Reversing the trajectory of school disengagement? Lessons from the analysis of Warsaw youth's educational trajectories

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Abstract

The theoretical framework of the paper combines the notions of school disengagement and educational trajectories. Our current research has demonstrated that several trajectories of school disengagement can be distinguished: *unanticipated crisis, parabola, downward spiral, boomerang, resilient route, shading out*. The text focuses on two trajectory types – the parabola, when youngsters facing increasing school disengagement are provided with substantial support and their trajectory changes its direction, and the downward spiral, which despite the support leads to further school disengagement and school leaving.

Analysing the educational biographies of students from secondary schools in Warsaw, we focus on their perceptions of the support provided by different formal and informal sources. Investigating the protective factors and successful interventions might thus be useful in fostering the educational success of youth at risk. An analysis of the trajectories might be treated as guidance as to how to offset the negative impact of social and educational inequalities and hence to reverse the negative direction in one's educational trajectory.

The text is based on qualitative analysis of data obtained within an international research project: individual semi-structured interviews with Polish students at risk of early school leaving and youngsters who left school early.

Keywords

School disengagement, early school leaving, social support, educational trajectories, youth at risk, protective factors

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Introduction

In many European countries there is serious concern about the fact that a significant number of young people leave education without graduating from upper secondary school – at the moment, it is every tenth young European (Eurostat, 2018). Early school leaving (ESL) is burdened with high social, economic and individual costs (Brunello and De Paola, 2014; Gitschthaler and Nairz-Wirth, 2018; Psacharopoulos, 2007), increasing the risk of social exclusion of the most vulnerable groups, as the youngsters more at risk of ESL tend to come from already neglected social environments (Dale, 2010; De Witte et al., 2013). For these reasons, the issue of ESL was noticed by policymakers and reducing the percentage of young people leaving school to 10% became the goal first of the Lisbon Strategy and then of the Europe 2020 strategy.

Research shows that ESL is a complex process usually accompanied by gradual decrease in school engagement (Dale, 2010; D'Angelo and Kaye, 2018; Kaye et al., 2017; Rumberger, 2011; Rumberger and Lim, 2008). Therefore, when studying pupils at risk of ESL and those who have already left school early, the analysis taking into account the school (dis)engagement allows for better grasping and understanding the educational trajectories of these young people.

As typologies are useful in synthesising and generalising research results, and helping to design effective interventions (Beker and Heyman, 1972, cited in Etzion and Romi, 2015), we created a typology of the educational trajectories of youth at risk of ESL and those who have already left education. In this text we focus on two trajectory types – the parabola and the downward spiral, which are strongly related to the concept of support.

Support systems for young people at risk of ESL are essential, and adequate access to them is the means of dispensing social justice. Even if schools and other educational institutions offer support, the challenge is in ensuring that everyone can make use of it in accordance with their needs and individual preferences.

To benefit from the support, the young person often needs to be first equipped with certain competences and resources which can be described as resilience (Lessard et al., 2014; Masten, 1999). These skills are important protective factors that can be shaped within the education process and from the earliest possible age. Support programmes for youth at risk should involve strengthening the resilience of young people as well as that of their families.

However, when support is inefficient and negative experiences of the young people at risk determine their negative attitudes towards formal education, non-mainstream educational measures and programmes may have a particularly important role in supporting vulnerable youth (Nouwen et al., 2016; Van Praag et al., 2016). Non-mainstream/alternative measures or programmes are implemented outside mainstream schools for young people (e.g. in second chance schools for adults, chambers of crafts or institutions for people with specific needs) and offer ISCED 3[1] level education or its equivalent. Some of them may include programmes combining part-time schooling with vocational training or apprenticeships (occupational training at workplace).

The research presented in the article aims at analysing the support offered by schools and other (non-)educational institutions, as well as individual actors of the educational and social environment, to prevent or counteract ESL and the loss of school engagement. The article will also reveal young people's perspectives on the support they have received or have not been offered in their educational trajectories and what kind of support turns out to be perceived as the most effective. It will also indicate other protective and risk factors present in the lives of young people and how they interact with each other.

Thus, the text presented introduces new and enriches the existing knowledge from numerous educational studies on the relationship between ESL and school engagement processes and the

importance of social support for the school engagement of youngsters at risk of educational and social exclusion.

This article is based upon qualitative research (individual in-depth interviews) among youngsters at risk of ESL and early school leavers in Poland and six other countries (Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, UK, Sweden), conducted within an international research project in the years 2014–2016. In presenting research findings, we focus on an in-depth analysis of four cases of students from Warsaw. However, the method of analysing and creating the typology of educational trajectories as well as the conclusions also apply to the data from other countries.

School disengagement, ESL and educational trajectories

ESL, recently known as early leaving from education and training, has been a subject of extensive research over the last decades (Dale, 2010; De Witte et al., 2013; Ross and Leathwood, 2013). There have been numerous quantitative and qualitative studies into the reasons and consequences of dropout and ESL (e.g. Bridgeland et al., 2006; Dale, 2010; Finn, 1989; Rumberger and Lim, 2008) and the cost-benefit analyses indicating the social significance of interrupting education (Brunello and De Paola, 2014; Gitschthaler and Nairz-Wirth, 2018; Psacharopoulos, 2007).

The studies conducted in Europe usually refer to the Eurostat definition of ESL, which measures the percentage of young people aged 18–24 who have finished at most lower secondary school or its equivalent (ISCED 2 level) and are not in further education or training (Eurostat, 2018). However, the official definition seems to pose two challenges. Firstly, being very broad and time-restricted, it tends to oversimplify the phenomenon. Secondly, it assumes that to a large extent early school leavers are similar to each other, while from research we know that this is not a homogeneous group (Dale, 2010; Van Caudenberg et al., 2017). To overcome these limitations, in our research we have adopted the concept of school disengagement process and support experiences in the perspective of individual educational trajectories. To capture the variety of educational trajectories of youth at risk of ESL, we also decided to create a typology of educational trajectories focusing on how the process of school (dis)engagement was evolving and what role was played in this process by various protective factors (above all support) and risk factors.

The concept of school engagement has been thoroughly researched and described in social sciences (Janosz et al., 2008; Newmann, 1992; Rumberger, 2004; Van Houtte, 2004; Wang and Fredricks, 2014). It is based on the ideas of investment and commitment (Fredricks et al., 2004). School engagement is the result of interaction between numerous internal and external factors (Skinner et al., 2009) and is a multidimensional construct (Fredricks et al., 2004; Hancock and Zubrick, 2015; Johnson et al., 2001; Willms, 2003). It links significant contexts – such as school, home or peers – to students and their outcomes, such as school belonging, aspirations and motivation; hence it can be compared to glue keeping it all together (Reschly and Christenson, 2012). Accordingly, disengagement is usually used synonymously with low engagement or lack of school engagement (Hancock and Zubrick, 2015).

ESL is often considered the culmination moment in the school disengagement process (Rumberger, 2011) as well as its result (Dale, 2010; D'Angelo and Kaye, 2018; Kaye et al., 2017; Rumberger, 2011; Rumberger and Lim, 2008). It is believed that the more an individuals are disengaged from school, the greater the risk of them interrupting their education (Ferguson et al., 2005; Lamb et al., 2011). Hence ESL can also be treated as an indicator of school disengagement

(Hancock and Zubrick, 2015). However, not all students falling out of the education system are students who are disengaged from school (Vallée and Ruglis, 2017). Though disengagement may begin at the start of one's education (Gasper et al., 2012; Vallée and Shore, 2013), it does not signify that it has to lead to students leaving school early, which in turn does not have to be a final or definite step in their educational trajectory (Lee and Burkam, 1992; Marchlik et al., 2018; Van Caudenberg et al., 2017).

We recognise school (dis)engagement as a process within the educational trajectory of the individual in which multiple factors interplay in various configurations and periods of time (Lessard et al., 2008).

In this paper we focus on educational trajectories analysing the individual cases of youngsters at risk of ESL. An educational trajectory is a sequence of transitions between educational levels and institutions shaped by individual choices, as well as structural and institutional arrangements (Hickman and Garvey, 2006; Orfield et al., 2004; Pallas, 2003). To delimit trajectories from other related concepts – pathways and life-courses – we follow the conception assuming that 'a trajectory is an attribute of an individual, whereas a pathway is an attribute of a social system' (Pallas, 2003: 168). Therefore, the term 'pathway' appears when we refer to specific programmes a young person can choose from within a given education system.

Numerous studies have presented a variety of types of early school leavers (e.g. Bowers and Sprott, 2012; Dekkers and Driesen, 1997; Dwyer, 1996; Fortin et al., 2006; Janosz et al., 2000; Kronick and Hargis, 1990; Lessard et al., 2008; Marchlik et al., 2018; Menzer and Hampel, 2009). Focusing on the process of school disengagement and not on the individual characteristics of youth at risk of ESL, we distinguished six types of educational trajectories, denominated as: *unanticipated crisis, shading out, boomerang, resilient route, parabola* and *downward spiral* (Tomaszewska-Pękała et al., 2017).

Unanticipated crisis refers to a situation when an unexpected life event – for example, illness, accident, death in the family – disturbs a young person's educational trajectory which so far has not been not affected by major disruptions. The school situation deteriorates abruptly, which might lead to increased school disengagement. In the case of the shading out trajectory, small negative issues and experiences of the student accumulate over a long period of time, resulting in a gradual increase in school disengagement. These two trajectory types are frequently overlooked by schools because the students might not present clear behavioural signs suggesting that they are experiencing serious difficulties and need support. The boomerang trajectory illustrates an educational career consisting of the cycle of leaving and returning to school repeatedly, whereas the resilient route type includes trajectories which do not result in complete detachment from school/education despite the existence of many risk factors. Thanks to many protective factors (such as support from significant others; positive relations with parents, teachers and/or peers; determination to achieve something; relatively positive academic self-concept; and high self-esteem) which overcome the adversities, a young person does not experience a substantial or gradual decrease in school engagement.

Finally, we distinguished the parabola and downward spiral trajectories which are the subject of in-depth analysis in this article. The element that determines the parabola trajectory is support or, to put it more precisely, the perception of social support received by the young person. This support is perceived as the turning point of an educational career and is the crucial factor in deciding that the young person stays in education or plans to return to it, despite previous negative experiences and/or despite accumulation of various risk factors. In contrast to the parabola trajectory, the downward spiral is distinguished by the lack of social support – this lack may mean that support has not been offered at all. However, it can also include situations in which support was present, but it turned out to be inappropriate or insufficient. Finally, the support could have been rejected or misused by the recipient.

The understanding and types of support

Among the various forms of support and intervention, the crucial ones are those collectively described as social support. In sociological terms, social support is one of the elements of social capital (Rose et al., 2013; Wrona et al., 2015). However, trying to operationalise social support received by the youngsters we look at 'an individual's perceptions of general support or specific supportive behaviours (available or acted on) from people in their social network, which enhances their functioning or may buffer them from adverse outcomes' (Malecki and Demaray, 2003: 231).

The basic sources of social support are the family, friends and social networks in the closest surroundings (Howe, 2010). With time, along with the process of development, greater importance may be taken on by new experiences and building one's own network of social contacts, termed by Rose et al. (2013) a 'portfolio of resources'; that is, non-family relationships (above all with peers) and institutional relationships resulting from the increasing participation in social life and performing various roles.

The significance of social support for various aspects of the person's well-being has been the subject of research. Among other findings, it was proved that support from the closest ones helps to cope with difficult life situations, and prevents feelings of rejection and alienation (Ystgaard, 1997). On the other hand, the feeling of closeness to family members, having friends and participating in social life are more common among people who are more resistant to stress and better at coping with crisis (Schwarzer and Taubert, 1999). People who feel a higher level of social support are more satisfied with life (Yarcheski et al., 1994) and are less prone to risky behaviours (Samdal and Dür, 2000). However, apart from the subjective perception of 'being supported', the important factors are the skills which are associated with it, such as the ability to seek and accept support (Helgeson, 2003).

Less frequently researched is the impact of the type of support received on its perception and effectiveness. The analysis shows that various support sources offer different types of support (Dubow and Ullman, 1989; Richman et al., 1998), that not every type of support is appropriate in every situation and finally that people differ in their preferences regarding a given type of support (Malecki and Demaray, 2003; Shumaker and Brownell, 1984; Tardy, 1992).

House (1981) distinguishes four main support types: emotional, informational, appraisal and instrumental. Emotional support involves providing empathy, caring, love and trust, but also showing concern and listening. Emotional support is both the foundation and an element of other forms of support, and it brings together various behaviours that people most often refer to as supportive (Gottlieb, 1978; House, 1981). Informational support means providing someone with information necessary to deal with some difficulty, making it easier to make decisions or solve a problem – it can be advice, suggestions or simply facts. Unlike informational, appraisal support is the transfer of evaluative information that allows individuals to relate their behaviour to a wider context and learn how it is perceived and assessed by others. Appraisal support includes such behaviours as affirmation, feedback or comparison. Finally, instrumental support includes specific acts aimed to help someone in need – taking care of a child, watering flowers or lending money are just a few examples.

When focusing on the support offered to students at risk of ESL by schools and educational institutions, three basic types of support were distinguished in our project: academic support (tutoring, services for students with special educational needs, flexible learning pathways and various grouping practices), socio-emotional and behavioural support (counselling, coaching and mentoring, disciplinary policies, e.g. responses to students' absences or challenging behaviours, social skills trainings and extracurricular activities) and career guidance support (Nouwen et al., 2016). However, the basis for distinguishing the types of support in this case is not the perception of the youngsters, but the activities of the school in response to the needs of the students. Both of these perspectives – perception of respondents and institutional responses – will be analysed in the context of educational trajectories of the young people under study.

Methodology and data

In this paper we analyse the parabola and downward spiral trajectory types, which were identified within the project, on the basis of the analysis of in-depth semi-structured individual interviews with youngsters aged between 16 and 24 years old coming from seven countries (Poland, Belgium, Sweden, Portugal, Spain, UK and the Netherlands). A total of 252 interviews was conducted twice between September 2014 and October 2016 with respondents coming from three groups at the time of the first interview.

The first group was composed of students from mainstream schools who were considered to be at potentially higher risk of ESL due to a number of risk factors related to the individual level (e.g. playing truant, showing other signs of school disengagement) or the institutional level (e.g. attending a low-performing school and/or a vocational track). The second group comprised youngsters who had left mainstream education before attaining ISCED 3 qualification and were participating in alternative learning pathways. The last group included youngsters who were early school leavers. The youngsters who participated in individual in-depth interviews were contacted through schools and alternative learning arenas that were carefully selected based on the first wave of the student survey data[2] and the field descriptions of local educational landscapes. In each country, the research was carried out in urban areas with an increased ESL risk, which was determined according to the knowledge of ESL environmental risk factors based on the extensive review of research literature.

Following the process of empirically grounded construction of typologies in qualitative social research as described by Kluge (2000), we carried out several steps which allowed us to distinguish the types of at-risk trajectories.

First, out of the 252 cases we randomly selected 42 interviews with early school leavers and students from alternative learning pathways (the last two groups described above, excluding students following regular education programmes) – six from each country.

Next, we developed a multidimensional grid to organise the combination of attributes that would be the basis for distinguishing the types of educational trajectories (Kluge, 2000). The grid consisted of a timeline organising the sequence of transitions within a given trajectory and the occurrence of risk factors related to ESL and school disengagement, such as grade repetition, truancy and being a victim of bullying. Risk factors and crucial moments (e.g. significant changes in personal situations, crises, institutional support received) were inserted into the grid in order to indicate the educational stage and/or age of the young person when they took place. Additional information about the youngsters' views and attitudes on the value attached to education, educational and occupational plans and aspirations was also included in the grid.

When the 42 interviews were placed into the grid, the occurrence of certain combinations of attributes and dimensions was analysed and this resulted in the development of six trajectory types. We analysed several more interviews according to the same procedure to ensure that the trajectory types also matched other cases.

In this article we present just a part of this extensive work, analysing in depth four cases of Warsaw youth, two of whom were interviewed twice (Mariola and Paweł).[3] However, the conclusions refer also to the international data.

Polish school system

During the period covered in this study (school years 2014/2015 and 2015/2016), the education system in Poland included a six-year primary school (ISCED 1 level), a three-year lower-secondary school (ISCED 2 level) and a three or four-year upper-secondary school (USS; ISCED 3 level). There were three main types of USS: a three-year-long basic vocational school, a four-year-long

technical school and three-year-long general secondary school. Basic vocational school represented a vocational track, whereas a general secondary school represented an academic track. Technical schools provided mixed general and vocational track curricula. General secondary and technical school ended with the Matura exam that was a qualification required for tertiary education. Basic vocational school students could sit the Matura exam after having graduated from supplementary general or technical schools.

In Poland, full-time compulsory education (obligation to attend school) covered children and young people aged 7 to 16 years and part-time compulsory education (obligation to participate in education or training) for young people aged 16 to 18 was fulfilled after the end of lower secondary school in USS for young people, or in a non-school setting (for example, as part of vocational training at an employer's organisation) (Kolanowska, 2018). However, although the system allowed for alternative educational tracks, the vast majority of students in Poland attended regular USS for young people on a full-time basis, with the general and technical schools as the most popular choice and the basic vocation school as the least frequently chosen (GUS, 2016).

Research findings

In our article we present four stories of school disengagement. Two of them did not end in leaving school prematurely, though there was a high risk of such an event. But the educational trajectories were successfully reversed, thanks to a number of protective factors, including the support received. They represent the parabola trajectory. We also refer to two stories of school disengagement, which did end in ESL and withdrawing from education entirely – examples of the downward spiral trajectory type. In those cases, the support offered turned out to be ineffective or was rejected. In our article we attempt to answer the question of what makes the support work and how to use this insight in designing more effective support schemes.

Following Lessard et al. (2008), who distinguished three major phases leading to dropout (*setting the stage, teetering* and *ending the journey*), we divided the stories of Warsaw youth under study into three sections: *Background and school disengagement process, The perception and experiences of support* and *The future*.

Background and school disengagement process

The first issue worth taking into consideration when discussing types of educational trajectories is the background on entering the education system; that is, the social and cultural capital of the family, characteristics of the immediate neighbourhood, etc. These are the factors that might contribute to the young person's later (lack of) engagement and success at school. The background of all the youngsters described here was very similar and challenging from the start; that is, they all grew up in a rather poor environment, with a low level of cultural, social and economic capital, with health issues, unemployment, and mostly without one of their parents.

First, we present the background of the two females whose trajectories have been classified as a parabola. Then we introduce the two male respondents whose trajectories can be referred to as a downward spiral.

Mariola (20 years old) grew up in a small town, in a large family with low socioeconomic status (SES) – she has five siblings. Her mother, who is in poor health, is unemployed. Her father, an alcoholic, for a long time oppressed his family mentally and physically, for which he spent several years in prison. The parents have only primary or basic vocational education, but all three of Mariola's elder sisters have university degrees. One of the brothers is struggling to complete lower secondary school. Similarly, Maria (20 years old) also had a very challenging background: she

came from a family with low SES, had a physically abusive father, experienced her parents' divorce, after which her father was not paying alimony and her mother found it difficult to support her family from an unskilled low-paid job.

So it can be said that both girls' personal situations can be a good illustration of the accumulation of numerous risk factors putting them at higher risk of school disengagement (Willms, 2003). Indeed, their school disaffection grew when they were in lower secondary school. This was when they both experienced verbal and physical violence from their peers, as a result of which they both started to withdraw from school. They stopped coming to lessons for fear of meeting their bullies in or near the school; Mariola, feeling deserted by everybody, even by her close friends, attempted suicide. In both girls' perception, the staff in their schools were not supportive. In Maria's case we may talk about the vicious circle of school disengagement: being persecuted by her peers led to a long absence and poor performance, and, as a result, repeating a grade, which intensified her disengagement, which again led to truancy and to another grade repetition (Day, 2012; OECD, 2016). At some point, in upper secondary school, Maria got pregnant and had to interrupt her education to look after her baby. In addition, the relationship with her partner was full of conflicts, which negatively affected her mental health and emotional stability. Nevertheless, she still aimed to complete ISCED 3 level education.

The backgrounds of the two male youngsters whose trajectories belong to the downward spiral type are quite comparable to the stories described above. Marcin (19 years old) was brought up only by his mother, as his father abandoned the family in Marcin's early childhood; after his parents had divorced, his mother found a new partner and gave birth to another boy, which led to Marcin feeling rejected by his mother. After an accident, which happened when Marcin was looking after his baby brother, of whom he was not particularly fond, his mother accused him of harming the baby deliberately. As a result of that, Marcin was sent to a psychiatric hospital, to which he returned a few years later, after a suicide attempt. He was diagnosed with depressive personality disorder. In addition, as he considered the lessons boring and school a waste of time, he did his utmost to stay off school and was frequently absent from it. His mother found it hard to control or influence him; therefore she decided to place him in a youth sociotherapy centre (YSC[4]). He spent many years in care institutions or boarding schools (in the last year of lower secondary school he was a student at four different schools). This case seems to confirm the results of previous studies: school absenteeism and frequent school switching have been found to lead to failure, school disengagement and ESL amongst young people in foster care (Zorc et al., 2013). Paweł (18 years old), before being placed in a youth sociotherapy centre at the age of 15, presented challenging and aggressive behaviour. He cheated in school, played truant, used psychoactive substances and was violent towards his peers. As he said: 'I had three court cases for demoralisation. I drank in school, did drugs, smoked.' However, he never repeated a grade. During the first interview, he was aware that the way he had been behaving would lead to him being placed in a juvenile detention facility.

The perception and experiences of support

The trajectories classified as a parabola and downward spiral show multiple complexities of biographies, connected to micro- (individual), meso- (institutional) and macro- (systemic) level risk factors, making them alike. However, what differentiates them is the availability and effectiveness of support offered, received or lacking.

As regards the support perceived by the young people from our study, both females representing the parabola trajectory say that the main source of support is the family. In the case of Mariola, numerous family members (three sisters, two brothers, mother) and her godfather are the source of various types of support, including emotional, informational and instrumental. When it comes to

emotional support, Mariola points out that she can call her sisters, tell them everything and count on their support in every situation. That was the case after the suicide attempt, after experiencing peer violence at lower secondary school, or when her brother stood up to defend her when she was attacked by her peers. Mariola even complains a bit about the excessive attention paid by family members: 'Sometimes it's a bit annoying, because, you know, everybody's worried, everybody cares, everybody has a different opinion and says different things. [. . .] Sometimes they care too much.' At the same time, Mariola tries to be independent and cope with everyday challenges on her own – she rents a flat, undertakes various jobs and tries to financially support her mum, who is in a difficult situation. The large family is also a social capital that helps her find a job; for example, one of her sisters wants to recommend her to the hotel where she works herself, and another took her to work abroad. Mariola also received a considerable sum of money from one of her sisters when she decided to move to Warsaw. As far as Maria is concerned, she believes she has insufficient support in taking care of her daughter – she says that her partner, the father of their child, does not support her enough, her mum and sister work and it is only occasionally that she can count on her grandma's help. She complains that she cannot maintain the relationships with her girlfriends anymore. Still, her mother, sister and grandmother are very important to her as sources of emotional support.

In contrast, Marcin and Paweł do not see their families as a source of support. Paweł emphasises that he has lost family support because of his own problem behaviour, and, besides, he has never trusted anyone but himself. During the second interview, Paweł mentions as sources of both emotional and instrumental support his girlfriend from the residential care centre and his aunt, who helped him to be placed in residential child care when he was living on the street. His girlfriend also informed him of an option to take up a vocational course in Voluntary Labour Corps that would allow him to gain some qualifications quickly.

The examples of Mariola and Maria show a complete lack of support from their schools, in which the girls experienced peer violence and to which they appealed for help. In both cases, the issue was neglected, the school did not hold the perpetrators responsible and the main burden of guilt fell on the victims. No steps were taken; the problem was disposed of instead of being solved. In the case of Mariola it was even worse, because even after her suicide attempt and change of school, the girl and her family were still persecuted; the social ostracism in the small town where they live has not stopped until now. The school which Mariola found herself in and eventually graduated from did not offer any kind of socio-emotional support either. Although Mariola graduated from lower secondary school, the conflict with the internship supervisor and the lack of the school's help in this situation meant that she did not get professional qualifications that would facilitate her entry into the labour market and give her more professional options. After finishing lower secondary school Mariola went to general upper secondary school, but she did not meet with understanding and support there either – she had health problems that caused her absence, but she was not allowed to take exams after the deadline, which shows a lack of social and emotional support, but also a lack of flexibility and willingness to respond to her specific needs. At the moment Mariola attends an alternative learning arena – a second-chance school for adults; it meets her expectations, because she receives the opportunity to study at weekends, which enables her to combine school and work.

Unlike Mariola, Maria received adequate and sufficient institutional support. She first went to a youth club in her neighbourhood and then the streetworkers from this club helped her to enrol at a private school for young people with learning disabilities, run by a foundation. The support from streetworkers was more of an informal relationship, which, as House (1981) emphasises, is characterised by mutual respect and relative status equality. Such help is often easier to accept by troubled young people. The institutional support saved Maria from a court case: the previous school wanted to limit her mother's parental rights, as she was deemed unable to control her

daughter's absences at school, and to place the girl in institutional care. Although beforehand Maria was disappointed with school and her teachers, now she is quite satisfied with the school she attends and her relationships with the teachers. She underlines: 'I have many such teachers to whom I can go and talk about my private matters, they will always advise me, help me.' Maria also emphasises the innovative teaching methods and small classes, which allow the school staff to care for their students.

This is different for Mariola, Marcin and Paweł, who do not trust the teachers, educators and other representatives of various institutions.

When Marcin stopped going to school at the lower secondary level, his mother arranged with the class tutor to let her know if the boy had come to school or not. Such support turned out to be insufficient and ineffective, as it was difficult for the mother to make sure he went to school. Asked if teachers tried to help him, Marcin replies:

> They tried to force me. For example my class tutor who phoned every day, to ask whether I was in school. Did not help. Day after day, the teacher, my class tutor, a perfidious type, came to the school and the first thing he did was take his class register and check whether I was at school or not, if not, he called my mum. Five minutes later, I knew that my teacher had come to school because mum called me or sent me a text message.

As a last resort, Marcin was placed in a YSC and then by court order in subsequent institutions. He stayed for brief periods of time everywhere he went and his distrust gradually increased. Similarly, Paweł went from one institution to another, treating being there as a necessary evil.

The boys' immediate family – mothers – could not cope with their resentment about school, and similarly the schools, in the boys' perception, did nothing to prevent their further school disengagement. The alleged support was based on the institutionalisation of care with the focus on the obligation to fulfil compulsory education. When asked whether he had received adequate support in school or whether in his opinion the school had reacted properly, Marcin responded:

> The school reacted like school. You don't go, so it's your problem. We'll inform the court that you don't go to school and you'll have a case in court. That's their obligation. They didn't want to keep me there at all costs. They have so many students, why would they care about one.

The institutions in which Paweł and Marcin were placed focus on deficits and on isolating young people from society in the name of security and their own good. Thus, they contribute to deepening their feeling of mistrust towards people and society as a whole (Kelly, 2003). Moreover, cases of gradual educational exclusion of higher-risk students may be due to the need for schools to 'get rid' of those learners who could negatively affect the assessment of the schools' performance or their position in rankings.

In both cases of the downward spiral trajectory, institutional support was provided; however, it was primarily instrumental and academic, and there was no emotional or appraisal support. The previously established attitude of hostility and generalised distrust of people and institutions has not been changed. As a result, both males might face various challenges due to the lack of skills and competences to fully participate in social life.

The future

All the described cases, regardless of whether the parabola or downward spiral, also show the young people's difficulties in career planning and achieving life goals.

The two young men have very vague, fuzzy plans to have a job that does not require effort and brings in a lot of money. The previous attempts to take up employment ended in failures.

Marcin has tried various jobs (mail delivery, distributing leaflets, renovations), but he cannot adapt to the rules and complains about the need to get up, the commute, the duties, etc. He also indicates his shortcomings, which supposedly prevent him from employment. He does not seek any support and does not see any point in it.

Paweł, after an escape from the YSC and a stay at the residential care institution, landed in the juvenile shelter at a correctional facility due to court cases of burglary, beatings, extortions, etc. He has no concrete plans for the future; he wants to have fun and not to work. However, he counts on financial and material support (housing, money for development) that are granted to children coming from institutional care.

The young women are more realistic about their future, but they limit their dreams to the requirements of the moment and the need to get a job and earn money. Mariola prefers not to plan anything in the long run; she is currently thinking of moving to another city with her boyfriend, getting a job, completing a vocational course. Earlier, during the first interview, she talked about university studies. In her case, the lack of career guidance support can be seen. Mariola does not know how to manage her professional career – she constantly changes her occupation. However, she wants to achieve something in life; her driving force is the thought of a better economic situation than her parents' and she has the resilience not to give up and to move forward. However, the final goal she is aiming for is not entirely clear.

Maria dreams of graduating from university and working with challenging young people, because thanks to the club's employees she discovered the meaning of life and she started to believe that one could do something valuable in life. However, she does not fully believe in the possibility of realising these dreams, because she knows that after graduating from secondary school she must start earning money to support her baby daughter, so she is thinking about starting to work as a waitress or a barista. In her free time, however, she would like to help children in need as if paying back for the support she received.

The analysis confirms that the youngsters at risk of ESL share the inability to translate their aspirations into clearly defined educational and occupational goals, strategic plans or moves that would effectively influence their trajectories (Van Caudenberg et al., 2017).

Discussion and conclusions

The parabola trajectory represents a situation of youngsters confronting significant issues which gradually lower their school engagement. In the two cases presented in this article there was an experience of peer violence with no proper response and support provided by the schools to which the victims had turned for help. However, Maria and Mariola were provided with substantial emotional and instrumental support and decided to stay in education and are about to successfully complete upper secondary school despite many adversities. What distinguishes this trajectory from the downward spiral trajectory is not only the presence of support, but the youngsters' readiness to accept and benefit from it.[5] An important issue is the reflection on where the readiness and the ability to accept support comes from and how to build and support the development of this important protective factor in education. We try to answer this question below by discussing the conditions of effective support.

The two trajectory types differ also in the way of perceiving the value of education. Both females highly value education, which might be another significant protective factor (Marchlik et al., 2018). In both cases, the increasing disengagement with their schools did not lead to complete disengagement with education, as both girls continued studying in their new schools and

managed to complete ISCED 2 level of education. In the case of both males, the situation is quite different. They do not perceive education as a value in general, nor do they perceive the education as an instrumental value for their personal lives (Mickelson, 1990; Van Caudenberg et al, 2017).

As youngsters with parabola trajectories often associate school with negative experiences, it is important that educational institutions offer support to young people in an open environment, outside school. It is also very important for parabola trajectory students to be provided with flexible and alternative learning pathways (e.g. second-chance schools, schools for adults, professional courses), because youngsters often experience learning disruptions, but after receiving support or specific incentives to undertake or continue education they are willing to do so, if they still believe in the value of education in general. Financial incentives or flexible learning pathways that would enable them to work and learn could be beneficial, as these youngsters usually encounter financial difficulties.

Youngsters whose educational trajectories can be referred to as a downward spiral from the very beginning had to deal with many risk factors related to their disadvantaged background or other aspects of their functioning; for instance, behavioural issues or learning difficulties. This was the case with the two young men, Paweł and Marcin. Their school engagement gradually declined, they had serious problems with conduct and/or learning and finally stopped attending school. At some point they became completely detached from school and education in general, despite the institutional support provided. The downward spiral trajectory youngsters often lack a more comprehensive approach towards the assessment of their complex needs, including the needs of their families. Therefore, it is important that educational institutions also try to engage and support the entire family. The effective support should include working with the family from the very beginning of the child's educational trajectory (nursery, preschool) to shape positive connotations with education, institution, teachers and practices, and prevent the situation that children enter the education system already convinced that education is useless or that they are not good enough to succeed in school. This is crucial as many parents of at-risk youth have experienced educational failures themselves or have a limited access to resourceful social networks.

Additionally, to compensate for the lack of support at home, academic support schemes should be available in and outside school. As young people with downward spiral trajectories may have experienced previous failures and stigmatisation, they may fear evaluation and comparisons with peers. Therefore, they could benefit from one-on-one academic support (e.g. peer mentoring or tutoring).

What is more, young people who experienced various difficulties and failures in their school careers often receive the support they need in alternative learning arenas and programmes rather than in mainstream, public schools. That is why the existence of such a possibility is extremely important.

The main findings doubtlessly confirm the great significance of various forms of support for young people at risk of ESL and those who have already left school. The support provided by families from the earliest years is a very strong protective factor, a type of vaccine that immunises young people against unpleasant life experiences. The examples of Maria and Mariola show that also in poor families with low social and cultural capital, burdened with many problems, it is possible to create an atmosphere of trust and support for its members in difficult situations. The use of these natural, available resources, as well as the close cooperation between institutions and families and the involvement of the parents, is one of the conditions for the effectiveness of support.

The support offered to students most at risk, as presented in the cases of Marcin and Paweł, is often based on the assumption that such students present a set of 'deficits' which need to be corrected (Nada et al., 2018), and that they cannot be trusted (Kelly, 2003). However, our results show that support based on power relationships and attempts to enforce subordination have little chance of success, deepening the young people's sense of generalised distrust.

What are the other conditions which determine the effectiveness of support?

The first condition on the part of a school or another institution working with youth must be to accept and face the problem, not get rid of it. So support must be systemically guaranteed regardless of whether the young person will use it or reject it. However, this is only a prerequisite – the quality of this support and the way it will be delivered are equally important. Here comes the question of supportive adults – teachers, mentors, tutors, advisors, who, as Maria's example shows, really can reverse the young person's downward trajectory. In Werner and Smith's (1989, 1992) seminal research on high-risk Kauai children, all of the resilient children 'could point to at least one teacher who listened to them, challenged them and believed in them' (Werner, 1997: 104). But unfortunately such adults seem to be a 'limited commodity' in Polish schools, where generally the relationships between teachers and students are often far from supportive (Dudzikowa, 2008; Przewłocka, 2015) and often the only form of intervention undertaken by the school is purely disciplinary (e.g. phoning Paweł's mother each time he was absent).

Another condition would be to provide the support that answers the actual needs of the young people in question. Therefore, any support provided within institutions such as schools should be preceded by the holistic ecological assessment of the available support system in which the student at risk is embedded (Richman et al., 1998).

Szymańska (2015) following Werner and Smith (1989, 1992) lists another three important categories of protective factors related to the school environment:

1. The supportive relationship with at least one caring adult, who shows understanding and compassion, accepts the child unconditionally, and tells them that they can do something right, is crucial for healthy development and supports the learning process;
2. Positive high expectations – research shows that schools which expect all students to achieve something have the greatest success in teaching and the fewest problems with risky behaviours, such as truancy, school leaving, drug use or juvenile delinquency;
3. Opportunity for meaningful participation in various tasks and events. Schools and other educational institutions have many opportunities to give the students at risk a chance to achieve something. Fostering the experiences and feelings of belonging, experiencing care and respect from others develop the features and skills that build up resilience and facilitate the educational success of all students, including those at risk.

The conditions of effective support for youngsters at risk of ESL presented in this article are not universal recipes, because they always need to be tailored to specific contextual and institutional circumstances. However, these are important pre-conditions which should be met on the road to supporting young people and helping to reverse their trajectories of school disengagement.

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Notes

1. ISCED stands for International Standard Classification of Education, developed by UNESCO. According to the 2011 ISCED classification (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012), there are the following levels of education: ISCED 0 – early childhood education; ISCED 1 – primary education; ISCED 2 – lower secondary education; ISCED 3 – upper secondary education; ISCED 4 – post-secondary non-tertiary education; ISCED 5 – short-cycle tertiary education; ISCED 6 – Bachelor's or equivalent level; ISCED 7 – Master's or equivalent level; ISCED 8 – Doctoral or equivalent level. See: http://uis.unesco .org/sites/default/files/documents/international-standard-classification-of-education-isced-2011-en.pdf
2. The survey results are not the subject of an analysis in this text.
3. All names have been changed.
4. Youth sociotherapy centres are educational institutions for students who cannot cope with the requirements in mainstream schools and who present various challenging behaviours or emotional disorders.
5. We are aware that vast majority of studies prove that boys are more likely to be at risk of ESL or to show signs of a lack of school engagement. However, we have no basis to explicitly indicate gender differences in this area on the basis of the research presented here. Gender disparities are therefore deliberately not addressed in the analysis and conclusions.

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