Engaging at-risk youth through self-directed learning

Coinvolgere i giovani a rischio con l'apprendimento auto-diretto

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ABSTRACT The large number of young people in Europe who lack formal qualifications constitutes a considerable concern in terms of individual, social and economic consequences. The influx of young migrants into Europe is making this issue even more significant. To avoid social exclusion and youth unemployment, and to ensure economic progress, the European Union (EU) and national governments are providing a variety of educational opportunities for these young people. As traditional approaches have not proved particularly successful, an alternative approach has been developed that seems to overcome previous limitations. This approach is characterized by a focus on learners' agency and identity, and offers young at-risk learners a different, more intrinsically motivating learning experience. The approach was implemented in 12 pilots in six different European countries, including several with migrant youth from different regions of the world. The main result presented here is a comprehensive design framework developed on the basis of a cross-case analysis. The framework includes design principles concerning the organization, as well as the pedagogy, of engaging at-risk youth.

KEYWORDS At-risk youth, Marginalized youth, Disadvantaged youth, Self-directed learning, Engagement, Activation, Self-regulated learning.

SOMMARIO In Europa, il considerevole numero di giovani sprovvisti di qualifiche formali sta destando notevole preoccupazione a causa delle possibili conseguenze individuali, economiche e sociali. L'afflusso di giovani immigrati in Europa rende il problema ancor più pressante. Al fine di evitare l'esclusione sociale, la disoccupazione giovanile e garantire il progresso economico, l'Unione Europea e i governi delle sue nazioni offrono a questi giovani una varietà di opportunità di istruzione/educative. Gli approcci fin qui adottati non hanno dato esito positivo e per questa ragione ne è stato sviluppato uno alternativo, che sembra meglio affrontare gli aspetti critici del tradizionale modo di operare. Questo approccio è caratterizzato da una particolare attenzione all'iniziativa e all'identità dello studente, e offre ai giovani studenti a rischio una esperienza di apprendimento differente, più intrinsecamente motivante. L'approccio in esame è stato adottato in 12 sperimentazioni pilota, in sei differenti paesi europei, coinvolgendo diversi giovani migranti provenienti da differenti parti del mondo. Il risultato principale qui presentato è un quadro progettuale completo, sviluppato sulla base di una analisi incrociata dei casi. Il quadro include i principi di progettazione in materia di organizzazione, così come i criteri pedagogici da impiegarsi con i giovani a rischio.

PAROLE CHIAVE Giovani a rischio, Giovani marginalizzati, Giovani svantaggiati, Modello progettuale, Apprendimento auto-diretto, Coinvolgimento, Attivazione, Auto-regolazione dell'apprendimento.

1. INTRODUCTION

The recent global economic crisis has provided an impetus for various policies and programs that support social inclusion, to provide the right conditions for active engagement with lifelong learning and offer employment opportunities. A considerable concern are 'youth at risk' (also called 'youth left behind', 'marginalized youth', or 'disadvantaged youth'), which OECD identifies as «*young people who have several disadvantages, including the lack of a diploma, an immigrant/minority background, residence in disadvantaged, rural, or remote areas, teenage motherhood, and a prison or foster-care background*» (OECD, 2012, p. 66).

Young migrants, especially those from poor socio-economic backgrounds, often have poor foundational skills, which prevents them from actively, effectively, and productively participating in society. They lack valuable social networks and cannot rely on a financial safety net or (academically) supportive family members, making them risk-averse and not choosing for formal higher education (Werfhorst, 2009). Language barriers, as well as discrimination, missing family members, poor financial conditions, and cultural differences contribute to the risk of leading a marginalized and insecure life, dependent on public welfare (Pohl & Walther, 2007). Family mobility is also linked to poor academic development: children who experience multiple transitional moves have more difficulty in adjusting academically, socially, and emotionally to a new school environment (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Migrant children, both first and second generation, face higher risks of dropping out of formal or non-formal education (Belfield & Levin, 2007; EC, 2011; Quintini & Martin, 2006), and migrant youth are more frequently affected by youth unemployment than native youth (Walther et al., 2005).

1.1. *Engaging At-risk Youth*

Disengagement is considered the primary predictor for students dropping out, both in formal and non-formal education (Furlong & Christenson, 2008; Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992; Steinberg, Brown, & Dornbusch, 1996; Taylor & Parsons, 2011).

Negative educational experiences create an attitude that discourages individuals to take risk and take responsibility for one's life. The unemployable tend to lack initiative and approach tasks passively, and are particularly in need for skills that allow them to become self-sufficient (Janosz, Leblanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 1997). A key challenge in empowering at-risk youth is therefore increasing the level of agency of the individual, which relates to i) the subjective incentive of a motive resulting from interest or need and ii) the subjective expectation to achieve this goal by one's own action, that is the feeling of control and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982).

1.2. *Disengagement Among Immigrant Youth*

Engaging disengaged students constitutes a central objective in recent educational policies and programs to «*re-engage or reclaim a minority of predominantly socio-economically disadvantaged students at risk of dropping out*» as well as to «*enhance <u>all</u> students' abilities to learn how to learn or to become lifelong learners in a knowledge-based society*» (Taylor & Parsons, 2011, p. 4). Factors that lead to disengagement at school include «*personal and family issues, including conflict, violence and abuse; high family mobility requiring lots of fresh starts; family history of negative experiences with school; lack of transport; parents with physical or mental illness or drug related issues; financial pressures; trouble managing work and school; drug and alcohol issues; and mental health issues*» (Butler, Bond, Drew, Krelle, & Seal, 2005, p. 9). Janosz et al. (1997) ascribe a higher risk of dropping out for boys and students from ethnic minorities and low-SES (socio-economic status) with structural disadvantage (i.e., single-parent family, parents with a low level of education, large family size, other dropouts in the family, etc.) and families «*characterized by a lack of supervision, a permissive parenting style, poor aspirations regarding the schooling of their kids, and negative reactions to school underachievement*» (Janosz et al., 1997, p. 734).

Young people from migrant communities are more likely to experience language difficulties, instability in

housing, prejudice, discrimination and segregation (Nevala et al., 2011). They often feel isolated within school and demonstrate a lack of motivation. They can also bring with them cultural or educational processes of their countries of origin, which would require them to reorient and adjust to local practice and expectations. The demands on these young people can significantly impede the learning process (ibid). Eurostat data indicate that early-school leave (ESL) is twice as high for first generation migrant (non-EU) students than for native students (19,8 % vs. 10.1 % in 2015) (Eurostat, 2016).

Current activation programs, primarily non-formal VET programs (*vocational education and training*) attend to this issue with a range of measures (trainee contracts, job opportunities, qualifications and direct payment, for example). In addition to extrinsic 'carrots and sticks', programs commonly address individual circumstances, such as family or psychological issues, and offer personalized guidance and counseling (EC, 2011; Pohl & Walther, 2007). However, few programs attend to the intrinsic motivation to learn, and motivational strategies are often focused on what can be expected from attending or completing a program (positive as well as negative), rather than personal enjoyment or fulfillment of being engaged in learning (Day, Mozuraityte, Redgrave, & McCoshan, 2013; OECD, 2000). The learning itself is not understood as motivating, it is a means to an end. Intrinsic motivation is greater when individuals feel personally involved in tasks that include interaction with others in a social environment and they find relevant and meaningful (Ryan & Deci, 2000a, 2000b). It needs to be addressed to empower young migrants to adapt to new conditions in social and professional life.

1.3. *About the reAct project*

To address the diversity of problems and issues underlying early-school leave (ELS) and youth unemployment, a range of social, youth, family, health, local community, employment, and education policies are being developed (EC, 2011). Tackling these problems is high on the political agenda, as reflected in the Europe 2020 flagship initiatives *'Youth on the Move'* and *'Agenda for New Skills and Jobs'*.

Given the problems and opportunities described above, in 2008 a consortium was formed, with partners from Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Austria, and the Netherlands, with the aim of developing a contemporary approach that focused on (re)-activating disengaged at-risk youth in different formal and non-formal educational contexts (reAct, 2010). The three-year project (2009-2012) with the acronym 'reAct' (re-activating teachers and learners), focused on multiple objectives, most importantly the design and implementation of a contemporary pedagogical approach that taps into intrinsic motivation to learn. Furthermore, the approach was supposed to address employability and opportunities to participate in society by connecting to lifelong learning practices and addressing relevant learning skills; e.g. focused on empowering migrant youth in taking responsibility for their own lives and labor market value (Pohl & Walther, 2007). Thirdly, there was a particular interest in the use of web-technologies, and their potential to facilitate the implementation of the pedagogical approach. The objective was to find out if Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and in particular so-called Web 2.0 tools, would facilitate students in more creative learning processes, in collaboration, and in self-organization. One of the project's work packages was to develop a Toolbox describing various freely available tools with respect to the learning process. Finally, the approach was supposed to enable implementation within different institutional and organizational contexts, and acknowledge the diversity in skills and backgrounds among the target population of students and teachers.

2. RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

The reAct project was implemented in six countries, across a variety of formal and non-formal educational contexts, such as migrant, second-chance and dropout/re-integration educational programs as well as job-placement and re-training. In each of the partner countries we organized two consecutive pilots, each

lasting one semester (approx 5 months), with approximately 20-30 students per pilot, and 3-6 teachers. Neither teachers or students were experienced in using ICT in the classroom, nor were they used to the proposed pedagogical principles of self-guidance. The student-participants (aged 15 -28 years) were at-risk youth from different backgrounds and with varying learning objectives and needs. In one of the pilots, a group consisting entirely of migrant learners participated, while in three other pilots a significant portion of students were first or second generation migrant. This paper highlights the outcomes of the pilot study that involved only migrant students, followed by a description of the pedagogical design framework. The framework, which can be read in Hennis (2016), is purposefully generic and focused on implementing a pedagogy that is centered around principles of self-expression, collaboration, creativity and self-guidance in a variety of non-formal educational contexts. To be clear; its value is not that it focuses on one particular target group. Rather, being a holistic design-framework, is supposed to facilitate educators across a variety of contexts in devising an institutional strategy and pedagogical approach based on these principles. Below, we explain how we developed the original reAct framework that was implemented in the various pilots.

2.1. *The reAct Framework*

To construct the original reAct framework, we used Illeris conceptualization of learning (2003), which describes every learning activity as an acquisition process as well as an interactive process between individual and environment. The acquisition process is the psychological processing, the internalization of the content following internal impulses to do so: it links an *incentive dimension* with the *content dimension*. The interaction process takes the notion that all learning is situated, which has significant influence on what is being learned, and how it is learned: it puts the individual in an environment (*social* and *societal*). All learning always includes three dimensions – the cognitive dimension of knowledge and skills (*content*), the emotional dimension of feelings and motivation (*incentive*) and the social dimension of communication and cooperation (*social*) – all of which are embedded in a societally situated context (*societal*) (Illeris, 2003; 2007). We took principles derived from our literature review, stakeholder analysis, and exemplary initiatives and placed them within these three dimensions, as depicted below.
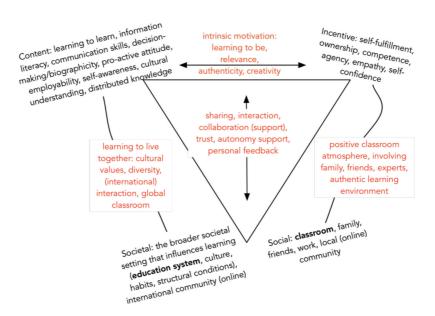

Figure 1. Principles in the context of Illeris' content-incentive-environment dimensions (2007).

2.2. *Pilot organization*

All pilots were organized according to a pre-established plan, consisting of a Teacher Training, Familiarization phase, International project, Local project, and Local Integration. Only minor adaptations to this plan were made between the two rounds of pilots. Teacher training, involving only the teachers, was focused on getting used to the ICT tools, and preparing learning activities based on the initial set of pedagogical principles (including collaboration, creativity, self-guidance, and relevance). During the familiarization phase, students were introduced to the reAct approach, the toolbox, and participated in various learning activities, some focused on international exchange of ideas and interests. The familiarization phase prepared students for the next phase, which was the international (student) project, whereby students, often in groups, were allowed to start and execute a personally relevant (student) project. The local project phase was similar, but was focused on local collaboration. In some pilots, teachers offered more structure and guidance in choosing topics for these projects, often reflecting curriculum themes. The final phase was a reflection phase, and consisted of integrating activities and principles into the curriculum and teaching practice. Figure 2 below illustrates the project organization. A detailed description of the pedagogical approach, ICT Toolbox, and case studies can be found in Hennis (2016). As a practical guide and to ensure comparability of the cases, we developed and proposed a set of suggestions for the teaching and learning methods adopted by teachers, as well as an implementation guide that described the various phases in the project (reAct, 2011).
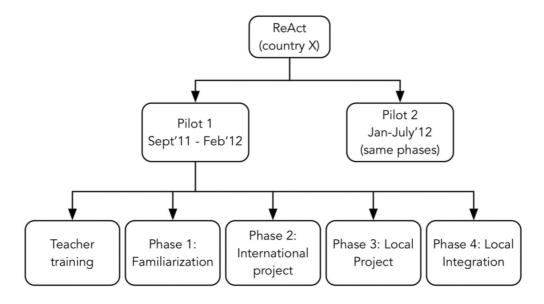

Figure 2. Pilot organization, repeated for six countries (total: twelve pilots).

2.3. *Evaluation Framework*

A comprehensive evaluation framework was made for all partners with the objective of collecting comparable data about the implementation of reAct. In addition to specifications of the instruments and data collection protocols (in particular for interviews), the plan included a clear planning when data had to be collected. The instruments included three student-questionnaires per pilot (addressing perceived engagement, enjoyment, usefulness throughout the pilot), three teacher questionnaires (teacher experiences, only second pilot), several student interviews, teacher interviews, and log books with data about the progress of students, types of projects, tools used, and perceived difficulties. Moreover, we analyzed various other

data sources, such as the student projects, the project's wiki, and several Facebook groups (conversations and content).

Based on a pre-defined template, partners collected data and made two implementation reports (one per pilot) and a comprehensive country report that reflected on the entire experience. The original data as well as these reports were used to develop the case studies (eight in total). A cross-case comparison was done to develop the final framework that is presented in this paper. To highlight the implementation of the original framework in a class of immigrant teenagers, we include one case study, which is the second pilot in the Netherlands (NL2).

3. NL2: CASE STUDY

Before we present the resulting framework, we summarize the second pilot in the Netherlands, which was conducted with a group of 15 migrant youth (mostly refugees and economic migrants) with an age between 15 and 18 years old, who had arrived 6 to 12 months previously. The cohort in our pilot consisted of students who had failed to progress fast enough to enroll in the regular educational track, which explains their lack of engagement and motivation, and lack of self-confidence. On the other hand, the students were ambitious and appeared extrinsically motivated to participate in education.

Most students had personal issues and a challenging home situation: some had lived through traumatic experiences, were without family, or faced extradition to their native country. At home, parents or caretakers could offer only limited support at best, due to language barriers or absence.

The teachers, all regular 'formal education' teachers with limited background in teaching migrants, were enthusiastic to implement the reAct framework, with its focus on self-guidance and creativity, and the use of ICT, as they expected that it would be a more motivating alternative to regular teaching, and would enable them to use their own language in their personal student projects, which could lead to improved self-confidence.

3.1. *Implementation of the reAct framework and pilot outcomes*

Rather than following the regular program and topics, students were asked to propose and investigate topics of their own liking. This new responsibility, of designing one's own education, was a considerable challenge for students: many, especially those with little self-confidence, were hesitant to come up with suggestions or ideas for personal projects. Throughout the pilot, students appeared to be strongly driven by a desire to fit in, and to be recognized by peers and teachers. This was an issue, as students frequently made comparisons between the reAct activities ('occupational therapy' as some called it) to the 'real education' received by their peers in other cohorts. Class sentiment and cohesion, which went up and down during the pilot, seemed to correlate with student engagement. Various students were from countries with a hierarchical teaching culture, and they had considerable difficulty adjusting to the responsibilities and challenges of self-guidance and collaboration. At the same time, the language barrier made facilitating and motivating students more difficult for teachers: the learning objectives of the reAct approach were considered less straightforward and more difficult to explain than 'regular learning objectives'. A lack of ICT skills, information literacy, project management, and collaboration skills, further inhibited progress and deeper learning. With a large variety of student projects, teachers found it hard to keep an overview and give personal support to each student.

There were a few organizational issues. A late start, and limited time for preparation, sometimes resulted in ill-prepared activities, which some students perceived as chaotic, ad-hoc, and inconsistent. Teachers failed to be clear to students about what was to be expected from the learning process and what their role

and responsibilities were. Another point of attention was the limited time per week allocated for the reAct project: approximately 4 hours per week appeared to be insufficient for the kind of deeper engagement that was desired and required for effective participation, to finish student projects, or to engage in meaningful reflection. The implementation of the reAct framework was done across various moments in the week, and students followed the formal educational track during the other hours. This dispersion of activities and attention caused disengagement.

Moreover, the sessions in the ICT lab, during which students were able to work on their projects using the schools' computers, were highly inefficient: logging into the computers took a long time, getting started was difficult and maintaining focus was considered hard (students were allowed to use Facebook and YouTube for their student projects). ICT proved to distract many students, except those with clear (personal) project objectives. Students were most comfortable using their mobile device, which they used for interacting with peers, and making pictures and videos for their project. Other than that, information literacy was low and ICT skills generally very limited, and this was often exacerbated by weak proficiency in English. They were generally unorganized and even simple tasks proved to be difficult for some (e.g., finding relevant information online, registering for an online tool or logging in). Email inboxes were a mess and often teachers' emails went into the archive without ever being read (Facebook Groups was a more effective method to communicate with students). Teachers had difficulties explaining how ICT could play a meaningful role in student projects.

Despite these challenges, the overall reAct experience was positive. Importantly, it created stronger ties and more collaboration between participating teachers. Also positive was the involvement of other colleagues, who joined in and continued with the activities in their classes. This increased student motivation and gave extra credibility to the approach.

The most powerful reAct principle was to 'start from students' interests'. Not only did it motivate students, but also provided teachers with more insights into their students' interests and ambitions. However, it should be noted that considerable efforts are required, by teachers and learners, to come to a point where one can speak of a 'true interest'. Many students frequently 'switched' interests and remained diverging and exploring, and never came to a state of converging and focus (which affected their perceived relevance).

4. STARTING FROM INTERESTS, A PEDAGOGICAL DESIGN FRAMEWORK FOR AT-RISK LEARNERS

Using a cross-case comparison (including NL2, which is summarized in the previous section), we derived a pedagogical design framework for at-risk learners focused on integrating interest-based and project-based learning in non-formal educational contexts. Taking into account the specific outcomes in NL2, the design framework can appropriately be used to engage at-risk migrant youth and offer teachers in non-formal education a customizable approach that fosters ownership, agency, and identity development and addresses relevant skills such as collaboration, self-efficacy and project-management. Below, we explain the core of the framework, which consists of the two interconnected principles 'interest' and 'relevance'; for an overview of the other pedagogical design principles (including organizational design) we refer to Hennis (2016).

4.1. *Core of the Framework: Building Relevance from Students' Interests*

The basic premise of the framework is that it facilitates a process of making students' interests become relevant and meaningful. A distinctive characteristic of the reAct approach was that activities and experiences did not revolve around the curriculum, but were (initially) based on students' interests. The most important reason to take students interests as a starting point was to disrupt passive learning behavior to-

wards a self-sustained, pro-active and positive behavior. Providing students with opportunities to explore their interests was shown to have the potential to improve engagement, attitude, and drive self-guided exploration, leading to increased self-awareness and confidence. Asking students to share their interests had an additional, un-anticipated and very powerful benefit: knowing what drives students enabled teachers to develop a more effective and personalized teaching approach.

In practice, students often lost interest in topics they themselves had proposed. Only a few students demonstrated true interest in the topic or project proposed by them; these students also showed more profound understanding and knowledge of the proposed topic. Activities should therefore help students with only shallow understanding and knowledge about a particular proposed topic to deepen their interests and develop personally relevant goals related with the interests. Across all case studies, we saw four distinct types of interests: the personal, social, societal, and institutional/ curricular interest. Table 1 explains these types of interests in more detail, which include both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations.

Interest > Me: **being**	This dimension represents the individual need to develop a personal identity that reflects his or her beliefs, personal values, and interests. It emphasizes the question 'Who am I?' and the process of self-discovery.
Interest > others: **belonging**	This dimension represents the individual need to belong to a certain group and the acknowledgement that a classroom is a highly social environment in individual behavior and engagement is strongly affected by implicit and explicit social cues and configurations. It emphasizes the student's question 'How do my peers see me?' and stresses the importance of promoting and encouraging positive interactions.
Interest > Institute: **becoming**	This dimension is oriented towards the educational institute, addressing curriculum, activities, and content. Most students indicated an interest in the curriculum, and nearly all of them wanted a diploma that was formally recognized. Curriculum therefore represents the institutional context and educational program and its formal requirements and objectives, which addresses the student's professional or academic interest and the question 'Who do I want to become?'
Interest > Society: **changing**	This final dimension addresses the individual need to act and contribute to a higher goal. It relates with the interest in societal issues, such as inequality, expressed and experienced by many of the participants. It adds meaning to the learning environment and experience and addresses the question 'What do I want to change?'.

Table 1. This table describes the four dimensions (or types) of 'interest' that emerged from our analysis of student projects and activities.

The major driver as well as barrier of engagement, throughout all cases, was the perceived (lack of) relevance of the interest-based activities. Students who thought that what they were doing was relevant, demonstrated more commitment, which reinforced their positive perception of relevance, in line with expectancy-value theory, which describes intentions of learners as the product of i) their expectation to succeed in the task, and ii) the perceived value of the task and outcome of the task (Wigfield, 1994). Frequently, a 'lack of intention' could be linked with a lack of insight and understanding of the (self-organized) learning task: students did not really know how to explore a topic, deliver a product, or organize their project. Without knowing what to do, their 'expectation to succeed' likewise dropped.

Reflection as well as the ability of teachers to facilitate meta-cognitive skills (e.g., planning, coordinating tasks, decision-making, following and participating in discussions, presenting oneself, and conceptualizing ideas and projects) were essential in relation to 'adding relevance' to activities. Students with a traditional view on education (with regard to the migrant youth: in particular those from traditional educational backgrounds) needed more time to adapt to, and understand, recognize and appreciate implicit learning processes.

There are many opportunities to increase the 'real' and perceived relevance of learning experiences, which are described as practical guidelines below. Essential to this is the development of strategies and activities that address *all four dimensions* of relevance and underlying values, described below:

- Personal and intrinsic relevance: Facilitating students in a process of discovering their true interests, possibly through a process of personal guidance, creative expression, and reflection, and to design and propose learning activities and internships that relate with students' personal interests and deeper personal values. Facilitating students to explore and share their interests online (i.e. Pinterest, Facebook) significantly helped teachers to offer appropriate suggestions based on students' interests.
- Social relevance: people add, and reinforce relevance, so it helps to involve friends, family, and other 'external' people from students' and teachers' social networks. The international context also increased students' perceived relevance, albeit temporarily.
- Professional and academic relevance: first and foremost, teachers must be able to identify and explain the value of implicit learning processes that are part of the process. In addition, it helps to integrate or relate activities with the formal program or curriculum, because of students' intrinsic interest in curriculum topics ("I really like ceramics") as well as their extrinsic interest in the program ("I just want a diploma"). Carefully introducing extrinsic rewards and integrating formal and accredited assessment may increase student commitment and subsequently intrinsic motivation, but may also interfere with intrinsic motivation. In addition, many students were interested in local employment opportunities and local industries and schools, which suggests a need to extend the curriculum 'beyond school' and to offer practical opportunities to learn and demonstrate professionally relevant skills. The school's manager, other teachers, and relevant experts also carry authority that can increase students' perceived relevance.
- Societal relevance: the popularity of social issues, such as inequality, health, and democracy, demonstrates the potential of activities that appeal to a higher cause or goal. In addition, the local history and culture often appealed to students, which again calls for activities beyond the classroom, such as activities relate with the local industry, history or culture, and regional festivals.
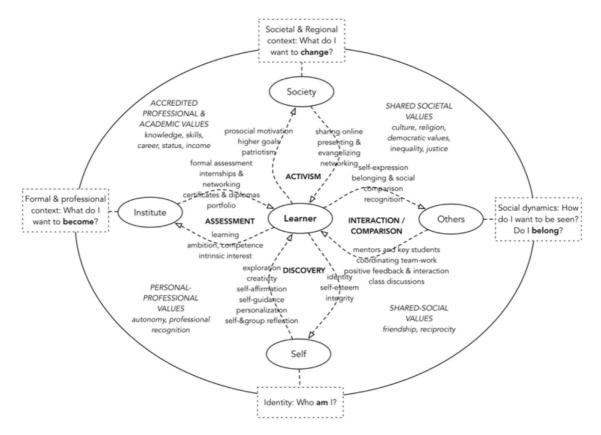
Figure 3. Pedagogical Design Framework: Interest-based learning (Hennis, 2016).

Figure 3 represents the core of our framework to support interest-based meaningful learning processes. Central to the learning process is the 'Learner', who may express in one or more of the four dimensions of interest. It is up to the teacher or school to provide the learning environment in which these interests are discovered and made relevant. 'Making relevance' is an interactive process between all participants in the learning environment.

For example, a student from Romania expressed an interest in stray dogs, which was assumed to be related with her being an orphan herself ("Self"). Following this personal interest, teachers were able to develop a relevant and meaningful learning experience with regard to the other dimensions of the interest-based learning framework:

• First of all, societal relevance ('Society') was added by helping the student to find volunteering op-portunities in a shelter for stray dogs. She was also asked to present this topic to her class to create awareness of this topic, and to collect some money for the shelter.

• The social relevance ('Others') was focused on the classroom dynamics, rather than the wider societal con-text. The student found other students (also on Facebook) to help her with the student project, and the teach-ers created an atmosphere where the student felt free and encouraged to talk about, and present her topic.

• With regard to the formal learning component ('Institute'), teachers were able to connect her proposed topic to an existing course or subject. One teacher gave her an encyclopedia of dogs, which she sa-vored, and the Biology teacher was able to transmit knowledge about Dog Psychology and typology as well as the nature/nurture discussion. Moreover, teachers helped her prepare a good presentation, and a CV which was necessary to be accepted as a volunteer in the shelter.

4.2. *Additional guidelines*

It is very important that teachers offer a transparent and consistent approach (manage expectations), help students focus, and take time for reflection. The following general guidelines for teachers are offered in relation to the above framework:

- Design for different levels of interests: The strategy should be to offer minimally invasive guidance (Mitra & Dangwal, 2010) to those who have a clear goal and show understanding and deep interest in their proposed topic, and offer more time as well as structured guidance and feedback to those who are unable to produce personal goals and who do not demonstrate deep and sustained interest in the topic they propose. Knowing what you like or find worthy to pursue can take considerable time and this 'discovery process' can be considered part of the learning process.

- Relate, connect and integrate: in order to create a consistent experience, make sure to connect students' interests, the learning activities, and assessment rubrics with relevant skills or personal learning objectives. Discuss and be transparent about the relation between student projects and relevant skills and knowledge. Make connections between peers with similar interests, and help them develop a shared goal.

- Restrictions and limitations: maintain focus by adding helpful restrictions and limiting options for students. The adage *'Everything is possible'* was often not conducive to productive behavior and thereby feeding into a perceived lack of relevance. Hence, helpful restrictions (also with regard to the use of ICT), guidelines, and reduction of options to students can be an effective strategy to deal with a lack of progress.

- School distractions: reduce or channel the distractions caused by other students, classes, courses, and examinations that may harm focus of participants. Social comparison was a real issue in some pilots, in particular the comparison with other students in the same institute.

- Continuity: the time-schedule is an essential ingredient to increase focus. Sessions should be at least two consecutive hours, and minimal five hours per week, in order to give students the opportunity to get into a *state of flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008).

- Milestones and deadlines encourage students to finish their projects or demonstrate intermediate results. A focus on 'presenting' also helps them to conceptualize and reflect on their activities.

- Present and reflect: Let students demonstrate their ideas, skills, progress and coordinate group reflection activities.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the study presented in this paper was to develop and evaluate an effective and adaptable approach to address at-risk learners (including migrant youth) in different educational contexts, with a particular interest in the use of ICT to facilitate self-organization, creative learning, and collaboration. The research demonstrates that the introduction and effects of self-guided, interest-based projects and collaborative learning in non-formal education has great potential for engaging young people and fostering agency. However, successful implementation is challenging, and depends on various factors, including institutional autonomy and culture; participant background, skills and attitudes; organizational support for teachers; options for curricular integration; and teaching skills in relation to tasks such as collaboration, decision-making, goal-setting, and project-management.

As suggested by Day and colleagues (2013), based on their comprehensive study of second-chance educational programs across ten European countries, it is *«the cumulative effect of the different features of second chance [programs] that makes them effective»* (2013, p. 91). They underline the importance of building

schemes that – on an institutional level – are multi-faceted and – on an individual level – are responsive to learners' needs. The framework presented consists of a pedagogy that centers around four types of interests, and provides guidelines to let students explore these interests in a meaningful and engaged manner. The relevance of this approach for (at-risk) migrant youth is explained in terms of increased agency and identity development; a case study is included describing the implementation of the approach in a class of migrant youth in the Netherlands.

The process and dimensions of 'interest-discovery' was investigated through the comparison and analysis of all student projects and learning activities. These dimensions include i) an interest in self, in identity, self-expression, meaning that the student project should be perceived as something that truly relates to the individual student, ii) an interest in others, the social aspect that is part of most teenagers' school experiences, and concerns notions of belonging and recognition, iii) an interest in the curriculum, or profession, meaning that many students demonstrated a strong interest in developing skills and learning something that had professional or academic relevance, and iv) an interest in society, and in particular themes that an individual cares about and wants to change, such as health issues, inequality, and more. We believe the proposed approach offers opportunities for migrant education across Europe not just to increase engagement, but – more fundamentally – to give culture, identity, personal interests and history a place in the learning process and thereby helping young migrants develop skills that increase their agency, self-awareness, and confidence.

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