ADDRESSING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORKING SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES AND ACTIVITIES THAT FOSTER PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL COMMUNITY

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Abstract

Early school leaving (ESL) is a complex phenomenon that may negatively influence learner prospects for professional and personal development. While ESL contributing factors may differ from one community to another, some emerge as significant: socio-economic background, the value a family places in education, parent understanding of school curricula, parent availability and capacity to help their children with homework, teacher ability to identify ESL risk and address it effectively, and more. While a learner may be identified as being at risk of ESL in high school factors that contribute to ESL, especially related to family circumstances, may emerge as early as in primary or even pre-primary education. The LINC project aims at contributing to ESL prevention. LINC explores the challenges faced by learners, teachers, and parents as well as possible responses and introduces learning interventions that start early, in primary education, and continue throughout lower high school addressing ESL factors before ESL becomes a visible risk. LINC aims at strengthening social networks that support learners in learning and schooling helping them stay engaged in educational processes. The LINC methodological learning framework draws upon principles for community building, experiential learning, story-telling, and blended learning. LINC empowers parents to become actively involved in their children's educational efforts. This is achieved through joint activities between learners and parents that promote communication and build parent confidence and capacity to support their children in schooling. LINC further promotes parent-school communication through on-line communities and provides access to resources that encourage parents to pursue lifelong skill development for becoming better equipped to support their children in learning. LINC empowers teachers to be school leaders on building a supporting community environment for all players, including learners and parents, by promoting the exchange of peer know-how and good practices on preventing or addressing ESL. Evaluation of proposed active learning methodologies and community building tools takes place in an on-going manner involving teachers, parents, and students in several educational sites in Greece, France, Sweden and the Czech Republic.

Keywords: Digital community, Early School Leaving, parent involvement, experiential learning, activities for blended-learning, social networking tools.

1 INTRODUCTION

Early school leaving (ESL) rates are defined by the European Commission as the proportion of the population aged 18-24 that has only lower secondary education or less and are no longer in education or training. Early school leavers are therefore those who have only achieved pre-primary, primary, lower secondary or a short upper secondary education of less than 2 years or having only pre-vocational or vocational education that does not lead to a qualification equivalent to the upper secondary level. Early school leaving is often described as a long process of school disengagement [1].This particularity implies that there is not any single response to ESL. Different responses applied at different stages of the ESL process. For example, some responses focus on prevention while others aim at interrupting the process of school disengagement, at bringing back to school the disengaged students, at establishing compensation measures, and more. Commonly, EU member states acknowledging the need to respond to ESL act in three levels: the strategic level, the preventive level, and the level of reintegration ([2], p.59) [3].

At a strategic level, emphasis is placed on bringing together 'actors and activities to work towards reducing ESL' ([2], p.61). Forces are joined against the ESL threat both at a strategic but also at an operational level ([2], p.61). Another core activity that takes place at the strategic level is the organized monitoring of national and international data regarding ESL. The analysis of data demonstrates trends

and tendencies and can be used to early recognize ESL, to set new policies, to improve existing ones and to update current operational practices.

As it is explained in the Final Report of the Thematic Working Group on Early School Leaving ([4], p.18) at the level of prevention the focus is placed on addressing emerging difficulties at an early stage in order to prevent the threat of drop-out. Preventive responses can be 'system- related' with the aim of improving the educational system and achieving benefits for all [2]. Teacher training offerings, counselling services, and curriculum reforms are few examples of system-related preventive policies. Preventive responses may also target specific groups of people that are at risk of school disengagement. Noteworthy, some countries have set up a 'scale of disadvantage' based on which targeted policies and measures are activated. An example of targeted preventive policy is the support offered to students that belong to specific racial or ethnic minorities [2]. On the other hand, reintegration responses come into play when school disengagement has already occurred. Among the most common strategies employed at this level by EU member states is the establishment of transitional classes, second chance schools, and other vocational and professional flexible educational pathways [2] [4] .

This paper presents the LINC intervention that aims at addressing ESL before the ESL warning signs are already visible calling for mitigation measures. LINC suggests responses that can be better described as preventive. The focus is on early and continuous intervention for fighting ESL starting early on, in primary education, and continuing throughout lower high school. The intervention focuses on building a supportive school community environment for learners with the participation of teachers, parents, and families that enhances school community bonds, fosters engagement of all players, and links education to real-life.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Dropping out of school can 'substantially diminish the life prospects of youth' [5]. Early school leavers have greater possibilities to be unemployed or to have low-paid jobs; it is also more luckily to face problems in retaining a job compared to individuals that have completed their school studies [6]. Many studies stress the fact that early school leavers run the risk of being involved in criminal activities and illegal or antisocial actions. Students that leave school prematurely are more likely to be long-term dependent on social welfare services and to demonstrate reduced life satisfaction. The daily problems and dissatisfaction result in limited interest in becoming active citizens and being involved in lifelong learning. This may lead to strong negative effects on social growth. Fiscal growth is also influenced as all the previously mentioned dimensions ultimately result in 'higher costs to society in the form of health, welfare, and criminal justice burdens' [7].

Although ESL rates in Europe have declined over the past few years, there is no room for complacency. The ESL problem is still a big challenge with serious consequences for youth, European societies, and economies. There is a strong agreement that understanding the factors that lead to ESL can help the systematic care planning in order to deal with the problem and to reach the European target set for reducing ESL to less than 10% by 2020 [8]. This is not a straightforward task as ESL is not related to one single factor. Literature describes early school leaving as a long term, multi-dimensional process that is influenced by a wide variety of 'school and out-of-school experiences with broad social and cultural implications' [9] [3]. Learners may be attracted out of school by jobs with low entry level skill requirements, for example in the tourism sector. Other factors include socio-economic background of the family; the value the family places on education and the perceived cost-benefit ratio; the educational level of parents, their interest in their child's education, and their capacity to help with homework; the time parents have available for communicating with their children and the teachers; teacher capacity to identify and address ESL; the quality of teacher communication with students; relationships with peers; school atmosphere; lack of intercultural content; and more. Combinations of the above factors may lead to drop out behaviours.

Even a quick reading of the ESL factors presented above reveals family challenges as an important dimension of the problem. Research findings [10] [11] show that dropouts come often from special parenting attitudes that are characterized by 'lack of supervision', 'poor aspirations regarding children's schooling', 'poor or limited engagement to school practices', 'negative reactions to school underachievement', 'low level of verbal interaction with the children' and irresponsible attitude or lack of scaffolding when students' are taking initiatives or decisions ([3], p.19). Family structure, parental education, and parent occupational category may also influence drop-out behaviours [3] [12].

LINC project embraces the idea that school does not exist in isolation and that family-school partnership is an integral part of school education quality. The concept of family-school partnership is supported at the European level by several European associations and is promoted through several European activities and initiatives. A noteworthy example is 'the declaration jointly signed in Copenhagen on 24th of November 1996 by the European Parents Association and the European Syndicate Committee of Education', which emphasized that good rapport and collaboration between parents and school staff can promote quality in education [13]. In this line, the international conference 'Parents and Partners' was organized in Edinburgh in 1998 aiming at raising awareness and dialogue about parent involvement in school community [13]. Since that time a lot of progress has been made and many European countries have been established policies towards parent involvement in the school community through the establishment of different representative bodies at school level' [13]. Several publications in conferences, journals and online thematic networks highlight the importance of parent involvement in the school community for quality in education [13] [14]. This research points to the correlation between school-family and society, with strong links leading to high, positive impact on school education and enhanced learner engagement in school activities.

Typically, parent association activities take place mainly in the context of the school environment. However, the 'rational will' and parental sense of belonging in the school community can be better described as weak [12]. As a result, it is not surprising the on-line school communities are not highly popular. Parent associations may pursue online publications or presentations of their activities on the school portal; however, a tendency towards interaction, communication, and collaboration is loose. This is the gap in educational practices that LINC aims to address. LINC views school as a broad supportive community and aims to empower learners, parents, and teachers to better understand and project to others in their community the value of education; to raise the confidence of parents and teachers on their ability to help learners in their educational efforts by leveraging cultural and social capital and diversity; to provide opportunities to parents to become further involved in both schooling and learning and to offer moral support to their children; to empower teachers to develop innovative, inclusive learning activities that engage learners, parents, and families in the learning process.

3   METHODOLOGY

To ensure that outcomes meet the needs of teachers, parents, and students the project starts by analyzing issues related to early school leaving in the countries represented in the project consortium through partner organizations, i.e. Greece, France, the Czech Republic, and Sweden. Moreover, a review of existing policies and pilot actions against early school leaving takes place. Field input is also gathered regarding the use of communities in the context of school education in partner countries. A big part of the documentation is based on literature review and research findings. This piece of information is useful but there is also a need to elaborate further on specific requirements that derive from end-users and are closely related to their needs and desires. In order to generate feedback from the main target groups, namely teachers and parents, in relation to early school leaving a small-scale study has been designed in Greece, Czech Republic, France and Sweden.

The analysis and the input generated by the partners constitutes the theoretical tangent of the LINC methodological framework and implementation plan. The LINC methodological framework draws upon principles for community building, experiential learning approaches, story-telling practices, and blended learning design. The framework is validated in practice through the design of parent-learner joint educational activities that promote school engagement as well as the development of a social networking community. More precisely, a set of 10 blended-learning activities will be developed by the participant teachers with the support of the LINC work group. The design of learning activities for joint execution by parents and learners offers benefit for both. For parents, it promotes their engagement into their children's schooling, the development on their ability to positively influence their children's learning, and enhanced insight on school activities. For learners, it introduces opportunities for further support by their parents in their learning efforts, it contributes to the development of family ties, and encourages the sharing of school experiences with family. This process is aimed at strengthening the role of extended family networks in a child's school life enhancing the support a child receives, promoting engagement in the learning process, and creating a positive environment that can help prevent ESL contributing factors from developing or further developing. Examples of activities include: regular visits to museums and follow up tasks and discussions, interaction with experts or involvement in communities of practice, story-telling tasks that require parent contribution, small case studies about specific social problems, interviews with people from varying backgrounds, experiential interventions related to the environments in which parents are professionally active, activities related to the school

curriculum such as ICT subjects, mathematics and more, activities related to societal issues such as green development, that play an important role in everyone's life, and more.

4 FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP TRHOUGH THE LINC COMMUNITY

Although educational theorists have not agreed to a single definition of the term community, there is a research agreement that a community cannot be described as a physical entity but as a social phenomenon [17]. The social phenomenon of the community revolves around a unique sense; 'a sense that members have a belonging, members matter to one another and to the group and have a shared faith that member's needs will be met through their commitment to be together' ([18], p.9). Each community offers a context within activity takes place. For this reason, community experiences and activities within the community are often described as context-specific [19].

With the advance of web technologies and social networks, communities take a new online form. Online communities have no geographical borders and do not set time- restrictions [20]. They can bring together people from varying cultural, educational and professional backgrounds and from different geographical areas [20]; they can provide avenues for collaboration with experts and pioneers; they can provide opportunities to share and create knowledge, information, and resources. The technological services and ICT features can offer opportunities for communication and interaction but they cannot guarantee that real engagement and meaningful interaction will be achieved. Specific policies and strategies should be carefully considered and activated in order to empower 'rational will' towards community membership, engagement, and development [16].

A variety of ICT services and social networking tools will be integrated in the LINC community in order to promote communication and to enable interactions among the community members. The members of the community will be able to access the forum of the community, resources such as articles, journals, and more, and the LINC multimedia library. They will further be able to exchange ideas and information through forums and blogs. Regular updates on scheduled meetings, workshops, seminars, cultural events, school and outdoor activities, and more will be published through the community. Learning activities for joint parent-learner execution will be also promoted through the LINC social networking community. The activities will be blended in nature and they can take place in the school, outside of school and online. Members of the community will have specific roles, which include teacher, parent, and learner. Notably, learner participation will be only through teacher mediation and not direct for ensuring security for under-aged children. Information will be tailored to the specific interests of each group. In addition, members of each group will be able to interact with others in their group for exchanging knowledge; for example, teachers may exchange information on good practices in the classroom. Members will also be able to interact with others acting in complementary roles; for example, teachers may exchange information with parents on suggested activities for enhancing support to their children in the context of learning and schooling.

5 EVALUATION PLAN

At least 5 schools from 4 different European countries (Greece, Sweden, France, and the Czech Republic) take part in the validation study. Evaluation will be pursued through qualitative case studies that deploy learning experiments during which stakeholder representatives will be exposed to the LINC community and activities. More precisely, the method of participatory observation is used for qualitatively gathering data during teacher, parent, and student engagement in the LINC school community, which is supported by a digital community and joint parent-learner educational activities. During the stage of observation field notes will be recorded by teachers and the researchers. Special focus will be paid on issues associated with the feeling of community-belonging, the relevance, acceptance, and effectiveness of proposed methodologies and tools in the learning process, attitudes on the value of school education, and usability of solutions. The observation is not explicitly predetermined; a semi-structured observation approach will be followed to ensure that important emerging issues related to ESL are taken into consideration. Participant parent and teacher feedback will be also documented as it can reveal interesting qualitative aspects of engagement in community activities. Student feedback on the joint activities will be also documented and analysed. The evaluation process will take place in an on-going manner informing the design of learning activities and supporting community tools and the LINC team to integrate end-user feedback into technical implementation.

6 CONCLUSSIONARY REMARKS AND FUTURE PLANS

The LINC project is a work in progress. This work will be concluded in November 2015. The LINC community, tools, activities, and methodologies will be evaluated through the engagement of groups of parents, teachers and students in learning experiments that will take place in Greece, France, Sweden and Czech Republic. LINC views school as a broad supportive community and aims to empower learners, parents, and teachers to better understand and project to others in their community the value of education and the active participation in the school community; to raise the confidence of parents and teachers on their ability to help learners in their educational efforts by leveraging cultural and social capital and diversity; to empower teachers to develop innovative, inclusive learning activities that engage learners, parents, and families in the learning process; to promote the idea of schools as 'community hubs', as active places with an impactful array of opportunities and supports that link school to real life.

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