

# Re-engagement in education and training of young people who leave education early: the importance of earlier prior trajectories

## *La reincorporación formativa de jóvenes que abandonan tempranamente la educación: relevancia de su trayectoria previa<sup>1</sup>*

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### Abstract:

The lack of education and training resulting from leaving education early might contribute significantly to high rates of unemployment and inactivity among young people. Education is also seen as a decisive means of tackling these problems. Therefore, acquiring knowledge about the conditions in which re-engagement with education occurs after it is prematurely interrupted deserves special attention. The study presented here explores the opinions of students attending a second-chance educational centre in Ceuta (where the aforementioned benchmarks have

quite high levels) concerning their life courses prior to returning to education there and the impact they attribute to the centre. Data from in-depth, individual interviews were used to do this. These were performed with 39 unemployed young people at risk of social exclusion aged between 18 and 24 (29 had left school early and 10 had not), as part of a broader case study relating to a centre selected for its relative success and its reputation in Ceuta. The information provided by the participants in the form of stories was subjected to narrative analysis, using two processes: summary biographical tables, which represent relevant

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events from their lives alongside their views of them, and thematic analysis of the information contained in them. In broad terms, results indicate that the life courses the participants follow are shaped by decisions they take from options shaped by personal, institutional, and social circumstances. They are, therefore, something like *choice biographies*. In this context, early school leaving and re-engagement in training are recurrent, transitory, and reversible, precisely because of the important role played by the people who experience these situations, even if they do so constrained by their institutional and social setting.

**Keywords:** disadvantaged youth, school dropout, transition to working life, educational re-engagement, second-chance education centres, youth unemployment.

### Resumen:

Las carencias educativas resultantes de abandonar tempranamente la educación estarían contribuyendo significativamente a altas tasas de desempleo e inactividad entre los jóvenes. Sin embargo, la educación también es considerada un medio decisivo para afrontar estos problemas. Por tanto, merece especial atención obtener conocimiento sobre las condiciones en que se produce la reincorporación a la formación tras quedar esta interrumpida prematuramente. El estudio aquí presentado explora, en un centro educativo de segunda oportunidad ubicado en Ceuta (donde los indicadores mencionados alcanzan valores relativos muy elevados), la perspectiva que sus alumnos tienen de su recorrido vital previo a

retornar a la formación en él y la incidencia atribuida al mismo. Para ello se recurre a datos procedentes de entrevistas individuales en profundidad realizadas a 39 jóvenes sin empleo y en riesgo de exclusión social con edades comprendidas entre los 18 y 24 años (29 en situación de abandono temprano de la educación y 10 que no se encontraban en esta situación), como parte de un estudio de caso más amplio referido a dicho centro, seleccionado por su éxito relativo y notoriedad en la mencionada Ciudad Autónoma. La información proporcionada por los participantes en forma de relatos ha sido objeto de análisis narrativo, aplicando dos procedimientos: biogramas que representan sucesos relevantes acaecidos en su vida junto a su visión de estos, y análisis temático de la información recogida en ellos. Globalmente considerados, los resultados indican que los recorridos realizados van siendo contruidos mediante decisiones que los participantes adoptan entre alternativas determinadas por circunstancias personales, institucionales y sociales. Se aproximan así a *biografías electivas*. En este contexto, el abandono educativo temprano y la reincorporación a la formación revisten un carácter recurrente, transitorio y reversible, precisamente en virtud del relevante papel que desempeñan quienes viven estas situaciones, aunque lo desempeñen condicionados por su entorno institucional y social.

**Descriptores:** jóvenes desfavorecidos, abandono escolar, transición a la vida activa, reincorporación formativa, centros educativos de segunda oportunidad, desempleo juvenil.

## 1. Introduction

Youth unemployment and inactivity are growing global phenomena that are causing widespread concern (International Labour Organization, 2017). Their impact is greater on people who leave education early, and so both conditions have been linked to this phenomenon (Flisi, Goglio, Meroni, & Vera-Toscano, 2015). Spain's position with this group of problems is regarded as especially worrying (Jin, Caldera, & García Perea, 2017).

Education and training are linked to these problems, but are also an important part of resolving them, particularly in the case of young people who have to face more difficulties (Pérez & Melendro, 2016). Lack of education and training affect unemployment and inactivity among young people (Woessman, 2016). And as these are especially pronounced in cases of early school leaving (ESL), their negative impact is bigger and broader (Flisi, Goglio, Meroni, & Vera-Toscano, 2015). To avoid or remedy these shortfalls and their impacts, it is common to turn to educational and training measures. These include intervention and prevention measures, as well as measures to tackle the problem after it arises: these are «compensation» measures, aimed at «help[ing] those who left school prematurely to re-engage in education, offering routes to re-enter education and training and gain the qualifications they missed» (European Council, 2011, C 191/6, Annex, Art. 2.3; Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2015). The attention this type of action deserves is not only justified by the need to address the requirements of people who have left education early,

whose numbers have not changed significantly despite prevention and intervention efforts (Polidano, Tabasso, & Tseng, 2015). It is also justified because the transition between training and working life tends to be more complex, changing, uncertain, and prolonged, making life-long learning increasingly important (Raffe, 2011).

Recognition of the importance of this type of action justifies our study. It examines its addressees' perspective on their prior trajectory as this is likely to play a significant role in them having recourse to such measures. Firstly, a conceptual framework is presented, providing the foundations for putting the re-entry into education of people who left school prematurely into the broader context of the trajectory of their lives. After this, the most notable methodological characteristics of the research are explained. The results are then set out, attempting to preserve the perspective expressed by the participants. Finally, a set of conclusions are proposed in dialogue with studies that have approached similar questions.

## 2. Trajectories and transitions: a panoramic approach

While they are not always consistently defined, three basic notions in the so-called *life course theory* are trajectory, transition, and turning points (Hutchison, 2018). The experiences that shape a person's life course follow trajectories or regular patterns that give them continuity and even direction. While these regular patterns provide stability, they also induce change. The notion of transition is used to

refer to changes in state or situation in an individual's personal trajectory that could be the result of events or processes (sometimes disruptive or disturbing) which have more capacity than others to shape this trajectory or even redirect it: for example, a transition can contribute to a trajectory with a positive direction adopting a negative one, or conversely can contribute to a negative trajectory adopting a positive route. When they are fundamental and decisive, these changes acquire the status of major changes or turning points.

The success of a transition is often linked to it leading to an end state regarded as desirable (such as accessing a productive job) and so moving towards it in a linear and orderly way (te Riele, 2004). Consequently, there has been a tendency to associate any deviation from this standard with failure. In parallel, institutional interest in «easing» transitions through the use of multiple measures has been growing, although these attempts to «manage» such transitions represent a recognition, albeit implicit, of their problematic character (Ecclestone, Biesta, & Hughes, 2010, pp. 3-4).

However, questions have been raised about equating the transition to adult life with a simple linear sequence. Furlong and others (for example, Furlong, Cartmel, Biggart, Sweeting, & West, 2003) have emphasised two closely related characteristics in the most common transitions among young people: non-linearity and complexity. Non-linear transition is defined as a type that, instead of being a direct progress, contains interruptions, frequent changes in direction, and unusu-

al sequences of events. Meanwhile, complexity is associated with longer transitions comprising multiple and sometimes overlapping periods of limited duration in which the individuals, moving through different situations and contexts, experience multidimensional changes (for example, in their knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, emotions, etc.), which go so far as to affect their very identity (Ecclestone, Biesta, & Hughes, 2010).

These changes are usually considered to be uncertain and unpredictable. Accepting this situation generally involves recognising the importance of the decisions and actions of young people involved in them and, ultimately, their active but limited role. From this perspective, the paths they follow emerge from «navigating» the changes taking place in their lives, including those determined by institutional pathways (such as those set by schooling), while deliberating on the opportunities and limitations they encounter (Furlong, 2013).

### 3. Re-engaging with training after early school leaving

Late adolescence, youth, and the so-called *emerging adulthood* are often associated with these phenomena of change we have referred to as transitions. These life stages have overall been regarded as transitional (Heinz, 2009). At the same time, they have been regarded as stages dense in (decisive) transitions (Bele & Kvalsund, 2015, p. 196). Furthermore, some of these transitions can also be given the description of the stages they are part of, and each one, in turn, is associated with multiple changes.

ESL can be regarded as one of the transition phenomena amongst a set of changes relevant to a life stage usually regarded as transitional (Schoon, 2015). It has often been described as a prolonged *process*, which can start in the early stages of school life and «culminates» with leaving the educational institution (Rumberger, 2011, pp. 48, 145, & 151). It has also been likened to «the *final stage* in a dynamic and cumulative process» that is broader (National Research Council & National Academy of Education, 2011, p. 61; author's italics). In both cases, ESL can be regarded as a more or less broad and relatively bounded transition that withdraws young people from school. Furthermore, this transition can be decisive in their subsequent trajectory as it withdraws them from the world of work (through unemployment or inactivity) and even from society (through social exclusion).

However, when accepting the complex and non-linear nature of the ever more common transitions among young people, it may be worth considering that those leaving education early might not separate themselves from it definitively and that, in any case, such an interruption might not be so critical for their future. It is worth adding that if —as has recently been claimed— ESL amounts to a discrete *event* in which lasting factors can be as relevant as emergent situations (Dupéré et al., 2015), other (discrete) events are likely to follow, not necessarily involving negative consequences. Therefore, even though lasting determinants continue to affect the subsequent course (for example, extreme socioeconomic disadvantages),

favourable situations that arise (such as, new educational opportunities) can turn around a negative trend. Even facing up to difficulties could contribute to a positive change in direction. Furthermore, the young people themselves can play an active role in shaping their trajectory in these cases. Re-engaging with education could, then, be as important as ESL or even more so in the future course of those experiencing it, helping introduce a positive change in trend, whether promoted by negative or positive situations and circumstances. Furlong et al. (2003) have expressly raised the possibility of understanding the increasingly frequent and even recurrent return to education as part of a complex and non-linear transition. It has also been suggested that young people play a central role in this change (Ross & Gray, 2005).

Re-engaging with education is worth considering as a potentially important element in the trajectories followed by adolescents and young people, particularly when there has been prior school leaving classed as early. This justifies deepening our knowledge of the conditions in which this occurs, something that includes examining knowledge of the pathway that precedes it in greater depth (García, Casal, Merino, & Sánchez, 2013). The results presented here refer to aspects of the previous life course, which, from the perspective of a group of young people, might have an influence on the re-engagement with education in a distinctive second-chance centre located in a setting that is also distinctive. The data were obtained as part of a wider study, the aims

of which include exploring, in general, the reasons that have led young people from this centre to decide to re-engage with education, including their beliefs about their prior trajectory before coming to the centre and its impact; this is the focus of this work. Some studies have focussed their attention on the trajectory of educational failure followed by adolescents and young people up to the point of ESL, but there have been significantly fewer that take a broader temporal perspective and also focus their attention on re-engagement with education. This study adds to this latter group (see the «Discussion and conclusions» section).

#### 4. Method

The data used are part of a case study. The selected case is a publicly-owned centre specifically dedicated to non-formal vocational training to improve the social and workplace integration of unemployed people in situations of risk or social exclusion. This centre was selected because of its relative success in this task<sup>2</sup>, in an especially challenging setting: the Autonomous City of Ceuta, which has rates of youth unemployment, inactivity, and ESL that are among the highest in the European Union (Eurostat, 2016, 2017). Consequently, two distinctive features can be attributed to it, which justify using it as a «unique» case; it is an extreme case, given that it has displayed notable sustained success under the conditions described above; it is also an atypical case, as these achievements exceed the ordinary (Gerring, 2017). Both features also justify treating the case as instrumental for understanding other

special situations or phenomena in their context or even basic aspects of a broader reality or general phenomenon, such as the phenomenon studied here (Thomas & Myers, 2015; Yin, 2018).

##### 4.1. Participants

The units of analysis in this case study include early school leavers just before enrolling at the centre and non-early school leavers just before enrolling at the centre. Using the European Council's definition of ESL (2011)<sup>3</sup> and its implementation by Eurostat and Spain's national statistics institute (Instituto Nacional de Estadística), the students classified as being early school leavers are those aged 18 to 24 who have not completed upper-secondary education and were not pursuing any type of education in the four weeks preceding the start of the educational programme, according to the information available in the centre and provided by the students.

The data concern 39 students of both sexes (26 male and 13 female) enrolled at the centre in question in the 2015-16 academic year who voluntarily and expressly accepted the invitation to participate in the research, having been informed about it in detail in accordance with the ethics provisions approved by the funding body. This number represents all of the students in the centre who, complying with the requirements stated above, were still in it when the fieldwork was done. Of them, 29 are ESL students, on whom our attention mainly focusses, and 10 are non-ESL students. The data for the latter group are also included to compare their viewpoints with those of the ATE students.

## 4.2. Data collection and analysis

The study uses qualitative data in order to understand the experiences of the participants in their natural setting through the meanings they give to these experiences. It uses verbal evidence to give them more opportunities to express their point of view with the fewest possible restrictions. The data was collected using individual, in-depth interviews. These were semi-structured, and were implemented based around a small set of core questions, which took as their reference point the proposals by Mills, McGregor, and te Riele (2015, p. 156) and Smyth and Robinson (2015, p. 223). These questions were complemented by other more specific questions for possible use during the interview, aside from other ones that emerged in a given situation, all of which had the aim of obtaining the most comprehensive and accurate information possible according to the particular perspective of each participant (Patton, 2015).

Regarding the focus of this work, the core question was: what is your history before coming to this centre?

The specific questions associated with this were as follows, the first one being introductory:

- How did you come to be at this centre?
- What other centres have you attended?, is there anything you would emphasise, positive or negative, about your experience at them?
- In all of the time that passed before you came here, what would you emphasise

about your life in general, positive or negative?

- From everything that has happened to you, what do you think has had the biggest influence on you coming to this centre?

A first cycle of 39 interviews like this one performed in January 2016 was followed by a second cycle of 21 individual follow-up interviews in May of the same year, which took as their point of reference the preliminary data analysis. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed, with the verbal and written consent of the participants and with guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity in the processing and use of the information.

The information collected and the analysis of it are narrative in character. Narrative research can be characterised by the phenomenon being studied (namely stories or narratives) or by the methods used to study them (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Regarding the former, it should be noted that this study focusses on the students' perspective of the course they have followed up to the time of enrolling at the centre, expressed through the oral description of experiences they regard as significant and their comments about them. Applying a narrative analysis to this object of study is justified both by the narrative presentation format naturally used by the interviewees, and by the frequent use of this format for examining such processes led by the young people themselves in an attempt to capture their perspective (Furlong, 2013).

As for the second aspect, two analysis procedures were used. Since the information provided mainly referred to a set of significant and even critical events, biograms were used, one of which was prepared for each participant (see Table 1 for an example). This technique, which has been used in studies on related questions (Rojas, Susino, & Calvo, 2013), involves constructing a summary textual and visual representation of relevant events, combined and arranged chronologically, summarising the individual's description of the events in themselves and her perceptions, interpretations and evaluations of them (Suárez-Ortega, 2012). As they have the distinctive feature of being summary, these representations allow for comparisons between more informants and even suggest conjectures applicable to them as a group. In addition, a thematic analysis was also performed (Riessman, 2008) on the information contained in the biograms and other relevant information not included in them. In addition to differentiating between the descriptions provided and the opinions accompanying them, this analysis identifies broad categories referring to life stages and domains, making it possible to allow for information relating to numerous peculiarities associated with each personal situation.

## 5. Results

The information below refers to patterns identified in the data and particular notes relevant to understanding it. It also primarily corresponds to ESL students, although attention is sometimes directed to similarities and differences with non-

ESL students. The data are presented through narrative description accompanied by illustrative verbatim quotations. The development of this section parallels the broader categories identified in the thematic analysis. We thus differentiate by periods that take the institutional educational pathway as a reference (namely, between the period corresponding to compulsory education and the education after this) and then by areas in the participants' lives that they emphasised which are often closely connected (basically, education and training, family context, employment situation, and personal situation).

### 5.1. During compulsory education

The references to this period revolve around education. Few ESL students (five) mention primary education, and they say they did not have any major problems or even that everything went relatively well. In all cases, the problems appear during the compulsory secondary education stage, sometimes in the first two years and sometimes in the third or even fourth year. There are also similarities in reporting these problems: failing and repeating one or two years. From here, there is considerable variety (see Table 2), although the following situations are worth noting. In the case of most of the students who did not complete the stage, unsuccessfully repeating one or two years directly preceded abandoning their ESO studies and, with them, the educational system. In other cases, repeating a level will precede entry to a PCPI<sup>5</sup>, although only half of those who studied it went on to complete it and obtain the ESO diplo-



TABLE 1. Example of a biogram.

Name	Age	Primary education	ESO (and PCPI where appropriate) <sup>4</sup>	Context	Post-compulsory education and other relevant experience	Context
XXXX	XX	Completes primary education without repeating a year: «I passed».	<p>After repeating year 2 of ESO, stays in school until year 3 of ESO, «was going to repeat it» too.</p> <p>«The problems begin» («you know what it's like, friends, messing about, being a teenager ... Then you hit the responsibility of studying, and choose one or the other. That's how it is. That's it»). Ends up «failing».</p> <p>Ends up «leaving» ESO.</p> <p>Then, joins a PCPI at an Adult Education Centre. Completes year 1 because «it was practical» and «that was interesting» but not year 2, because there was «more theory» and «the same reason: more messing about, more fun with classmates...».</p>	<p>«Leaves» ESO «because I felt like it».</p> <p>Getting a drivers licence also interferes.</p>	<p>«I took a year off, without doing anything.» Then enrolled at the Construction School.</p> <p>Combines the course at this centre with working towards obtaining the compulsory secondary education diploma in another adult education centre.</p>	<p>«Now» with «more maturity» and «seeing it» as «easier» «wants to get the diploma» even though «it doesn't motivate me.» The following is also suggested: «I see classmates who have the Baccalaureate or a degree and they aren't doing anything. They're worse off than I am. And I'm doing this to get the diploma and end up the same? It's something you have. I know it's something you have to get it, whatever happens».</p>

Source: Own elaboration.



ma. Furthermore, a significant number of students (eight) achieved this qualification on their own without the need for taking a PCPI.

In general, what in the view of these students explains their paths, is not well defined. *Demotivation* is a term that can be used to describe what is often initially cited to explain problematic and negative experiences relating to this period and/or the educational setting where it happens. The following quotes may be enlightening:

«In my secondary school I didn't do anything I was the typical kid who went to secondary school, sat through the five or six hours of classes and went home... I didn't have any kind of motivation» (male, aged 18).

«I don't know what happened to me. I lost all interest, I don't know... I lost all willingness to study» (female, aged 24).

The same aspect was also mentioned by those studying PCPI to explain their ESL, as they rely on motivation to explain their continuance and success in this programme:

«With so much time sitting down, I didn't feel like studying» (male, aged 22).

«I told myself I was going to do it no matter what. And that's it» (male, aged 19).

As one of the quotations included above illustrates («I don't know what happened to me»), they cannot always explain this demotivated state. When an explanation of

some type is provided, this state is usually associated with a variety of circumstances. These are noticeably different, although they converge with risk factors identified in the literature on ESL (Ripamonti, 2018). In any case, the participants did not present them as unique, decisive reasons for this demotivation, but rather as aspects to which a notable impact was attributed.

Among such circumstances, they mention changes in their immediate surroundings for which they did not have a satisfactory response: changes in different areas, including educational issues (see Table 3). These changes only occasionally affect non-ESL students.

In addition, these students (and only a few non-ESL students) also mentioned as explanations personal changes affecting themselves that prevent or impede them adapting to new situations they face (see Table 4).

There are even people who expressly see the decisive reasons for the abandonment in themselves, accepting responsibility themselves, and even displaying feelings of self-blame and regret:

«It was my fault» (female, aged 19).

«And I feel disappointed in myself. The blame is all mine... Because I know that, if I had wanted to, I would have finished ESO, the Baccalaureate» (male, aged 22).

The participants who emphasised various concurrent aspects as explanations for a problematic and negative experience are,

TABLE 2. Studies completed by ESL students.

	Do not achieve a qualification	Achieve a qualification	Total
ESO	11 (without completing the stage)	8 (completing the stage)	19
ESO → PCPI	5	5	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>29</b>

Source: Own elaboration.

TABLE 3. Changes in situation mentioned by ESL students.

Aspects	Frequencies	Examples
Educational centre, teachers, and teaching	8/29	«In secondary school there were loads of people, and the teachers were just there talking and talking, and us there» (female, aged 24). «The teachers ignored us» (male, aged 18).
Group of classmates (and other relational settings)	9/29	There are older people, there are bad influences and stuff. And that's what happened to me. I fell in with a bad group» (male, aged 23). «I've wasted it by following my classmates... And, also, because of the neighbourhood I live in, El Príncipe, you see some things there» (male, aged 19).
Paternity/maternity	3/29	«I got pregnant. That made everything harder for me so I gave up. And that's it» (female, aged 23). «My son is 4 now. And I'm with my girlfriend. She also has a child» (male, aged 23).
Family	10/29	«Because my mother fell ill and I was with her through the chemotherapy» (female, aged 20). «Because my father was in prison... All he did was ignore me and I just saw nothing but bad things. I couldn't carry on» (male, aged 23).

Source: Own elaboration.

TABLE 4. Personal changes mentioned by ESL students.

Aspects	Frequencies	Examples
Maturity	11/29	«As I was at that awkward age, I wasn't interested in studying» (female, aged 19). «Also when I was young I was an idiot... I was lost» (male, aged 23).
Problematic behaviour	9/29	«I was a very rebellious child» (female, aged 18). «Lots of suspensions» (male, aged 20).
Risk behaviour	6/29	«I lost my way, I started smoking drugs. [...] And that change really led me into drugs» (male, aged 18). «I got into everything, when I was 15 or 16» (male, aged 23).

Source: Own elaboration.

on the whole, ESL students who left ESO without the corresponding diploma. The concurrence of various external and internal conditions would eventually cause an intense and persistent state of demotivation, something that would eventually be reflected in a group of experiences of disaffection, suspensions, and absenteeism, followed by leaving education. In the case of ESL students who did obtain the diploma, these episodes were transitory or one-off. Changes in the educational and social-family context demanded an immediate reaction from the students, but, with time, they were able to restore the initial situation or make the necessary changes, sometimes receiving support from teachers or family members. Something similar happens in the case of non-ESL students.

## 5.2. After compulsory education

None of the ESL students (including those with the ESO diploma) managed to obtain a more advanced qualification before accessing the centre. All of the non-ESL students achieved a more advanced qualification: five obtained vocational qualifications, four achieved the Baccalaureate and one achieved a higher vocational qualification.

But, what happened after the period corresponding to ESO? Although there are still distinctive features and variety, some recurring patterns can be identified. Apart from the youngest ones, who have a shorter or even virtually non-existent subsequent trajectory outside the educational system owing to having repeated a year and/or studied for a PCPI, the ESL students all emphasise the educational

activities they participated in during this period. A significant proportion of them (15 of the 29) had carried out the relevant educational and preliminary guidance activities integrated into the educational programme of which the course they had accessed at that time forms part. Apart from these activities, the following two situations can be noted.

Firstly, the less frequent one involves resuming studies within the educational system, either through ESO for adults, Intermediate Vocational Training, or the Baccalaureate (see Table 5). The last two options were far more common among ESL students who did manage to get the ESO diploma. However, the studies they started would be abandoned once or on several occasions before they enrolled at the centre. When the reasons for abandonment are stated, they are often similar to those given for leaving ESO, with the difference that finding work becomes a priority:

[2nd year of Baccalaureate] it was more demanding. It didn't motivate me because at that time I wasn't mature enough to understand how important it is. The next year, I started doing an intermediate level vocational course, which went very well. I finished the first year. But the next year I got a job and had to stop studying (female, aged 23).

In addition, some students restart formal studies upon starting the course in the centre and so combine them. The former situation is the most common among non-ESL students, with fewer leaving early (just three).

The second, more frequent, situation involves re-engaging with education in occupational or workplace courses outside the educational system (for example, courses from the Public State Employment Service or in companies: 10 ESL students said they had completed these, one reported combining this type of study with the course in the centre, and—in contrast

with the previous situation— only two reported interruptions or abandonment. Three had already studied in this centre before. Only two non-ESL students said they had chosen this second option.

In addition to these patterns relating to participation in education and training, there are others relating to work, the oth-

TABLE 5. ESL students' formal studies after leaving ESO (ordinary).

Situations	Frequencies
Interrupts or leaves ESO for adults	3/29
Interrupts or leaves Intermediate Vocational Training	3/29
Interrupts or leaves Baccalaureate	3/29
Combined with ESO for adults	4/29
Combined with Intermediate Vocational Training	3/29
Combined with Baccalaureate	3/29

Source: Own elaboration.

er field the participants emphasise when referring to this time. References to work experiences were less frequent among ESL students: two reported having been working part time and four said they did occasional or sporadic work. Furthermore, only one said he had been actively seeking work<sup>6</sup>. Another said he had been involved in volunteering. However, long-term inactivity was also less frequent: only seven students specifically mentioned this situation:

«I took a year off, doing nothing» (male, aged 21).

«I left secondary school with nothing. I spent four years doing nothing» (male, aged 21).

That said, the situation most frequently applicable to all of them at some point is experiencing significant periods of inactivity combined with shorter periods of education and, as the case may be, sporadic work. In this regard, the case of those students who participated in educational activities delivered outside the educational system as they alternate courses («whatever comes up»; «whatever they call on you for») with

periods of inactivity is illustrative. As for non-ESL students, two were in this situation for a prolonged period (around a year) but none of the others mentioned periods of inactivity they regarded as relevant. Four emphasised that they had been doing activities relating to looking for work (such as preparing for competitive exams for public sector jobs in two cases).

Up to here, we have presented what, from the perspective of the participants, has been identified as relevant in their path before enrolling at the centre. Nonetheless, what relating to this prior path has also, from their own point of view, had an impact on them re-engaging with education in this centre? The answer to this question is closely connected to those issues identified as relevant in their path. On the one hand, a notable number of ESL students (21, as well as eight non-ESL students) use the expectation of learning and acquiring education<sup>7</sup> as grounds for deciding to resume their education, although references to continuity with prior education and training are vague or practically non-existent<sup>8</sup>:

«To learn, to get training» (male, aged 23).

«Doing this course really works well for me. This way I learn more» (female, aged 18).

On the other hand, they also mention inactivity as a reason for resuming education, with a similar frequency (20, along with seven non-ESL students):

«So as not to be unemployed another year» (female, aged 21).

«Because I didn't have anything to do» (male, aged 19).

## 6. Discussion and Conclusions

Leaving an activity means withdrawing from it or not carrying on with it. So, anyone who leaves education or training, permanently or temporarily, abandons it. Those who leave education or training withdraw from these activities, permanently or temporarily (in the latter case, with the interruption lasting for more or less time). In the case of temporary withdrawal, the interruption could last for more or less time. People who re-engage in education after ESL illustrate the potentially temporary nature of such a situation. But the results presented go further. As soon as the first situation of ESL occurs, various recurring experiences of resuming education or training follow. These are short duration and are in formal education or, more frequently, outside it. After completing the education or training started in these experiences, or even without completing it, they are likely to return to the situation of ESL, also for a limited period. It is thus noticeable that what is regarded as ESL is reversible (Cardozo, 2012), but also that these reversions can also affect re-engagement and are recurrent. Furthermore, ESL situations that are so transitory and close to the resumption of education could be more similar to repeated interruptions of education (in the sense of repeatedly or continuously deferring it) than to leaving

it in the strict sense. On the other hand, the results indicate that the situations of ESL and the experiences of returning to education are combined with situations and experiences in areas other than education (work, family, personal), to which it is also worth applying these characteristics identified in ESL and the return to education (namely, recurrence, limited duration, and reversibility). Nonetheless, inactivity stands out among these situations and experiences as a common phenomenon while people are in ESL situations. Therefore, two features with which the so-called *choice biographies* of numerous young people have been characterised (Snee & Devine, 2015) can be identified here: reversibility and synchronicity (du Bois-Reymond, 1998).

But these biographies can be described as choice because they are open to the decisions taken by the individuals through which they construct their lives as they move forwards. The results obtained suggest it is plausible to apply this characterisation to early school leavers who re-engage in education or training. In a recent study that considered the path of young people and adults from ESL to university studies, Montes (2016) attributes a «reactive» character (p. 19) to ESL and re-engagement alike. The results presented here indicate that, when they enter a situation of ESL and when they re-engage with education, young people to some extent *opt* to do so, however limited and restrictive the choices available to them may be. They also suggest that these situations are not necessarily the result of having chosen hastily, but instead are

the result of considering the limited opportunities and many and significant difficulties they encounter, in conditions of uncertainty. To summarise, even while being subject to restrictions that specifically undermine its elective nature, this would be a more of a conscious decision than a rash one, even though the initial leaving of education happens earlier than is regarded as normal. This can be observed when the first leaving occurs (when, for example, considering accumulated and/or arising adverse circumstances shapes the selection of a particular path), but it would show itself more clearly later on, in a period where favourable personal changes have occurred while the individual has had to confront other adverse circumstances (like job insecurity and, above all, inactivity). In particular, it is worth recalling that a considerable number of students implicitly assume that they have made progress in their maturity. One student expressly stated: «At high school, because I was younger, I didn't know what I was doing. [...] And then when you are 19 you realise that.» Others assume that there have been favourable changes in other personal conditions that, at one time, would have impeded or hampered continuing their studies (see Table 4). In her study of the return to education of young people with ESL experiences, Pérez (2016) emphasises that there are identity changes in these processes.

It is worth clarifying that this does not mean that the pathways followed by these students are exclusively decided by them. It is important to remember that

a characteristic of these «biographies» is that the social and institutional setting in which certain options are offered ends up obliging the subjects to make an informed choice between them, thus making them responsible (Furlong, 2013). Moreover, the responsibility for responding individually to serious social problems that exceed their power might be being passed onto individuals.

Case studies are considered to be limited in that their conclusions can be expected to be exploratory, although, despite this, they can be of value for providing more general explanations or even theoretical ideas that can be tested in subsequent research (Gorard, 2013). This study could make a contribution in this direction. It merits further work in at least three directions: including more young people and even adults so more perspectives can be compared, expanding the research to other contexts, and following-up over time. External influences on individual decisions, which might not be limiting factors, and the perspective of the agents through which these influences are channelled could also merit attention in further studies.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This work results from the «Educational re-engagement at the School of Construction in Ceuta from the perspective of its students: a case study to identify good practices» research project, which was selected by the Instituto de Estudios Ceutíes (Institute for Studies on Ceuta), affiliated to the C.S.I.C. (Higher Scientific Research Council), in its 2015 call for research proposals. We would like to thank the organisations that participated.

<sup>2</sup> We initially became aware of this success through the media and, subsequently, through our initial contact with the centre and the student performance figures it provided.

<sup>3</sup> «The term 'early school leaving' is used in connection with those who leave education and training with only lower secondary education or less, and who are no longer in education and training.» (Consejo de la Unión Europea, 2011, p. 1).

<sup>4</sup> ESO: compulsory secondary education (*educación secundaria obligatoria*). PCPI: initial vocational qualification programme (*programa de cualificación profesional inicial*).

<sup>5</sup> Only one non-ESL student used of this pathway.

<sup>6</sup> These activities were included: attending employment services or agencies; registering for job banks, and/or sending CVs and preparing for competitive exams for public sector jobs.

<sup>7</sup> Often as a means of achieving other aims: above all, accessing work.

<sup>8</sup> Only one student referred to the shortcomings in the education she had previously acquired.

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