, pp. 351–361), instead of retention. There is also a need to revise the accreditation system of compulsory education (objective, fair and external criteria) and offer continuous assessment and recognition of acquired competences in compulsory education for those who do not obtain the certificate (Tiana, 2012a, p. 355). This should be complemented with optional entry to continue education for those who do not have the compulsory education degree, thereby ensuring a means of ‘recovering’ ESL young people while, at the same time, providing greater support to at-risk students. Along similar lines, professional courses, with less focus on academic content, as well as alternative educational tracks for those students who do not feel comfortable with the more traditional curriculum, should be offered as an optional track in compulsory and post-compulsory education (Roca Cobo, 2010).

Considering exogenous factors, there is a need for a shift in policies in order to legitimise vocational studies (for students, parents, society). This includes creating a better informed public through free information and counselling services so that the social benefits of an educated population are better understood. This is especially important in post-compulsory secondary education, through career counselling and orientation of work options. Young people at risk of ESL and their families need to be aware of the job demand and accompanying competitive salaries for well-prepared technical personnel so that vocational training is not seen as a useless effort or a ‘loser’ path. Along similar lines, policies should be put in place that ensure recognition of the expertise acquired through vocational education as a means of academic re-entry into technical, engineering, and other career programmes at later stages. Not only will this promote the social prestige of this educational option, it will also safeguard a more skilled workforce for the future.

Many young people, especially those coming from families who lack significant social capital, have scant information and links to potential workplaces. Many young people may not give careful thought to their own potential career choices and therefore have not taken up the opportunities in school to prepare appropriately for a career path, indicating the need for systemic diagnosis and counselling throughout compulsory education and beyond. Of course, these policies need to be financially backed with scholarships and other student aide. This is also applicable to higher education institutions. Given that the rate of graduates from tertiary education is similar for Spanish young people to that of those in other countries (e.g. Dutch young people) and yet those in Spain have a much more uphill struggle to find jobs, there is a need to reform the course curriculum at university to ensure that students acquire the kind of skills that employers are looking for. Furthermore, initiatives like these at secondary and tertiary level of education require steady, formalised partnership between schools, vocational institutions, employers and other engaged stakeholders.

Bynner (2012, p. 49) warns against the dangers of accepting ESL as an inevitable outcome of a type of natural social selection (e.g. some individuals are born to succeed, while others are destined to unskilled labour or unemployment). ‘The consequence of passive acceptance of the status quo is not just a problem for young people and their families, but by encompassing intergenerational continuity of marginalisation and exclusion, for society as a whole’. Tiana (2009) has a similar view, stating that Spanish society cannot afford to waste the talent of its young people.

This article began by looking at the evolution of the Spanish education system and the challenges of ESL within its framework and the social and historical context as a whole. It is now time for policy and practices to converge in endeavours to construct an education system that is comprehensive, based on human, not commercial values. These policies and practices must aim to reduce marginalisation of all pupils – early school leavers included.

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