



Push and pull reasons underpinning vulnerable young people's decisions regarding re-engagement with education and training

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ABSTRACT

Leaving school early is an issue of global concern and various measures have been taken to help early school leavers return to and re-engage with education and training, including second chance educational programmes. This qualitative case study explores young people's reasons for returning to school and continuing education in a second chance educational programme in a successful educational centre located in Ceuta, a Spanish city that is unique in a number of ways (i.e. geography, demography, economy, culture, etc.), and includes a high dropout rate. Our findings indicate that there is a complex interplay of personal and external (educational, family, and economic) factors pushing and pulling the participants to resume education, but that their agentic reflexivity is key in this process.

1. Introduction

The first target of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), included in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, is that: 'By 2030, ... all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes' (United Nations Resolution 70/1: *Transforming our world: The 2030*, 2015). However, in a global context, one in six (61 million) lower secondary school-age adolescents and one in three (138 million) upper secondary school-age youth do not attend school (UNESCO, 2020). A significant share of them are early school leavers (ESLs), and this is a critical problem 'because it means that a learner is "reached" but then "lost" by the education system' (UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2012), 2012, p. 32).

These 'losses' can be attributed in some part to education systems themselves, which are not achieving their goals (Lamb & Markussen, 2011). Despite improvements in participation rates before the COVID-19 pandemic, 'learning outcomes tend to be low', suggesting that 'while a growing number of children are in school, they are not necessarily learning', as required by Target 4.1 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2019), 2019, p. 3). This situation is likely to increase the number of adolescents who do not attend school, as evidence suggests that disengagement from learning, low achievement, grade retention, and failure at school are relevant risk factors for dropping out (De Witte, Cabus,

Thyssen, Groot, & van den Brink, 2013; Ripamonti, 2018).

Early school leaving (ESL) has thus been considered as one of the most serious issues for young people and their education (De Witte et al., 2013). Hence, many countries, including developed ones, have aimed to address this issue (UNESCO, 2020). A varied range of policy measures has been identified as relevant to such efforts. In addition to prevention to avoid students leaving school early and intervention when they are at risk of doing so, these measures include the educational reintegration of those who have left (UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2012), 2012).

This study aims to garner more insight into the nature of educational reintegration and thus pave the way for its improvement by identifying effective educational and organisational practices. Educational reintegration is conceived as a re-incorporation into education, through a process comprising not only of a return to, but also the re-engagement with it (see Kuschminder, 2017, 2019). Engagement is understood to mean the exercise of agency and growth regarding that agency (e.g. Kahn, 2014), which are likely to be more constrained in the case of vulnerable youth (McInerney, 2009). Such insight will thus be gained by exploring why ESLs return to and become engaged with education through a second chance programme (in particular, why they enrol and stay engaged in it), from their perspective. Thus, the current study intends to identify the reasons why ESLs decide to enter the programme, stay in, and engage in it.

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1.1. Previous research

As this study investigates the reasons leading to educational reintegration through a second chance programme, this selective literature review focuses on second chance programmes and the reasons that students engage with these programmes.

The reintegration of ESLs consists of so-called compensatory measures, which offer alternative opportunities to re-enter education and training to those who left school prematurely, with the aim of helping them re-engage in it (Council of the European Union (2011), 2011). These measures include second chance educational programmes. This scheme has spread across the world (Tukundane et al., 2015). As defined by the Council of the European Union (2011) (2011), these programmes provide learning environments that differ from mainstream schools in both their organisational and their pedagogical approaches (e.g. personalisation, small learning groups, flexible educational pathways) to respond to the specific needs of ESLs, recognise their prior learning, and support their well-being.

Although other measures (especially preventative ones) offer better results (Commission, 2011), these compensatory measures remain necessary for three main reasons. First, the number of young ESLs has not changed drastically despite prevention and intervention efforts (Polidano et al., 2015). Second, their needs are likely to remain unmet and will need to be addressed (e.g. by developing their skills or improving their well-being) (Hickey et al., 2020). Third, young people's transitions between education or training and working life tend to be complex, uncertain, and prolonged and thus involve multiple movements, making lifelong learning (a facet included in SDG 4) increasingly important (Ross & Gray, 2005).

On the other hand, little is known about why ESLs decide to continue education and re-engage with it, particularly in the context of such complex and non-linear transitions. Much research has investigated the intricate web of factors that can explain and even predict ESL (e.g. De Witte et al., 2013). Further, some research draws special attention to the 'push' and 'pull' factors that influence decisions to leave school (e.g. Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016). However, few studies have investigated the factors influencing decisions to re-enter education and re-engage with it (e.g. Espinoza, González, McGinn, & Castillo, 2020).

When investigating the factors that can explain ESL and educational re-engagement, objective and subjective factors might have been conflated in the past (e.g. Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013). According to Westaby (2005), reasons are subjective perceptions and understandings of objective factors which people use to explain their behaviour and which serve as underlying determinants of that behaviour. These subjective factors are relevant to ESL and educational re-engagement and thus need to be delineated.

Certainly, the personal reasons individuals give for leaving school early have been investigated in many studies, some of which have identified push and pull reasons (e.g. Bradley & Renzulli, 2011). There is also some evidence that the reasons why students leave school can affect the re-engagement process (e.g. Boylan & Renzulli, 2017; Espinoza et al., 2020). However, studies that have specifically focused on the reasons why ESLs return to or re-engage with education are scarce and evidence of push and pull reasons is scarcer still (see Malcolm, 2019 for a brief review). The studies of Iachini, Buettner, Anderson-Butcher, and Reno (2013) and Thomas, Dymont, Moltow, and Hay (2016) are exceptions that examine the reasons why students return and re-engage. The present study seeks to contribute to this line of research by emphasising the reflexive agency of those deciding to return to and re-engage with education and building their decisions on push and pull reasons. The relevance of agency and reflexivity in such a process has been highlighted (Ross & Gray, 2005), but it has only been examined for other youth transitions (e.g. transitions to other educational tracks or from school to work; Colombo, 2011; Grytnes, 2011; Laughland-Booij, Mayall, & Skrbis, 2015; O'Connor, 2014).

1.2. Conceptual framework

To frame our inquiry, we draw on conceptualisations of agency and reflexivity that shed light on the reasons and decisions leading youths to re-engage with education and training in a second chance educational programme. Here, we claim that the reasons grounding their decisions matter in the process of reintegration. This study seeks empirical evidence demonstrating that by making reasoned and deliberate choices, even vulnerable young people (see Section 2) are capable of being reflexive agents in their education under constraining and challenging circumstances and showing how their agentic reflexivity can be enabled.

Agency has been defined as individuals' capacity to construct their own life course through choices and actions while taking into consideration their opportunities, constraints, and other circumstances (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003). Interestingly, it has been suggested that agency embraces two potentially overlapping dimensions that do not always match each other: objective agency and subjective agency (Hitlin & Kwon, 2016; Kwon, 2017). If agency is associated with choice, the objective dimension would comprise the capacity to make choices and act in accordance with these choices in a situation or context, conditioned by the availability and use of resources (e.g. economic, cultural, social, and psychological). These resources define the set of opportunities and constraints affecting such choices and thus behaviour. In turn, the subjective dimension would refer to individuals' sense of agency or self-beliefs regarding their ability to affect those conditions and thus influence their lives.

Agency and reflexivity are intertwined (Caetano, 2014). The latter has been defined as the capacity to reflect upon ourselves, taking into consideration our circumstances (Caetano, 2014; May & Perry, 2017). This capacity and its exercise also determine the courses of action in a given social context, albeit fallibly. Courses of action and their subjective understandings are consciously and intentionally constructed repeatedly through choices when people think about themselves as situated in a context, including when being compelled to do so (and, therefore, choice is limited) (du Bois-Reymond, 1998). Increased reflexivity can thus enable and activate human agency (Caetano, 2019). Moreover, this applies not only to cases where action is a direct result of deliberate choices based on a sound rationale but also to rather usual situations, including flows of actions that are rationalised in retrospect, thereby appearing as a series of rational(ised) choices (Grytnes, 2011).

Giddens proposed one of the most detailed accounts of reflexivity (Adam, 2003), some aspects of which are directly relevant to the present study. Giddens (1979, p. 57) described the rationalisation of action as 'the capabilities of agents to "explain" why they act as they do by giving reasons for their conduct'. Thus, he characterised an agent as one that has reasons for their activities and can elaborate upon those reasons discursively (Giddens, 1984, p. 3). For him, reflexivity consists of a distinctive characteristic of human action, which is understood as routinely 'keeping in touch' with the grounds of what is done as an integral element of doing it (Giddens, 1990, p. 36). In his view, so-called 'reasons' represent such grounds (Giddens, 2007, p. 90). In more concrete terms, reasons refer to why a person primarily decides to undertake a course of action (Skakni, 2018).

Reminiscent of approaches influential in migration thinking (Myklebust, 2002), push/pull models have conceived ESL as the movement of students out of school driven by a set of push factors operating from the school itself (the 'place of origin') and pull factors operating from outside the school (the 'place of destination') (e.g. Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016). Reintegration is a reverse movement driven by push and pull factors. However, these pushes and pulls are often taken as objective structural conditions that enable or constrain the exercise of agency (Van Hear, Bakewell, & Long, 2018). Push/pull models explain the rationale behind choices and courses of action as anchored in those conditions (Lipura & Collins, 2020). This study rather focuses on how former ESLs explain their choices and actions by giving reasons regarding push and pull factors. This enables us to explore their

beliefs on constraining and enabling conditions and their ability to influence them.

2. Method

2.1. Study design

This study is part of a broader qualitative case study (see Portela, Nieto, & Torres, 2019, for additional details). It enables us to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences within real-world contexts, while emphasising the meanings attributed to these experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Although this study examines the reasons leading to re-engagement with education and training among vulnerable young people and assumes that such reasons matter to their decisions (and behaviour), its purpose is primarily exploratory, with the goal of ascertaining subjective explanations for further research (Yin, 2018).

This is a single-case study (Yin, 2018). The selected case is an educational centre (*Escuela de la Construcción*, hereinafter School of Construction) located in a context that is particularly challenging for youth (see the following section). This centre, run by the local authorities, effectively served inactive and unemployed youth and adults who were at risk of social exclusion by providing non-formal education and vocational training through a year-long second chance programme. Three rationales behind the selection of this case can be highlighted. First, it is a unique case located in a unique setting (Yin, 2018). Second, the case was critical because of its importance concerning the general problem (i.e. the nature of the educational re-engagement of vulnerable ESLs) (Yin, 2018). Plausible explanations provided by the participants for their re-engagement with education in this centre within such a context might be particularly useful to understand the phenomenon and noteworthy for further investigation (Flyvbjerg, 2013). Third, the centre was an extreme case that exemplified unusually high positive values by showing notable sustained success compared with cases of other cities (Gerring, 2017; Yin, 2018). Initially, we became aware of this success through the national media and subsequently, through initial contact with the local authorities and the centre, which also provided student performance figures.

2.2. Participants and context

The main participants were 29 students (20 males and 9 females) who were ESLs with Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEET) status before being enrolled in the programme at the School of Construction for the 2015–16 school year (hereinafter referred to as former early school leavers, or FESLS). As per the Council of the European Union (2011) (2011) definition of ESL and its implementation by Eurostat and Spain's National Statistics Institute, students that were classified as ESLs were those aged 18 to 24 who had not completed upper-secondary education and who had not pursued any type of education or training in the four weeks preceding the start of the centre's programme, according to the information available from the centre and the students themselves. As per Eurostat and Spain's National Statistics Institute's definition of NEET status (Eurostat, 2021b), they were not involved in either education or training but also unemployed or inactive in the four weeks preceding the start of the centre's programme. Data were also gathered from 10 students (5 males and 5 females) who were non-early school leavers (N-ESLs), including some with NEET status. Data for this latter group were included to compare their viewpoints with those of the FESLS to identify commonalities and differences and thus triangulate and validate their responses (Flick, 2019). Moreover, the sum of FESLS and N-ESLs represented all the students (aged 18 to 24) who were enrolled at the centre in the above-mentioned school year when the fieldwork was conducted. Interestingly, all the participants were assessed by the unit in charge as economically and socially vulnerable and at risk of social exclusion, this being the essential requirement to be enrolled in the centre.

Moreover, they all lived in a particularly challenging Spanish city, the Autonomous City of Ceuta (an administrative unit on par with other regions in mainland Spain), a small Spanish exclave located on the North African coast. It has been, and remains, among the territorial units with the highest rates of ESL in the European Union, as illustrated in Table 1 (Eurostat, 2021a).

2.3. Data collection

The data were primarily collected through individual in-depth, semi-structured interviews. A small set of core questions was developed by drawing on those used by Mills, McGregor, and Hayes (2015, p. 156) and Smyth and Robinson (2015, p. 223), as follows:

- What was your history before coming to this centre?
- What would you emphasise about your time here? What have been the most important aspects for you and why?
- How do you see your future while attending the centre and when you leave it?

In addition to these broader questions, the interviewers used a range of standard probes and other follow-up questions to explore the participants' meanings and answers that emerged from the conversation between the interviewer and interviewee. These questions included, where necessary, the specific reasons for their re-engagement (i.e. justification for their decisions and actions in this regard). With these questions, we sought to obtain comprehensive and accurate information according to the perspective of each participant (Patton, 2015).

A total of 60 interviews, ranging from 30 to 90 min (average: 66 min), were conducted in two rounds at the same site in January and May 2016. A total of 39 participants were included in the first round of interviews. From these, 21 participated in the second round of interviews (10 students were absent and 8 had left the school due to reasons other than the programme, according to their teachers or the Director). These follow-up interviews, drawing on a preliminary analysis of the data gathered in the first round, contributed to validation by eliciting participant checking and feedback (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and to the generation of new insights (Flick, 2019). All the interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed verbatim; the transcripts were validated by relistening to the recordings. Verbal and written informed consent were obtained from each participant prior to the commencement of the fieldwork. The participants were also given guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity in the processing and use of the information. Ethics clearance was obtained from the Institute for Studies on Ceuta, which is associated with the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC) (approval letter dated 19 July 2016).

2.4. Data analysis

Data analysis was informed by the grounded theory approach, which is a method of developing theoretical understandings through the examination of successive waves of qualitative data and testing and construction of the emerging theory as it evolves by applying codes to such data through a series of cumulative coding stages (while writing analytic memos) (Saldana, 2021; Willis, 2007). Using the ATLAS.ti Version 7.0

Table 1

Rates of ESLs in Ceuta and the position among the EU territorial units (NUTS 2 regions).

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Rates of ESLs in Ceuta (ages: 18–24)	29.8 %	21.5 %	20.1 %	23.4 %	24.7 %	25.5 %
Position among the EU units	2nd in the EU	13th in the EU	17th in the EU	6th in the EU	4th in the EU	3rd in the EU

Software, our analysis was performed via the following stages (e.g. Creswell & Poth, 2018):

- Broad areas or issues to be investigated were identified through four informal focus groups (Maxwell, 2013). These themes and the questions used by Mills et al. (2015) and Smyth and Robinson (2015) (see above) informed the interview guide.
- After completing the first round of interviews, data collected from them were triangulated with those gathered from the focus groups (Flick, 2019) and an initial set of substantive (i.e. mainly descriptive) codes was developed, which was the result of an axial coding process built on open coding. The research team cross-checked these codes and a combined, slightly modified set was generated (Thomas, 2006). A representation of this system of codes was then displayed in a diagram to be used in the second round of interviews to facilitate checking and feedback from the participants and to collect new insights.
- After the second round of interviews, a new version of the system was completed by identifying and selecting central categories as instruments for the integration of other major categories. These categories were identified and triangulated across the team (Thomas, 2006). These analyses were also set in dialogue with the theoretical approaches from the literature in an iterative approach (Tracy, 2020).

3. Results

The following results primarily refer to the patterns identified in the data. However, some findings that differ from these patterns are also included, as identifying evidence lying outside the patterns contributes to validation by providing a more realistic assessment of the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The results predominantly correspond to FESLs, although attention is sometimes directed to their similarities and differences with N-ESLs.

The results are reported following a chronological sequence progressing from those drawing on data concerning the participants' reasons for entering the centre to those concerning the participants' reasons for staying and re-engaging with education and training. Our reporting also distinguishes between the reasons associated with education and training (and the centre providing it) and those associated with other life issues (e.g. economic status, employment situation, family context, and interpersonal and personal situations). The results are presented through narrative descriptions accompanied by illustrative verbatim quotations (FESLs' quotations, unless stated otherwise).

3.1. Students' reasons for enrolling at the school of construction

Education and training. Interestingly, the most common reasons why the participants decided to enter this second chance educational programme emphasised education and training, with 21 out of the 29 FESLs citing such reasons. Most of the N-ESLs (8 out of 10) also cited these reasons.

A notable number of FESLs highlighted the centre's expected contribution to their learning, especially learning a trade: 'You are acquainted with a trade. They teach you a trade that was unknown to you.' Some participants emphasised that, in general, they expected the centre to remedy their lack of education and training or even to broaden or complete it. In addition, a large number of FESLs (18 out of 29) highlighted the importance of the programme completion certificate awarded by the centre, which was equated with a qualification:

- 'I also thought that it was about time to gain a qualification.'
- 'The qualification is the most important thing for me.'
- 'I intended to complete ESO [Spanish lower secondary education], but I did not want to miss the opportunity to gain a qualification.'

Employment and economic situation. Several FESLs and N-ESLs cited reasons pertaining to their labour force status and economic situation, which are closely related. Most of the FESLs and N-ESLs identified general inactivity as their main reason for entering the centre. However, this reason was often related to another: the belief that joining the centre's programme would improve their uncertain employment prospects. In particular, the links between the programme, the institution running it, and the associated completion certificate were often expected to help them find a job.

Similarly to other second chance schools (Dinan, 2019), the School of Construction combined human capital incentives (i.e. increase in skills and qualifications) with both a positive and a negative financial incentive in the form of a modest targeted grant that would be removed if attendance was irregular or interrupted (unless justified). Several students emphasised the importance of this support due to low incomes and a lack of resources caused primarily by unemployment that affected most or all their family members. Although the participants referred to these grants as an incentive ('The grant attracts you at the outset'), most stressed that they and their families needed it ('[It] is not too much, but we have a need for it').

Influence of external agents and students as agents. The third set of reasons included the influence of significant external agents such as parents, friends, and professional personnel on the FESLs and N-ESLs and their return to education and training. Families, mainly parents, had an influence, although it was sometimes limited. Some FESLs enrolled at the centre partly because they were trying to meet family demands ('My family told me: "Study..." and so on. This is my case'), or were even trying to fulfil their families' wishes ('Part of my motivation came from my family. They were happy for me to come to this school'). A few FESLs also highlighted that their parents supported their decision ('They supported me'). Second, recommendations from other agents such as relatives, teachers, other professionals, and friends were considered as especially important. These recommendations included the explicit suggestion to join the centre ('My cousin who was already enrolled told me that I could enrol'), deliberately foregrounding certain beneficial aspects or the beneficial character of the centre and its programme. Interestingly, those aspects often matched the reasons mentioned above (learning, the practical programme, the completion certificate, employment prospects, and the grant). Third, some FESLs also enrolled in the centre because they were referred to it by professionals ('They enrolled me while I was at the correctional centre').

Despite this network of external influences, a notable number of the participants (16 FESLs and six N-ESLs) also explained that they joined the centre because it was what they wanted and decided to do:

- '[Although] I entered on my own, they told me: "Do it, do it."'
- 'I told myself: "I will enrol and go." That is what I did, and what encouraged me to come.'
- 'I did it because I wanted to. I... decided... not my family.'
- 'I made the decision. I needed something more motivating.' (N-ESL)

3.2. Students' reasons for staying at the school and re-engaging with education and training

Education and training. The FESLs again cited education and training as the reasons for their sustained involvement and engagement; in addition, some identified further (and more specific) explanatory aspects. Interestingly, the number of FESLs that used general explanations, such as their aims to remedy their lack of education and training or to broaden or complete it, decreased as more students identified specific aspects. For instance, there was an increase in the number of FESLs that highlighted learning and knowledge acquisition as their reasons for staying and engaging with education and training. Moreover, a wider variety of these aspects was cited, including the usefulness of learning, overall quality of teaching (emphasising adaptations in teaching practice and evaluation), and perceived tangible achievements attributable

to learning and education (e.g. installing an air conditioning unit or tiling a bathroom). These patterns were also identified among the N-ESLs.

A major educational aspect highlighted by all the students in the study was positive relationships. Overall, no remarkable difference was observed among the FESLs and N-ESLs (although we focused our attention on the former).

All the participants foregrounded their positive relationships with their educators. Some did this by referring to them as 'good' relationships, although they were also characterised in terms of more specific features such as 'understanding', 'respect', 'helpfulness', 'support', 'interest', 'care', 'kindness', 'closeness', 'humour', 'dialogue', 'flexibility', 'encouragement', and the 'absence of conflicts'. Quality relationships were often linked to the personal qualities of the educators: 'Good' relationships among 'good' people were highlighted and 'understanding' by an 'understanding' educator was considered as a reason for sustained involvement and engagement in second chance education. Mothers and friends were often used as metaphors to describe the nature of these relationships ('The educator is like a mother. She worries about you [and] attempts to move us forward'). Importantly, the participants considered these relationships as crucial for their education and learning: 'Our teacher... he is [expletive] great, if I am allowed to say that. He is the best. He explains things. He is a good person. (...). They talk with you, give you chances... help you with any problems.'

The participants also referenced the importance of their peer relationships. The students noted their involvement in positive peer relationships as another important reason to stay at the centre and engage in educational activities. Establishing new relationships in the new environment was often particularly valued by the participants.

Employment and economic situation. The reasons given to explain continued attendance at the centre were similar to those for enrolling, but they were cited less frequently. Some FESLs stated that they continued with the programme because they could avoid inactivity and unemployment that way. Moreover, they somewhat associated inactivity with an opportunity cost that would be incurred if they decided to stop attending, which they viewed as beneficial: 'Because I have nothing else... and... I would be wasting my time. What is better than being here and learning and so on?' On the other hand, some students continued in the programme due to the belief that they would be more able to enter the labour market, which was considered as conditional on gaining an appropriate qualification ('With that qualification, I will have a better chance of being [employed]'), and, to a lesser extent, other aspects such as their achievements ('[If] I work hard, study, and have better grades, they will pull [hire] me'), or assistance from the centre (e.g. employer contacts).

Most participants (22 FESLs and eight N-ESLs) expressed that they would leave the centre if they were offered a job: this was the primary reason given to explain an eventual decision to leave (the only exception to this was severe family or personal problems, given as additional potential reasons to leave by three FESLs). These participants further justified their departure due to accepting a job offer by invoking (greater) necessity ('If I were offered a job, I would take the job because I need it more'). Necessity was also given as a reason by three FESLs to explain the importance of the grant in their decision to continue to attend the centre. This grant was still an influential reason for seven FESLs and five N-ESLs.

Family and personal reasons. The importance of family influence regarding the centre and its programme was less influential for the participants' decisions to continue with education than when deciding to enter. Only six participants (five FESLs and one N-ESL) mentioned this influence on their decisions to stay. In addition, there was no particular variation in the characteristics of that influence. On the other hand, the influence of external recommendations decreased even more: only one participant (an FESL) emphasised recommendations as a reason for remaining in the centre (i.e. the recommendations of former students).

However, personal reasons became more important. A significant

number of participants (15 FESLs and five N-ESLs) used their personal well-being to explain why they stayed in the centre and re-engaged with education and training. For instance, some of them expressed that they felt good, were at ease, or even felt happy:

- 'I feel good. This is one of the things I like most.'
- 'You are well here, you are at ease, and this encourages you to come' (N-ESL).
- 'I get up happy, and I only want to come here.'

Some FESLs added that their life in the centre served to distance them from external problems ('When I work [here], [the problems] go away... I forget all my problems') and from the environments where those problems were experienced ('...and this [helps you] steer clear of problems'). Some FESLs also highlighted that they were increasingly able to keep calm and felt more settled.

On the other hand, nine FESLs and six N-ESLs expressed that their stay at the centre and, particularly, their re-engagement with educational activities was based on their ongoing willingness and motivation, rather than on a single decision:

- 'We come willingly. This is what gives you the strength to come.'
- 'I come motivated.'
- 'Now, I am very willing to study. (...). You are looking forward to starting again if something comes up.'
- 'The truth is that I never tire of coming. It's true: I never tire of coming. Sometimes you get lazy or you are disoriented, but I never tire of coming' (N-ESL)

Such willingness and motivation were attributed to the activities ('I love the work. This is why I willingly come here'; N-ESL) and their educators ('The teachers give you motivation.'). Nine FESLs highlighted the importance of being busy and, especially, entertained: 'Every day you do something, learn, and are entertained.' However, being occupied alone was insufficient. To be entertained, these participants also highlighted the importance of doing tasks that they perceived as changing or novel: 'This is not routine. (...). This is not monotonous. That's good, for me at least.' Further, a recurrent theme was the importance of sharing work with other people in the centre, which was more entertaining: 'We have a good time'; 'We enjoy it.' Thus, personal well-being was necessary to be willing, motivated, and engaged; in turn, this well-being generated sustained willingness, motivation, and engagement. A network of positive relationships was pivotal in the context of personal well-being and involvement.

4. Discussion

Our results indicate that after leaving school, vulnerable young people, especially ESLs, concluded that they are being pushed out of a situation and, in turn, identified factors pulling them back towards education and training. In particular, the main factor pushing them out of their challenging environment towards education and training was unemployment and inactivity. Families sometimes intensified this push ('My mother told me that I should go out from home and study if I am not able to find a job'). This push coalesced with the pull exerted by the second chance centre and its educational programme. Two major aspects were especially highlighted as exerting a pulling influence towards the centre: learning (in line with Thomas et al., 2016) and, to a slightly larger extent, qualifications. Moreover, recommendations from family members, relatives, teachers, and friends underscored the importance of such aspects and thus intensified the pull exerted by the centre and its programme, a finding in line with previous evidence (Higgins, 2013; Thomas et al., 2016). Such recommendations sometimes came from relatives and friends who had been former students of the centre and had conveyed their experiences. The grant associated with attending the centre also exerted a pulling influence, particularly when the

participants were driven (pushed) by lack and necessity, in line with other findings (Haywood, Walker, O'Toole, Hewitson, Pugh, & Sundaram, 2009).

After enrolling at the centre, a noteworthy change could be seen in the participants' situations. The threat of returning to inactivity continued to exert a pushing influence, too: their continued attendance at the centre allowed them to avoid the cycle of inactivity and an opportunity cost was attributable to leaving it. However, this was not their main reason for staying at the centre. In contrast to situations in which schools push students out, the new environment exerted an influence that pulled participants in (see Mireles-Rios, Rios, Auldridge-Reveles, Monroy, & Castro, 2020, p. 16). Smyth and McInerney (2013) foregrounded the importance of resuming education under a different set of conditions from those that exiled young people from mainstream schools. The set of conditions identified in our study are in line with those identified in the literature on so-called alternative education or flexible learning (e.g. Rajasekaran & Reyes, 2019): high-quality teaching that is adapted to the returning students' needs and realities; the incorporation of practice and promotion of usefulness, meaningful learning, and concrete achievements (over and above certified qualifications); evolving interest; and, in general, the development of their education. Such conditions are also in line with those highlighted in some transformative pedagogies that are linked with alternative education (e.g. Smyth, McInerney, & Fish, 2013; see also Hempel-Jorgensen, 2015; Jóhannesson & Bjarnadóttir, 2016). These conditions include building identities as confident and successful learners, together with close positive relationships, that affect both their behaviour and identity (i.e. these lead not only to 'good' relationships, but also to 'good' people – as stated by some participants –, which have equally been emphasised in other literature) (Higgins, 2013; Morgan, Pendergast, Brown, & Heck, 2015). It might be said that the students pulled themselves together in the centre. In this context, there seems to be only one aspect powerful enough to push them out of this environment: a job. An eventual job offer was the major reason for which the participants stated that they would have to leave the centre and its programme out of necessity because of their vulnerable position. Other references to actual or potential internal or external obstacles thwarting the re-engagement process at the centre were almost absent.

Theories on school dropout often assume that students leave school prematurely when, on the one hand, the school discourages them to stay (i.e. the incentives are weak) and even forces them out, while, on the other hand, there are incentives to leave (e.g. Dowrick & Back, 2014). These assumptions might be extended to those returning to education when they are in a challenging situation of vulnerability: on the one hand, this situation discourages them from remaining in it and, further, forces them out of it, while, on the other hand, they may find incentives in re-entering education. In this scenario, agency becomes blurred.

However, the participants' agency did not disappear despite influences pushing and pulling them in the context of the constraining and challenging situations that they faced, and reflexivity can be viewed as 'a fundamental intermediary element' between such influences on one side and agency on the other (Tomassini, 2016, p. 187). On the one hand, several participants explained their choices to enter the centre as being based on their own decisions, while recognising other influences. Iachini et al. (2013) referred to this as 'self-determined motivation' and 'self-determined reasons' (p. 117). On the other hand, some participants explained their decision to stay at the centre and re-engage with its programme on the grounds of increasing steady willingness and motivation. Thus, it might be expressed that these participants pulled themselves into the centre and even out of their everyday life environment through a strengthened and sustained willingness and motivation. This illustrates that influences intertwine with agency through reflexivity. Willingness and motivation are conditional on a sense of well-being; that is, experiencing well-being is influential in enhancing willingness and motivation—in its absence, these feelings would be unlikely. Importantly, performing relevant tasks and activities in the

context of positive relationships and learning from them nurtured well-being and motivation.

5. Conclusion

This study took for granted that certain factors and beliefs affected FESLs' (and N-ESLs') decisions and behaviours regarding resuming education; it therefore aimed to enquire about those beliefs and their influence on decisions and behaviour. Studies on the agentic reflexivity of young ESLs and, specifically, their reasons for returning to and re-engaging with education are somewhat limited, with even fewer studies drawing on a push/pull model. Our findings suggest that this framework can be applied to the re-engagement process and, hence, we interpret them accordingly, resulting in further insights.

In addition, our results suggest that compensatory measures to tackle ESL are likely to remain beneficial in the future and that certain educational practices are decisive for their success, in line with other studies (see Section 4). Nevertheless, our results suggest that these measures should also consider the interplay of aspects affecting ESLs and, especially, the return to education. Further, compensatory measures should develop (and not curtail) agency and reflexivity among young people since measures drawing on best practices in alternative education might not be successful if young people's agentic reflexivity and the conditions under which it must be exercised are not considered. These findings can benefit a considerable number of youths who have been lost by education systems before completing their quality secondary education by informing the design, management, and implementation of their educational reintegration.

Case studies are limited in that their conclusions are exploratory and contextual; nevertheless, they can be of value for providing general explanations and theoretical ideas that can be tested in subsequent research (Gorard, 2013). Case studies can shed light on how and why a programme is more effective and, hence, be useful in suggesting new avenues of change (Yin, 2018). This study contributes to these research directions. However, it has some limitations and merits further work in at least three areas: including more young people and even adults, thus allowing more perspectives to be compared; expanding the research to other contexts; and following up over time.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

A. Portela-Pruaño: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Funding acquisition. **M.J. Rodríguez-Entrena:** Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **A. Torres-Soto:** Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing. **J.M. Nieto-Cano:** Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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