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Early School Leaving in Europe: a Complex Phenomenon Studied Through Multidimensional Approach

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[Review of the book: Comparative Perspectives on Early School Leaving in the European Union, by Lore Van Praag, Ward Nouwen, Rut Van Caudenberg, Noel Clycq, Christiane Timmerman; Routledge, New York, 2018, ISBN: 978-1-138-04807-2]

Early school leaving is one of the most complex phenomena in the panorama of social problems present in today's society. The early dropout of young people from training courses often generates processes of social exclusion with long-term repercussions in their lives. It is a phenomenon that also marks the beginning of the 'crystallization' of cultural capital and generates chronic effects not only on the life of the individual but, like an avalanche, on the entire social and economic system (NESSE 2009). It is worth emphasizing that the causes of early school leaving, even if individual, are affected by the influences of the social environment and inevitably fall on it (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Rumberger 1983).

The consequences of early school leaving can be defined in the short, medium and long term: the short term consequences refer to the working sphere and therefore to unemployment, precarious jobs, low income (Furlong 2006; Woessmann and Schuetz 2006); the medium-term consequences refer to both social costs (social disintegration, increased demand on the health system and lower social cohesion) as well as economic costs (lower productivity, lower tax revenues and higher social costs) (Belfield *et al.* 2007; Psacharopoulos 2007; Brunello and Paola 2014); finally, the long-term consequences constitute a significant waste of potential for social and economic

development. Thus, we can foresee a future characterized by difficulty in coming out of the mechanisms consolidated during the establishing of the phenomenon. These projections are easy to predict, given the complexity of the phenomenon and the difficulty of developing contrast actions to early school leaving that are able to curb the constant worrying increase of young people who decide to drop out of school and training courses.

A very important and innovative contribution to the studies on the phenomenon of early school leaving was published in the text “Comparative Perspectives on Early School Leaving in the European Union” which presents the results of a study carried out by a multidisciplinary team, in nine EU Member States (Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Hungary, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the UK), within the EU funded project “Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe” - RESL.eu (2013–2018).

The book is structured in four parts following a path that ‘accompanies’ the reader to analyse early school leaving in all its facets as well as from multiple points of view. The text is a very important tool for those who want to study in depth the phenomenon of early school leaving since the authors do not limit themselves to analysing its diffusion, but enter into the folds of the problem by identifying the risk and protection factors, correlating it with systemic and institutional indicators, while also analysing the measures implemented to contrast it. The real element of novelty is having given a voice to those who are in some way involved in the phenomenon, mainly using a research methodology (very rare in this type of analysis): young people first of all, but also teachers and insiders.

While reading the text, you get the impression of entering into the analysis of early school leaving highlighting a whole series of conceptual, operational and methodological nuances that give it almost a multidimensional vision. It is a book whose originality is immediately evident, because it accompanies the reader on a guided path that helps him not only to get to know the subject from multiple angles, but also places him in front of a series of alternative and prepositive reflections on the subject.

In the first part of the book “State of the art and impact of early school leaving across European countries”, the situation in European countries (involved in the research) and the cost-benefit relationship in tackling the phenomenon of early school leaving are outlined.

More specifically, in the first four chapters, the reach of the phenomenon and the profile of young drop outs in the various European countries involved in the research are described.

The first chapter presents an important source of empirical data that can be defined as innovative because it contains detailed information from a socio-demographic and aptitude point of view, referring to 20,000 young people living in Europe. The analysis reveals the important role of factors such

as self-perceptions and personal relationships as determinants of individual pathways that influence levels of school engagement.

This part of the book also discusses how the quantitative approach used in the research has helped to measure and implement the concept of school commitment. This is defined across the elements that most significantly influence the distancing of training paths, with the most interesting aspect being the relationship with peers and teachers, as well as with parents. All this leads to the definition of a statistical model of school engagement based on the international dataset, while highlighting the main protective factors (positive teacher-student relations, having peers with high aspirations, the expectation of parents towards their children to obtain higher level qualifications) that can promote and increase students school engagement.

The following topic (chapter 2) warns the reader about a possible risk that can be incurred by developing indices and measures relating to a dynamic that can lead to the exclusion of certain social groups as what occurred in Hungary for a group of young Roma.

The reading path continues (chapter 3) with the comparison between three countries of the Union that, by socio-political and cultural characteristics, are very different from each other: Portugal, Sweden and Poland. The relationship between education and the dynamics of Europeanization is taken into consideration, with the European policies implemented in some single states being analysed and evaluated through a qualitative analysis carried out with school insiders.

The starting point is a desk analysis of the policies and educational measures that are implemented to oppose the phenomenon of early school leaving in the three countries taken into account. The interesting element in this examination is the effort to understand to what extent European policies are adopted in national contexts and how much in all that is achieved, a network governance with associations, organizations and agencies that could be interesting in contrasting the phenomenon: finally, the ambiguities and tensions that emerge from this process are highlighted.

To complete the analysis of the policies, focus groups were carried out with experts (school staff) where participants were asked to evaluate the ESL contrast policies in relation to the characteristics of the phenomenon in the country of origin.

The first part of the book closes (chapter 4) with an interesting and still little investigated topic in the European context: the individual and economic costs associated with early school leaving, which are also costs for the whole society. The problem of the costs involved in dropping out of school is closely related to the economies of the countries and can have repercussions on the future development of each state.

The chapter examines the data relating to Austria and Sweden and pays attention to some areas where the greatest costs (individual, social and economic) can occur: individual employment and income, payments for public transfers, crime, health and economic growth. Reading the chapter is interesting because, using a tradition of American and Australian studies (countries where there is a deeply-rooted tradition of studies on this topic), it analyses how measures to contrast early school leaving can avoid high costs to society.

Even if there are studies and research carried out on estimates and projections, certainty that the damage of a wrong educational policy cannot be underestimated.

The reading path of the book in the second part (dealing with youngsters' perspectives on early school leaving and schooling) focuses on the experience of young people who are the direct protagonists of the phenomenon. Using an interpretative approach, the authors let us get to the heart of the topic by making the reader 'listen' to the voice of those directly involved, through the understanding of what it means to be engaged in school (or not) and how they imagine their future.

In chapter 5, researchers from the University of Aversa studied in greater detail the school narratives of two young people (who live in Flanders) who dropped out of school early. Through the qualitative methodology, they analyse their school experiences and the way in which their choices have been influenced. The three authors of the chapter present how the social context can determine the choices of the younger generations. However, the public debate on these issues does not consider the 'voices' and experiences of young people who choose to leave school early due to the socio-economic and cultural conditions of the family and the social network close to them. The decision to drop out of school is therefore presented in all its complexity and not as a simple departure from school: since school experiences are the result of a complex process influenced by the social context and the relationships lived in it, by the hierarchies of power and status, and specific rules and normative practices with which young people come into contact.

Also in chapter 6, the authors study in greater detail this topic by analysing the concept of (dis)engagement and placing it at the basis of a qualitative study in which they present five life stories. The goal is to understand the importance of school engagement through the analysis of the perception of the disengagement of young people towards their peers who go to school and the teachers.

The analysis is carried out in Poland, a country in which school (dis)engagement rarely ends with school dropout: young people who drop out of school are often subjected to risk factors since childhood. There is also an examination of the protective factors to always look for in the family envi-

ronment that compensate for the gaps in the risk factors. For this reason, the authors conclude the chapter by emphasizing the importance of supporting the vulnerable subjects to stimulate them and have a positive attitude towards the school that they hand down to their children. Institutions and professionals must pay considerable attention to this dynamic to stem situations that can lead to serious social marginalization.

The journey into the different dimensions of early school leaving continues with the analysis of the determinants of the “educational expectations” of young people living in some disadvantaged urban areas in Sweden (chapter 7). The authors, starting from the considerations and studies that connect economic and cultural capital with social capital, analyse the impact that the different forms of social capital have on the educational expectations of young students. The methodology used is qualitative: in-depth interviews were conducted with young students and participant observation at school was also used. The basic assumption of the study is that the educational expectations of young people can be predictive of the school dropout of young people living in conditions of social disadvantage: failure, frustration and eventually school dropout.

The interesting element presented in this chapter is the importance, in these situations, of the intertwining of the micro level (the stories of young people and the analysis of their social dimension) with the macro level of the education system and school policy, and the meso level which concerns social institutions such as relationships within the family, school, neighbourhood and community. The authors highlight the importance of the meso level and how social relationships can influence the complex school dropout process in the marginalized urban areas of Sweden.

The last chapter (chapter 8) of the second part of the book goes into the specifics of a category of disadvantaged girls with a low cultural background: the analysis concerns educational and professional aspirations in the school context and is carried out using a qualitative methodology. The ‘stories’ told reveal the close connection between individual aspirations (micro level), the school and family context (meso level) and national educational (institutional arrangements): the interdependence of these three levels is realized in the way in which young women express their aspirations (they want to be game developers) in relation to the stimuli they receive from both the family and the school context. Achieving one’s life goals can be so important as to create alternative paths to school ones in order to achieve one’s aspirations: the context in which one lives, however, is fundamental to satisfying these aspirations and be a support in achieving them.

The common thread throughout the chapter is the connection that the authors make between the wider literature on the effects of institutional arrangements and the studies on pupils’ aspirations, highlighting how dif-

ferent national contexts (Netherlands and United Kingdom) influence the development and fulfilment of young girls' aspirations through the concepts of "reasons" and "resources". The two school systems examined limit the opportunities for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds: in order to overcome the obstacles posed by the school systems, the young women interviewed had to create alternative pathways to the school ones.

The third part entitled "Educational trajectories of youth (at risk of) leaving school early" analyses the training trajectories of young people at risk of dropping out of school. It is a path that is treated in three chapters in which the theme of educational paths within specific systems of different European countries is specifically addressed.

The third part of the book begins (chapter 9) with the comparison between two very similar educational systems, that of Flanders in Belgium and that of the Netherlands. The authors lead the reader into a careful analysis of school change practices in two urban contexts of Flanders and the Netherlands. The starting assumption is that the educational systems of these two countries have a considerable influence on the institutionalized and individual transfer practices of students between fields of study and pathways, an issue that has been little studied in the sector up to now. An element that stands out in this chapter is that transfers within vocational education are considered less prestigious in both systems: the fundamental issue is that young people in vocational training circuits are more likely than others to change paths with respect to other young people.

The topic dealt with in the chapter offers an important starting point for reflection both on the training trajectories of students within the Dutch and Flemish systems as well as on the fact that the practices of change of educational direction can hinder learning practices and can undermine the synergy between aspirations and student opportunities.

Chapter 10 adds a fundamental piece to the panorama of studies on early school leaving because it pays attention to the educational trajectories and processes of inequality of young adults, living in Portugal, who drop out of training after completing compulsory school and without a certificate of upper secondary school or its equivalent (ISCED 3). Using a qualitative research methodology, the authors of the chapter draw the life trajectories that concern some young people, interviewed after some time since they left school: this is to understand the consequences of early school leaving and the dynamics of social inequality that characterize their biographies.

In the chapter, the authors underline the challenges that young people must face in a work landscape that requires increasing professional specialization, placing at the centre of reflection the analysis of inequality processes conditioned by social and cultural capital and by the mechanisms of inclusion of educational systems.

The third part of the book ends with an analysis of the academic trajectories of some young immigrants living in Catalonia (chapter 11). The peculiarity of this chapter is that it presents a topic rarely dealt with in the texts on school dropout because it reconstructs the training courses of young people who were considered at risk of ESL because they had a family and cultural background that would have led them towards that path. The authors show a detailed analysis of how the aspirations of young people can be protective factors and how the risk of ESL can be curbed by the support of teachers, by flexible, proactive and caring schools and by a strong self-determination of those directly involved.

The last part of the book “Strategies to deal with early school leaving” presents an operational aspect of the phenomenon of early school leaving: the three chapters deal with strategies for dealing with and preventing early school leaving. The most interesting aspect of this part is that the authors do not simply make a presentation of the strategies implemented at European or national level but analyse the policies in place through an experts evaluation.

In the first chapter of this last part of the book (chapter 12), the authors present a very original work, of a qualitative nature, in which young people and specialized personnel were involved in evaluating measures to oppose the phenomenon of early school leaving in Catalonia. The chapter analyses the points of view and experiences of young people and staff in the education system: respondents, from personal experience, assess the effectiveness of the measures 1) Youth for Employment Programme (YfE) [Joves per l’Ocupació] of the Employment Service and 2) Training and Labour Insertion Programmes (TLIP) [Programes de Formació i Inserció] of the Department of Education.

In the next chapter (chapter 13), the authors present a completely new point of view in the panorama of reflections on school dropout: they present some paths of young people who, having left ordinary education, have sought (and found) their way into future alternative training paths. The methodology used is the qualitative one, with such a high depth of analysis only coming from this type of approach. The originality of the work lies in having retraced the choices made in their past together with the young people: the reason for leaving school, the search for an alternative and the choice to take a different path from ordinary training channels by choosing alternative learning arenas that offer effective solutions for training. All this naturally takes place through a criticism by the authors of the Portuguese school system which obviously must initiate processes of change to offer valid alternatives to the younger generations.

The last chapter of the book (chapter 14) deals with a key theme closely related to early school leaving, that of young NEETs, and does so in the na-

tional context in which the phenomenon was studied for the first time, the United Kingdom. The originality of the chapter lies in treating the topic from a different point of view, that of those who have taken alternative ways to get out of the NEET condition and from the point of view of those who have had to deal with this category of young people as trainers and employers.

The chapter unfolds in an analysis of all those policies implemented to support young NEETs: the authors carry out an analysis of the apprenticeship interventions that have been applied in the Kingdom United to support this category of young people. The question that runs throughout the chapter concerns the validity of the apprenticeship in guaranteeing young people a useful training to find a job that makes them earn well and is not underpaid: low qualifications are among the factors of greatest risk to prevent the integration of young people into the labour market and keep them in the condition of NEET for a long time.

The book remains original until the end because it concludes with a series of political recommendations at European and national levels that arose precisely on the basis of the reflections that emerged from the research carried out. Within the conclusions, the authors follow a path that guides the reader in an in-depth analysis of some important issues in the field of early school leaving: alternative school pathways in the seven countries involved in the RESL.eu research (Belgium, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and United Kingdom), evaluation of the intervention, prevention and compensation measures implemented, discussion of the protective factors that are significant for school engagement in each country that participated in the research work.

The text closes with some very interesting national recommendations for all the stakeholders including school policy makers. Recommendations are presented taking into account the three levels that have characterized all the work: the micro, meso and macro levels. For each level, operational proposals are made that can support professionals and policy makers to improve their work and to offer the younger generations the appropriate support to improve their training courses and projection towards the future.

The book in its entirety is full of contents and meanings. It presents itself as an opportunity to learn about the phenomenon of early school leaving in all its facets, because it also sheds light on aspects of the phenomenon that have not been investigated so far.

In the reading, aspects emerge that often leak from the 'mesh' of the analyses normally carried out on school dropout, such as the whole part dedicated to ethnic minorities. The richness of the presentation is highlighted by the direct interesting talk and by presenting a whole series of alternative paths of redemption and opportunities on the part of those who have experienced early school leaving.

Despite the richness of the contents, the diversity of the contributions makes the text not very homogeneous: to avoid this fragmentation it would have been very important to relate the research results of each nation with the European context. It would also have been useful to consider other countries such as Italy, Malta or Romania for a more effective comparison between the different nations.

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