

III. Disseminating the European political common grammar in education: ESL as a EU concern

In the EU, the reconfiguration of political coordination resulting from power allocation upwards (to the European level), downwards (to the regions and local authorities) and sideways (to public/private networks) (Hooghe and Marks 2001) has created conditions for the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) to emerge as a privileged EU instrument for political coordination. The OMC was later extended to education. The countries have used the opportunities created by OMC processes to introduce new regulatory mechanisms dealing with their specificities at the national level. This governance system is based upon principles such as subsidiarity, flexibility, participation and policy integration. European multi-level integration is being configured as a political system rather than a legal process (Borrás and Jacobson 2004).

This loose coordination, or coordination of coordination mode (Dale 2007), was put in motion by means of governance networking involving organisations, associations, agencies and committees in charge of the implementation processes. It relies on 'soft law' and reflects upon the establishment of standards, guidelines and procedures at the national and institutional levels. Moreover, it affects the field of institutional governance, as well as the production of educational indicators that are being used throughout European education.

National governments have used the opportunities and constraints arising from the multi-level and multi-layered processes to carry out policies aimed at European integration and policies aimed at pursuing national goals (re-nationalisation policies, as pointed out by Musselin and Paradise, 2009).

In Roger Dale's perspective (2007), the interaction between national and European scales must not limit the analytical perspectives by locking them into an either/or relationship. Rather, they should be seen in a framework of a both/and relationship, allowing, for instance, an analysis of the rise of parallel discourses at national and European levels. This relation becomes apparent throughout this study/paper.

The convergence intended by the Lisbon Agenda 2000 has influenced the consolidation of a European dimension in education. The coordination structures and processes are providing an educational and political grammar that is framing education reforms. The coordination of coordination is also based on what Balzer and Martens (2004) designate "governance by 'opinion formation'", i.e., "the capacity of the EU to initiate and influence national discourses about educational issues" (2004:7). This is about 'thematic' governance involving not only the content but also the means that provide materiality to the models and concepts to be disseminated. Nóvoa states that "one of the most powerful modes of governance that are being managed in Europe" is comparability (Nóvoa 2002: 144) (see also Nóvoa and DeJong -Lambert 2003).

When comparing education policies across European countries, it becomes evident that their pace of implementation and their very nature are diverse and far from converging. However, the grammar (Magalhães et al. 2013) of the legitimating discourses of the reforms enables a considerable degree of convergence; if not around a specific narrative at least in the concepts and jargon that are used both nationally and internationally to 'talk' about education. European actors provide centrality to normative and cultural-cognitive elements rather than to regulatory complying instruments.

The 2007 Treaty of Lisbon was passed in 2009 and reinforced the political features of the OMC by clarifying the competences of the EU as a collective, those of the individual EU member states, and their shared competences. The efficiency of these soft political instruments relies on the fact that they put national reputation under scrutiny, as the responsibility for not maintaining the strategic European objectives brings 'blaming, naming and shaming' in international comparisons. Although research identifies national resistance to EU political coordination (Alexiadou 2005), it also recognises its growing influence on education policies, a national remit under the principle of subsidiarity, throughout Europe. This tension is reflected throughout the EU in the nuances of policy implementation: in the resistance to policies as well as in the mere rhetorical adherence to the European level education policies (Radaelli 2003).

The 2000 Lisbon Strategy

EU documents play a key role in the process of Europeanisation of education policies. In that respect, the Lisbon Summit and the Lisbon Strategy it endorsed represented an important landmark. In March 2000, the EU member states committed themselves to the goal of making the EU "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" (Lisbon European Council 2000 n/p). This goal was set out as a new strategy for the following decade and it was to be achieved by

... preparing the transition to a knowledge-based economy and society by better policies for the information society and R&D, as well as by stepping up the process of structural reform for competitiveness and innovation and by completing the internal market (Ibid.).

This political goal has had visible impacts on education policies as well as on social policies. The political drivers of the Lisbon Strategy articulate the investment in education and in the modernisation of the European social system as being essential both to dealing with social exclusion and to contributing to economic growth and sustainability. These drivers interact to promote employment and social cohesion and are the framework within which the EU concern with ESL can be understood.

The Lisbon Strategy brought education to the fore in an unprecedented way in the European Commission agenda. It recommended member states to increase their investment in R&D (at least 3% of GDP) and to promote entrepreneurship in order to achieve a 70% (60% for women) employment rate. Such strategy aimed at improving 'quality' and 'effectiveness' under the commitment to ensure social inclusion. It endorsed states to commit to a system of goal setting and evaluation processes to assess and compare the performance and achievement of educational objectives.

In line with that, the EU Council (2003) agreed to establish a series of reference levels of European average performance in education and training (*benchmarks*), while taking into account the starting point of each of the member states. These benchmarks were expected to be used as a tool for monitoring the implementation of the *detailed work program on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training systems in Europe*, based on comparable data.

The *European Parliament resolution on the mid-term review of the Lisbon Strategy* (2005) kept to the principles established in the Lisbon Strategy and reaffirmed the strategic goals of the Lisbon and Gothenburg European Councils: strengthening employment and economic reform, and enhancing competitiveness, social cohesion and environmental protection as engines of a sustainable growth-oriented economy. It also proposed that the Lisbon Strategy aims should be the EU's top priority for the next five years.

Configuring ESL as a political issue

ESL was clearly recognised by the Commission as a serious concern:

There is a high level of early school leavers (...) who leave the education system with only lower secondary education at best. This might result in an intergenerational vicious circle between childhood poverty, low educational achievement and poverty in adult life. (Commission of the European Communities 2001: 39).

Those without qualifications are less likely to participate effectively in lifelong learning and are at risk of being marginalised by the increasingly competitive contemporary society. The Council states that the EU has made the fight against ESL one of its priorities. In 2002, in the EU, almost 20% of young people aged between 18 and 24 years had prematurely dropped out of school and were on the fringes of the knowledge society. The Ministers of Education agreed to bring this rate down to 10% by 2010.

While the Council recognised that there had already been significant progress, member states were recommended to continue their efforts to meet the target. The focus should be primarily in schooling and in directing efforts to disadvantaged groups striving to promote successful training for every young person, supporting their aspirations and enhancing their capabilities.

Furthermore, it was underlined that it is essential to make the disadvantaged groups aware of the benefits of education and training and make the systems more attractive, more accessible and better suited to them. In this context, the emphasis should be put on prevention, early detection and monitoring of individuals at risk. Community monitoring of the implementation of national strategies in lifelong learning ought to pay particular attention to this aspect.

A European framework for youth and social cohesion

One of the main instruments designed to achieve the revised Lisbon Strategy objectives was the European Youth Pact, adopted by the European Council in March 2005. The Pact is a platform of the national youth councils and international non-governmental youth organisations in Europe whose goal is to strive for youth rights in international fora (EU, Council of Europe, and the United Nations).

Some years later, the Youth Forum *Jeunesse* stressed its importance as a landmark to "make sure that youth related policies (...) must be an integral part of the post-2010 Lisbon Strategy" (Youth Forum *Jeunesse* 2009:2) and that each member state should commit to reducing ESL by means of strong policies, sustaining access to education free of charge. The role of non-formal education and involvement of the youth and NGO sector in providing opportunities to develop crucial social and personal skills was also underlined.

Youth on the Move: education and employability

The initiative *Youth on the Move* was launched in 2010. It is a comprehensive package of policy initiatives on education and employment for young people in Europe, as part of the *Europe 2020 Strategy* for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth to be achieved in the next decade. This initiative was aimed at improving young people's education and employability while reducing the high rates of youth unemployment, in line with the wider EU goal to achieve a 75% employment rate for the working-age population (20-64 years). This goal was to be attained by making education and training more relevant to young people's needs, encouraging the use of EU grants to study or train abroad, and encouraging EU countries to take measures to simplify the transition from education to work.

These processes implied coordination of policies to design and stimulate actions directed at young people at the EU and national levels – such as the preparatory action *Your first EURES job* for labour market mobility within the EU – and increased support to young entrepreneurs via the European progress microfinance facility. This initiative focuses on young people, since about 5.5 million are unemployed in the EU (1 out of 5 people under 25 willing to work cannot find a job). 7.5 million people aged 15 to 24 are currently neither in a job nor in an education or training position. The initiative takes into account that the Europe 2020 Strategy highlights the need for measures to improve education levels, increase employment rates and promote social inclusion. This document identifies a major EU objective for education in two areas: to reduce the rates of ESL to less than 10% and to increase to at least 40% the proportion of people aged 30-34 who complete higher education or an equivalent.

An agenda: enhancing the relation between education and the labour market

ESL is a concern in the document *An Agenda for new skills and jobs: A European Contribution towards full employment*. This document emphasises the link between education and labour and recognises a mismatch between the skills of workers in the EU and the new needs of the labour market, as well as positive progress in adapting school curricula and in the introduction of reforms in line with the *Common European Framework of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning* and the use of *Europass*. However, it recommends member states to speed up reforms and introduce the *National Qualification Framework* based on learning outcomes, according to the *European Qualification Framework*.

Additionally, the document underlines the need to increase employment rates substantially (women, young and older workers) based on a more adaptable and skilled labour force that would be able to contribute to technological change and to meet new patterns of work organisation. The investment in education and training, the anticipation of needed skills, and the creation of guidance services and the need to match supply and demand in the labour market were also recommended to increase productivity, competitiveness, economic growth and employment. According to the document, all EU citizens should have the opportunity to acquire and develop knowledge, skills and abilities to be successful at work. Countering ESL and low qualifications in areas such as literacy, numeracy and science is seen as essential for inclusion, employment and growth.

The Commission, in cooperation with member states, proposed a new benchmark on education for employability (to set up in 2011) to encourage efforts to prepare young people for the transition to the labour market. It also proposed a Council recommendation to reduce ESL and to create a group of experts to study ways of improving young adult literacy.

Other documents that focus on the *social dimension of education and training* assert that preventing ESL requires deeper knowledge about groups at risk at the local, regional and national levels, as well as systems of early detection of those at risk. Inter-sector comprehensive strategies should be implemented to provide for a set of policies at the schools and systems' levels, targeted at different factors of ESL.

The *Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training* (ET 2020) emphasises the need to develop further work on ESL, such as education and training through the strengthening of preventive approaches, the development of cooperation between the general and vocational sectors of education, and the removal of obstacles to reintegrate ESLers into the education and training systems. It comes in response to the strategic objective to promote equity, social cohesion and active citizenship.

In their turn, the Conclusions of the Council (2011) on *The role of education and training in the implementation of the Europe 2020 Strategy* consider that the Copenhagen process, whose strategic priorities for the next decade were reviewed at a ministerial meeting (Bruges), stress that education and training (VET) have an important role in supporting the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy, providing expertise and relevant, high quality skills.

It was also assumed that achieving the two already mentioned main objectives of the EU in education and training will have positive impact on employment and growth. ESL is presented as a complex phenomenon, influenced by educational, socio-economic and individual factors, requiring preventive and compensatory measures and close coordination between the sectors related to education and training and other related areas.

Launched in 2010, the Europe 2020 strategy is the updated EU's social and economic growth strategy for the next decade, which prioritises making the EU a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy. When it comes to the national level, EU member states are challenged to provide high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion. Targets for education, whose improvements are said to enhance employability and reduce poverty, are set together, reinforcing targets for R&D, climate change and energy sustainability, and fighting poverty and social exclusion.

The reduction of early school leaving rates to below 10% is one of the EU2020 headline targets agreed upon for the whole EU. The other goal is that at least 40% of 30-34-year-olds have completed third level education.

In line with the actions proposed in the *Country Specific Recommendations 2012*, the European Commission invites member states to advance educational reforms to combat youth unemployment and stimulate the supply of skills. It proposes doing this through the implementation of performance improvement of students with high risk of ESL and low basic skills, as well as through key actions such as the creation of high quality affordable structures of education and early childhood care.

In February 2013 at the Council meeting, EU member states agreed to commit to improving the performance of young people who are at high risk of ESL and have low basic skills, by means of early detection across the education system and the provision of individual support.

Conclusion

The EU political driver endorsing ESL policies is directed at reaching the goal of sustained economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. The assumption is that EU social policies promoting equity and active citizenship must be articulated with the knowledge-based economy, meaning the participation in a highly competitive knowledge society where education and training are key factors in socio-economic development. Early school leavers (ESLers) are at risk of marginalisation through poverty and economic and social exclusion and, last but far from least, their significant number has the potential to put the whole EU desideratum at risk, slated by the Lisbon Strategy as being the most competitive region in the world. It is assumed that to ensure full employment and, consequently, social cohesion, it is essential to reduce the number of ESLers.

This appears to be in line with Roger Dale's interpretation of Europeanisation as part of a "globally structured agenda for education" (Dale 2001, 2005), i.e., education is to be analysed in the framework of global economic competition as a key factor in economic development. The mandate addressed to European educational systems is thus based upon a neo-human capitalist approach, making citizenship and individual development depend on the integration of individuals and groups in the structures and processes of the knowledge-based economy. In line with this, EU guidelines for growth and employment include policies aimed at the social and professional inclusion of young people.

EU organisations, platforms and initiatives recommended member states to develop policies addressing the ESL problem: 1. Incentive to complete secondary education; 2. Tighter coordination between general education and vocational training; 3. Elimination of barriers preventing the return of ESLers to education and training; 4. Creating conditions for lifelong learning; 5. Early identification of youngsters at risk of ESL; 6. Encouragement strategies for inclusion in school; 7. Support for students at risk of ESL 8. Enhancement of the quality of education; 9. Strong school and educational leadership; 10. Adequate teacher training; 11. Linking ESL to lifelong learning; and 12. Promoting awareness of the advantages of education and training among disadvantaged groups.

