

Social networks and digital communities on preventing ESL

Proposal overview (500 words)

Early school leaving (ESL) is a complex phenomenon still significantly evident in Europe. While large disparities exist between member states in 2012 the share of young people leaving school early was 12.8% Europe-wide according to Eurostat. ESL can negatively affect a learner's prospects for professional and personal development and a learner's ability to reach her full potential. The negative impact of ESL is particularly relevant in the face of employment trends showing that the jobs of the future will have elevated requirements on higher qualifications; this projection, which is documented in ET 2020 objectives and the New Skills for New Jobs Agenda underscores the need for high school completion rates. The European Commission has set a renewed target of reducing ESL rates to less than 10% by 2020.

A range of factors, or combinations of them, may contribute to ESL. They include socio-economic parameters, the value family places on education, parent understanding of school curricula, parent availability and capacity to help their children with homework, parent-teacher-learner communication, teacher ability to identify ESL risk and address it effectively, and more. Several factors are related to the presence, or lack of, and tie-strength of supporting social networks including extended family, friends, and the school community all of which can positively affect a child's engagement with school.

The LINC project focuses on ESL prevention through the strengthening of social networks and the active engagement in learning and schooling of the extended school community, which includes learners, parents, teachers, and others. The project differs from other ESL prevention or mitigation efforts by introducing learning interventions early, in primary education, continuing through lower secondary education and aiming at preventing ESL contributing factors to set root in a learner's life.

LINC develops on-line communities aiming at reinforcing the learner supporting environment, building the confidence and capacity of parents to effectively become engaged in school work, building teacher capacity to lead activities in their schools towards preventing ESL, and enhancing parent-learner, parent-teacher, and learner-teacher communication. Joint parent-learner activities are designed for strengthening communication. The activities are built on the LINC on-line community; they include documentation and sharing of experiences on visits to cultural or science-related sites, researching and explaining to others job descriptions, working on curricula-based exercises such as math, working on important present issues such as green energy, and more.

The LINC on-line school community is designed for deployment in the context of wider school efforts on engaging parents in schooling and learning, on demonstrating the link between school and real-life, on sharing projects, on collectively building teacher skills through the exchange of know-how and good practices, and on supporting the engagement of parents in lifelong learning through access to multiple resources. The community will be evaluated in Greece, Sweden, France, and the Czech Republic through the engagement of teachers, parents, and learners.

The LINC project is funded with the support of the Comenius Action of the Life Long Learning Programme and runs from 2013 to 2015.

Participant benefits (200 words)

The main participant benefit will be exposure to how technology-enabled communities and social networks can be used as tools that, in combination with broader school initiatives, can contribute towards averting the risk of ESL from arising through early and continuous interventions that can

start in primary school and continue throughout lower secondary school. Participants will experience a demonstration of the proposed on-line community and its features that address parents, teachers, and learners. Special attention will be paid to learner safety through solutions that are based on teacher mediation and access control.

The audience will further benefit from exposure to learning activities designed for joint execution by parents and learners for facilitating communication. The activities will be on subjects that link education to real-life and work. They will deploy the on-line community as a research and know-how sharing tool.

Participants will finally experience how teachers can collectively develop knowledge through good practice sharing and access to resources.

In order to gain perspective on how the proposed digital community solutions can contribute towards the strengthening of learner supporting social networks participants will further gain insight on ESL contributing factors, statistics, and policies and strategies for mitigating or preventing ESL.

Practical outcomes (200 words)

What did this initiative do? (200 words)

LINC develops early and continuous interventions and a holistic, inclusive ESL prevention approach that starts in kindergarten and follows learners throughout primary and lower secondary education focusing on the engagement and support of learners, their families, and their teachers in a community environment. Special attention is paid to the needs of migrant learners and their families aiming at their integration into the school community.

LINC introduces a methodological learning framework that is based on active, experiential, and community building approaches. The framework aims to:

Empower learners, parents, and teachers to better understand and project to others the value of education and the links between school and real life; raise the confidence of parents and teachers in their ability to help learners in their educational efforts by leveraging cultural and social capital and diversity; provide opportunities to parents to become further involved in both schooling and learning and to offer moral support to their children; empower teachers to develop innovative, inclusive learning activities that engage learners, parents, and families in the learning process.

The LINC on-line community and network strengthening learning activities are evaluated in 4 countries, namely Greece, Sweden, France, and the Czech Republic.

Why was the initiative undertaken?

ESL may lead to reduced opportunities for leading a fulfilling life as a result of low skills. European initiatives such as ET2020 high light the fact that in the coming years demand for professionals with high skills will increase. The New Skills for New Jobs agenda observes that innovation related, high skill jobs will drive economic recovery in Europe in the following years. Similarly, over 16m low skilled jobs are expected to be lost in the same timeframe. The above point to the urgent need for interventions towards achieving higher school completion rates.

Practices for addressing ESL can be divided in 2 categories: mitigation, which aims at bringing back into formal education individuals that have dropped out of school, and may include second chance

schools; and prevention, which in most cases refers to helping individuals that are already identified as being at risk of ESL stay in school, and may include after school study programs or mentoring.

LINC takes a step back, and aims at addressing ESL contributing factors before the risk of ESL becomes highly visible. The project introduces a holistic, inclusive learning intervention that strengthens social networks starting early, in primary education, and continuing throughout lower secondary education.

What were the results of the initiative / project?

1. An on-line community built on active and experiential learning approaches. It aims at strengthening school community ties by: empowering parents to become actively engaged in their children's learning and schooling; building teacher skills on identifying and addressing ESL through peer knowledge and good practice sharing; encouraging learners to be actively involved in school through inspiring projects, sharing of outcomes, and building on each other's experiences
2. Learning activities built on the LINC on-line community. The activities demonstrate the value of education through subjects that are drawn from school curricula, such as STEM education, or are tied to emerging social, work, technology or other issues that the world community is engaged with; examples include cultural "treasure hunts" in museums, green energy benefits, ICT or STEM skill development, exposure to professional profiles, and more
3. Good practices in the form of videos and a wiki on how the community can be used for enriching ESL prevention efforts
4. Review of ESL mitigation and prevention practices in Europe. It will be complemented by questionnaire-based research taking place in Greece, France, Sweden, and the Czech Republic targeting teachers, parents, and individuals that have dropped out of school, shedding light into ESL contributing factors

What impact did this initiative / project have?

- **Enhanced support for learners** with the objective of achieving **higher school completion rates** that lead to wider educational and professional development options in the future
- Enhanced **ability and confidence of parents to become involved in their children's education** through highlighting of their existing skills and providing access information for personal life long skill development
- Exploitation and maximization of the **added value of a close-knit school community as an inclusive environment that promotes learning** for the benefit of learners and their families; support from one family to another through community building activities in the school
- **Increased capacity of teachers to integrate interventions for reducing ESL** through training and good practice recommendations; increased capacity to **reach out to learner families**
- **Fighting of social exclusion, especially for migrants**, through inclusive learning that celebrates cultural diversity
- **Enhanced awareness of the cultural richness** of Europe and promotion of **European citizenship** through community building in the school
- **Positive attitudes** in relation to the **value of education**
- **Better understanding of school systems** and the **structure of curricula**

- **Good practice guidelines that integrate direct input from field evaluation** providing value-adding information on **early interventions towards fighting ESL**