

Review

Early School Leaving by Design—Prevention, Intervention and Compensation—A Policy Analysis of Early School Leaving and Underachievement Interventions in Europe

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide a comparative policy analysis of successful strategies that have been implemented across European countries to address early school leaving (ESL) and academic underachievement. Employing a transformative and multidimensional approach, the study examines systemic and local interventions that integrate cognitive and socio-emotional dimensions of learning. Using Eurostat data to categorise countries based on their ESL reduction progress, the analysis evaluates legislative frameworks, policy initiatives, and educational practices through the prevention, intervention, and compensation model. The findings identify common themes such as the expansion of early childhood education and care (ECEC), enhancement of guidance and counselling services, targeted support for socio-economically disadvantaged groups, inclusive policies for marginalised populations including Roma communities, and the development of vocational and second-chance education pathways. The paper highlights the critical importance of coherent and scalable policy design to reduce educational inequalities and contribute to achieving European Union ESL reduction targets by 2030. It advances policy discourse by emphasising the essential need for balanced preventive and compensatory measures to improve educational outcomes and to foster social inclusion across varied national contexts.

Keywords: early school leaving (ESL); school dropout; underachievement; educational policy; prevention-intervention-compensation framework; European Union (EU) 2030 target; early childhood education and care (ECEC); educational inequality

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1. Introduction

To address the issue of academic underachievement and school dropout, this paper provides an analysis of various educational practices across multiple (macro, meso, and micro) tiers of policy implementation and enactment that are substantiated by empirical evidence of social impact. This encompasses effective systemic and regional interventions that shape the educational environment, as well as school and community level strategies aimed at enhancing the quality of educational outcomes in fundamental competencies

such as literacy, numeracy, and science and encompassing digital literacy (specifically, media literacy). Concurrently, these practices are designed to promote psychosocial well-being and inclusivity. This approach integrates both cognitive and socio-emotional aspects within the framework of holistic child development, equipping individuals with the competencies required to confront the challenges posed by the 21st century.

As part of this research that formed part of a larger three-year European Commission Horizon Europe funded project entitled SCIREARLY (Reducing Early School Leaving and Underachievement) that consisted of a consortium of partners from ten European countries; the authors of this paper conducted an analysis of the academic literature to identify the root causes of underachievement and early school leaving (ESL). Additionally, legislative measures, policies, and policy driven initiatives were scrutinised across European countries with historically low rates of school dropout and elevated levels of student achievement, as well as countries that have effectively reduced ESL and those still grappling with rates exceeding EU targets to reduce ESL. While conducting the comparative analysis of policy discourse and practices together with identifying the policy measures pertaining to underachievement and ESL, particular attention has been dedicated to selecting measures that employed a transformative approach to reducing ESL. Additionally, this analysis delves into the existing research and evidence to ascertain the effectiveness of these measures in addressing issues related to underachievement and ESL. This endeavour is driven by the overarching goal of assessing the efficacy of extant policies as they relate to the European target of reducing ESL rates to 9% by the year 2030 (European Council, 2021).

Traditionally, there has been a focus on individual factors concerning ESL and underachievement; however, recent research has also drawn attention to the significant impact that institutional factors have on student outcomes. These include school leadership, teaching practices, and policy environments, among others (Brown et al., 2022a, 2022b; Herzog-Punzenberger et al., 2020; García-Cid et al., 2025; Gardezi et al., 2025). These structural features of the provision of education can have a significant mitigating or exacerbating effect on dropout rates, which is suggestive of the need for contextual awareness, and institutionally grounded interventions.

Thus, the analytical process for this paper provides an in-depth analysis of policies enacted at various levels, including local, regional, and national tiers, which have exhibited notable success in reducing ESL rates over the past decade. The Eurostat database, specifically containing statistics pertaining to education and training participation spanning from 2014 to 2024 for all member states of the EU (EU-27) has been instrumental in the identification of the countries that are included in the policy review. Moreover, at core, the authors of this paper are committed to drawing on a transformative paradigm using a multidimensional methodological approach that allows opportunities for personal and systematic transformation.

2. Towards a Transformative Paradigm

There has been a longstanding interest in the transformative power of social policy in general and educational policy in particular. Indeed, a key premise behind the notion of a transformative paradigm is that it moves beyond a purely economic or performance-driven evaluation and consequently highlights the importance of relational and humanistic school environments (Apple, 2012; Sen, 1997; Beresford, 2002; Brown et al., 2019). Thus, a transformative paradigm recognises the potential of educational policy interventions to change the trajectories of the lives of the most marginalised and has resulted in the development of a suite of initiatives across Europe and beyond. What ties them together is a belief that coordinated action at national and local levels can and does have a positive impact on reducing ESL (Brown et al., 2025). Where the challenge arises is

understanding what that impact is and how it happens. UNESCO (2022, p. 1) argues that while ‘policies exist to support transformative education, there is a general lack of awareness of this at a systems level and a lack of in-depth understanding of how they work at a practice level. As such, the authors of this paper have committed to ‘examine policies and practices from this transformative approach’. To facilitate the analysis, we used the 2011 European Commission framework that consists of three distinct measures to reduce ESL (Prevention, Intervention and Compensation) (European Commission, 2011a, 2011b).

Preventative measures refer to anticipatory measures designed to preclude the emergence of risk factors associated with ESL and underachievement. These include early childhood education initiatives, inclusive pedagogical practices, and systemic support structures that foster student engagement from the outset. The preventive pillar is predicated on the premise that early and universal access to quality education reduces the probability of academic disengagement and attrition (European Commission, 2011a, 2011b).

The literature indicates that the success of preventative policies to enhance engagement is influenced by the adoption of culturally responsive teaching, whereby schools incorporate curricula and teaching practices that respond to and reflect students’ cultural background (Nortvedt et al., 2020). Equally, across many European countries, parental involvement is seen as necessary to the success of these policies as it has been found that when parents have a good understanding of the education system, their educational expectations for their children become more realistic and this in turn, positively impacts ESL (Brown et al., 2020; Dollmann & Weißmann, 2020). Relatedly, it has also been found that positive relationships between teachers and students, and high expectations from teachers have also been found to reduce ESL (Blöndal & Aðalbjarnardóttir, 2014; Gardezi et al., 2025).

Intervention measures, in contrast, denote targeted responses that are activated as soon as learners exhibit signs of educational disengagement or underperformance and may encompass remedial instruction, mentorship programmes, or psychoeducational support, all of which are tailored to the specific needs of at-risk students. Interventionist strategies are inherently reactive, yet they seek to recalibrate trajectories before educational failure becomes entrenched (European Commission, 2022). There have been a number of initiatives identified that have proven to be effective interventionist measures. These include small class sizes, language supports, and psychosocial services, all of which have proven to be particularly impactful for migrant and minority students both of which have high-risk attributes for ESL (Lamonica et al., 2020).

Compensation measures, the third pillar, aims to reintegrate individuals who have already exited the formal education system. These may take the form of second-chance educational opportunities (Banks & Smyth, 2021), vocational training (Schmitsek, 2022), or alternative certification pathways. Compensation is thus rehabilitative in nature, oriented towards re-engagement and the re-establishment of learning pathways for early leavers (European Commission, 2022). To achieve the goals of this paper, the authors have developed a cross-cutting analytic framework that has allowed for:

- classification of key policies using the prevention/intervention/compensation framework identified;
- an exploratory analysis of policies that are ‘transformative’ in their systemic impact.

3. Materials and Methods

This section of the paper outlines the process used to select countries for this policy analysis and the methodology adopted for the analysis. The selection of countries used in the paper was based on an analysis of underachievement and rates of ESL within the EU that was derived from Eurostat data for ESL from 2014 to 2024.

This dataset revealed discernible trends that led to the categorisation of countries into three groups:

- i. Countries with historically low ESL rates (less than 6%).
- ii. Countries that have substantially reduced ESL rates (more than a 6% points reduction) in the last decade.
- iii. Countries that have not achieved significant reductions in ESL rates during this period.

Each partner initially selected their own and one other country for a policy review aimed at identifying approaches to addressing underachievement and ESL in those jurisdictions. Given that all countries falling into the second category (substantial ESL reduction) were part of the consortium, it was collectively decided to include them in the review. Additionally, three countries with historically low ESL rates (Poland, Switzerland, and Slovenia) were chosen. Finally, Italy, the UK and Romania were chosen due to their consortium membership and/or as countries that struggled to reduce ESL (Tables 1–3).

Table 1. Countries with historically low ESL rates.

Country/Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Poland	5.4	5.3	5.2	5	4.8	5.2	5.4	5.9	4.7	3.7	4.1
Switzerland	5.6	5.2	4.9	4.5	4.4	4.4	4	4.9	6.5	5.7	5.7
Croatia	2.8	2.8	2.8	3.1	3.3	3	2.2	2.4	2.1	2	2
Slovenia	4.4	5	4.9	4.3	4.2	4.6	4.1	3.1	4	5.4	5

Table 2. Countries with significant improvement in ESL rates.

Country/Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Greece	9	7.9	6.2	6	4.7	4.1	3.8	3.2	4.1	3.7	3
Ireland	6.7	6.8	6	5	5	5.1	5	3.3	3.7	4	2.8
Malta	17	16.3	15.6	14	14	13.9	12.6	10.7	10.3	10.2	9.6
Portugal	17.4	13.7	14	12.6	11.8	10.6	8.9	5.9	6.3	8.1	6.6
Spain	21.9	20	19	18.3	17.9	17.3	16	13.3	13.9	13.7	13

Table 3. Countries struggling to reduce ESL rates.

Country/Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Romania	18.1	19.1	18.5	18.1	16.4	15.3	15.6	15.3	16.6	16.8	16.6
Italy	15	14.7	13.8	14	14.5	13.5	13.1	12.7	10.5	9.8	12.7
United Kingdom ¹	11.8	10.8	11.2	10.6	10.7	10.9	11.5	9.5	10.4	11.3	12.2

¹ As a result of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Commission, no Eurostat data is available for ESL rates for the United Kingdom from 2020 onwards. Instead, for these years, ESL rates for the United Kingdom are derived from the statistics office of the United Kingdom. However, a note of caution is that available ESL statistics for the United Kingdom cover the age group 16–24 and are available at the following link: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-and-training-statistics-for-the-uk/2024>. Accessed on 4 June 2025.

Numerous meetings were also conducted to discuss and agree upon the process and to finalise the policy review template, which also included the development of the protocol for the task. Following on from this, partners prepared individual country reports using the template provided. Each country report comprised four main sections:

- i. a description of the legislation and policy measures or systemic strategies addressing underachievement and ESL;
- ii. a review of these measures in the academic literature;
- iii. an assessment of these measures in alignment with EU recommendations for prevention, intervention, and compensation measures addressing ESL;

iv. identification of gaps in policy discourse and in implementation.

Following the completion of the country reports, the analysis was conducted at three levels: first, an analysis of legislation, policy documents and academic literature in each jurisdiction was undertaken. Leading on from this, the next level of analysis consisted of an analysis of the extent to which in each case, the measures arising from policy implementation respond effectively to EU recommendations for ESL prevention, intervention, and compensation measures. Subsequently, these reports were collectively reviewed to gain a comprehensive understanding and agreement of the policies and measures implemented in each country.

In accordance with Braun and Clarke’s (2022) thematic analysis, the selected items were subjected to coding, leading to the identification of overarching themes as described in later sections of the paper. Within this, all members of the research team engaged in multiple rounds of reading and review of the policy analysis reports, culminating in the development of a table of subthemes and codes as they relate to Prevention, Intervention and Compensation measures (Table 4).

Table 4. Themes and subthemes for analysis.

Themes	Prevention Measures	Intervention Measures	Compensation Measures
Sub Themes and Codes	- Early childhood education and care	- Support for disadvantaged students	- Second chance education
	- Regulatory Frameworks	- Inclusion of students from vulnerable backgrounds	- Vocational education and training
	- Curriculum approaches	- Extra funding/financial aid for schools serving such students	- Combination of general and vocational education
	- Qualification prerequisites	- Extra resources for schools	- Work-Based Learning
	- Quality assurance policies and procedures	- Supports for students Teacher professional development	- Involvement of industry stakeholders
		- Any other features	- Alignment with labour market/industry
		- Availability of financial support	

More specifically, themes were identified using a six-phase process (Familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report) (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In practice, the country reports were read and re-read collaboratively to ensure thorough familiarisation with the content and from here, initial codes were generated to label prominent features of the data. Next, related codes were examined and grouped to identify potential sub themes, which were iteratively reviewed and refined through multiple rounds of team discussions. In the final phase of the analysis, each theme was defined and assigned an appropriate name, and from here an analytical narrative was developed to integrate these themes and their interrelationships in order to provide an overall interpretation of the analysis as described in the results section of the paper.

4. Results

4.1. Prevention Measures

The most consistent preventative measure taken in the countries reviewed in this paper relates to that of early childhood education and care (ECEC). These policies emphasise the critical role of high quality ECEC in promoting school attainment and student retention. Indeed, according to Curristan et al. (2023), ‘there is increasing evidence that social inequalities in outcomes emerge even before children start school, and a large body of international research highlights that investing in high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) can benefit children’s cognitive and non-cognitive development’ (p. ix).

What follows is a thematic analysis of the regulatory frameworks, curriculum approaches, qualification pre-requisites, and quality assurance policies and procedures of

countries that have in place ECEC policies, which include England, Greece, Ireland, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Switzerland of which, the themes are summarised in Tables 5–7.

Table 5. Prevention measures to reduce ESL (England, Greece and Ireland).

Country/Theme	ECEC	Curriculum	Guidance and Counselling	Attendance
England	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The compulsory school age is 5 years - Government funded ECEC schemes are available for all 3 and 4 year olds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - All schools that are maintained by local authorities must teach specified programmes, the National Curriculum for England - The Early Years Foundation Stage sets curriculum for children 5 and under 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Guidance and Special Education Needs and Disabilities, guidance for pre-school children and their families in disadvantaged areas, mostly school-based work - There is no Government funded counselling programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Education Act 1996 Pupil Premium Funding may deal with non-academic barriers to success in school, such as attendance
Greece	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Compulsory pre school attendance starts at age 4 for 2 years, is free of charge and in private sector is subsidised, along with the availability of all-day - Kindergartens with an extended timetable for at least 8 hours per day (Law 4521/2018) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - National Curriculum adapting the curriculum to meet the policy developments in education and emerging social needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Guidance and counselling to facilitate transitions and help early school leavers re-enter the education system (Law 4823/2021 and Law 4547/2018) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Law 4368/2016 refers to increased attendance and retention through compensatory education and remedial teaching (Law 2910/2001 concerning access to education)
Ireland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Compulsory school age is 6 and all forms of pre-primary education are optional - ECEC universal provision for 2 years (3–5) mostly provided by private entities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Centralised national curricula 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Education Act 1998 Provision of guidance and counselling to all post-primary students - Enhanced Guidance Initiative for DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunities In Schools) Schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Education Welfare Act 2000

Table 6. Prevention measures to reduce ESL (Malta, Poland, Portugal and Romania).

Country/Theme	ECEC	Curriculum	Guidance and Counselling	Attendance
Malta	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Legal entitlement to a place in ECEC provision begins from the age of 2 years and 9 months but ECEC (0–5 years) is not compulsory - Free childcare services are extended to all in new early leaving from education and training (ELET) strategy 2023–2030 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A National Curriculum Framework for All Curriculum adaptation according to school context included in both Strategic Plans (2014–2020 and 2023–2030) to address ESL 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Career Guidance Policy 2007—Distinction between guidance and counselling is clearly laid out - It is also Included in both Strategic Plans (2014–2020 and 2023–2030) to address ESL 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nationwide electronic platform for recording student attendance. - Article 5 Education Act, Chapter 327
Poland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 6-year-old children are required to attend 1-year pre-school. ECEC Education Act 2013 and Law on School Education 2016 - Children 3 years and above have a legal right to participate in pre-school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The National Curriculum forms the basis of instruction in all schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Integrated skills strategy 2030 - Guidance and counselling for people with varied personal, educational, and professional contexts and age 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Law on School Education (Prado sweater) about what school education includes
Portugal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participation in early childhood education (from age 3 to starting age 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Curriculum autonomy and flexibility Education Act 55/2018 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Decree Law no. 190/91 and Education Act 176/2012. It is a specialised service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Program Escola for improvement in student attendance rates

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - of compulsory primary education 6 - years) - Education Act 176/2012 - ECEC provision is not compulsory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The National Curriculum is similar for all public schools across the country 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - available for children ages 5–16/17 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - by providing support to do homework on a daily basis - Decree Law no. 176/2012 regulates the enrolment and attendance
Romania	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Law on Pre-university education No. 198 of 7/5/2023 - Programme 1.1 focuses on increasing access to ECEC. - Primary schooling begins at age 6 - Attendance is not compulsory, apart from the preparatory year in primary school for 6- to 7 year olds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Curriculum adaptation as a part of Inclusion of Roma Strategy 2012–2020 and 2022–2027 - Government Decision No. 1221/2011 and 560/2022 - The National Curriculum sets framework of curricula in school education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Guidance and counselling systems introduced by Law of Education (1/2011). - A dedicated school subject integrated into the National Curriculum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - School attendance is referred to in Policy on inclusion of Roma Children - Education Law concerning general mandatory education

Table 7. Prevention measures to reduce ESL (Spain and Switzerland).

Country/Theme	ECEC	Curriculum	Guidance and Counselling	Attendance
Spain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The LOMLOE also introduced changes for ECEC. For example, it stipulates the development of an ECEC curriculum and aims to define regulations for teacher development and the conditions in schools - Compulsory education starts at the age of 6. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - School as Learning Communities, PDC, LOIF (VET), Ceuta (the adaptation of the curriculum to the needs of the city with the special emphasis on language learning contents for Arabic speaking students and their families) - National curriculum for all schools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organic Law 3/2020 introduces guidance as a fundamental student entitlement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Well-being programme in Valencia - Programme for guidance and support towards advancing education National Strategy for the Social inclusion of Roma in Spain 2012–2020 - Learning Communities in Andalusia (local policies) - School absenteeism is regulated through article 226.1 of Spanish Penal Code
Switzerland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pre-primary education is compulsory for children aged 4–6- and they are granted access to 15 hours of free ECEC per week 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Federal Act on national languages HarmoS Agreement - There is no National Curriculum. - Each canton is responsible for drawing up the curriculum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Academic counselling and basic career guidance is provided by teachers and specialised services by the cantonal school authorities (Vocational and Professional Education and Training ordinance Article 4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The HarmoS Agreement also promotes school attendance

All of the above-mentioned countries have developed and implemented regulatory frameworks to facilitate the delivery of ECEC programmes and as part of the European Education Area Initiative, member states have agreed a target of 95% participation in early childhood education and care by 2030 (Curristan et al., 2023).

However, an analysis of the various frameworks that exist, reveals that there are evidential disparities between public and private provision; eligibility for enrolment; and the application of quality assurance policies and procedures to ascertain the quality and efficacy of ECEC provided (UK Parliament POST, 2021; OECD, 2023; European Commission/Eurydice, 2022a, 2022b, 2023d, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c; TUSLA, 2023). In England, for example, some government-supported early childhood programmes are accessible to eligible two-year-olds, as well as all three- and four-year-olds. These programmes, in which

parents can choose to register their children, are informed by the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) guidelines (UK Parliament POST, 2021; OECD, 2023).

Quality assurance and enhancement inspections are also conducted by Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) to ensure providers adhere to statutory standards (UK Parliament POST, 2021; OECD, 2023).

In Greece, voluntary early education is provided for children up to four years of age. Afterwards, it becomes mandatory for children aged four to six to attend pre-school. Oversight of these programmes is divided between public and private providers and in the case of public providers, they fall under the remit of the Ministry of Education. On the other hand, private providers are regulated by the Ministry of Labour (European Commission/Eurydice, 2023d).

Other European countries have different approaches to ECEC. In Ireland, the government funds early education for three to five year-olds, mostly through private childcare centres and provides supply-side funding to early childhood settings to deliver up to two years universal access to early childhood care and education prior to commencing primary education. This provision is based on three hours per day, 38 weeks per year. Poland on the other hand requires preschool for six year olds (Oberhuemer & Schreyer, 2018) and in the case of Romania, the final year of early education compulsory, with plans to lower the starting age to four (European Commission/Eurydice, 2022a).

It was also found in the policy analysis that various jurisdictions have adopted a diversity of curricular approaches to the provision of ECEC programmes, ranging from national frameworks to regional adaptations. As mentioned earlier, the EYFS guidelines, which are applicable to all providers, are used in England for children up to five years of age (Department for Education, 2025). Greece, on the other hand, has developed a formal curriculum for Pre-School and Kindergartens but has yet to do so for Day Care Nurseries (European Commission/Eurydice, 2023d). In the case of Ireland Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework was introduced in 2009, and updated in 2024. Aistear is a national framework that provides information and ideas for early childhood practitioners and parents to help them plan and provide high-quality learning experiences through play, interactions, and partnerships for babies, toddlers and young children (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2024; TUSLA, 2023). Malta also has a centralised ECEC framework entitled 'National Curriculum Framework for All 2012' that covers ECEC for a variety of age groups (Government of Malta, 2012). Finally, Spain has divided the provision of ECEC programmes into two cycles, with the second cycle being free of charge and curriculum aspects determined regionally (European Commission/Eurydice, 2023c). Additionally, it has also been found that institutional practices can play a preventative role in underachievement. These include language-rich and dialogic environments in conjunction with mixed-ability classes (García-Cid et al., 2025).

The role of formal qualifications in the provision of ECEC programmes is consistent, in that one is needed in all instances. However, there is significant variation in the types of qualifications needed. For example, in Greece and Switzerland a four-year degree is required to work in pre-primary childcare teaching, while a vocational education and training (VET) diploma is needed in Switzerland to work with young children (OECD, 2021). In the case of Ireland, a minimum QQI Level 5 qualification is required to work in ECE. However, in England a lower-level qualification is needed to work in the ECEC programmes (OECD, 2023).

The application of quality assurance policies and procedures was also prevalent in the provision of ECEC programmes, the key objective of which is to ensure compliance with statutory standards and to maximise educational outcomes. These policies and procedures are regulated by relevant statutory bodies in the above-mentioned countries, including Ofsted in England, TUSLA and the Department of Education in Ireland, and the

Ministry of Family and Social Policy and local authorities in Poland. (Government of UK, 2023; OECD, 2021; Oberhuemer & Schreyer, 2018).

Overall, despite variations in the administration of these programmes, all the countries mentioned have an acute awareness of the importance of ECEC for child development. Accredited qualifications up to and including a bachelor's degree is a requirement to work in most of these programmes, and most of them are regulated by a Statutory Quality Assurance body, although some are regulated by local agencies. However, there are also divergences in the provision of these programmes.

These include a discrepancy in age eligibility to access the programmes and centralised and decentralised curricula. However, despite these differences, it can be reasonably argued that there is an overarching shared objective in all of these programmes, that is, a holistic approach to ECEC with the goal of improving educational outcomes for children.

4.2. Intervention Measures

Differences in educational success are closely linked to individual characteristics of students. Factors such as parents' educational attainment, exposure to cultural activities and knowledge, and the quality of parent child relationships all play a significant role in ECE (Brown et al., 2025). Research has also consistently shown that a student's educational achievement is strongly influenced by the Socio-Economic Status (SES) of their parents and often experience disengagement and underachievement (Brown et al., 2019; Consideine & Zappalà, 2002; Fan et al., 2012; Traag & Van der Velden, 2011).

To address this, policy measures should aim to reduce the impact of socio-economic background on educational outcomes and provide support to disadvantaged students, including immigrants and students from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Hippe & Jakubowski, 2018). These students, in comparison to their more advantaged peers, face a higher risk of disengagement and ESL. In this regard, education systems should take proactive measures to curtail the effects of SES on achievement, including identifying early warning signs, offering differentiated instruction, organising extracurricular activities, involving parents in their children's education, and equipping teachers with the pedagogical skills to create inclusive learning environments. All the countries studied in this research have developed and implemented policies to varying degrees to enhance the opportunities and outcomes for students with low SES.

With cause for optimism, it was found that every country that was reviewed in this paper has developed policy frameworks to reverse educational inequality, with varying degrees of scope and focus as illustrated in Tables 8 and 9.

Table 8. Intervention Measures to reduce ESL (Ireland, England and Greece).

Country/Theme	Support for Disadvantaged Students	Inclusion Strategy for Roma	Teacher Professional Development
Ireland	- DEIS plan to address barriers to achievement among disadvantaged children and young people	National travellers and Roma Inclusion Strategy	- Included in DEIS programme
England	- Pupil Premium Funding—funding for schools to help close the educational attainment gap between rich and poor. Free School Meal and Holiday Activities and Food Programme.	- No mention in the policy review by partners though the government has a GBP 1 billion programme for Roma and Gypsies	- Teacher professional support under Pupil Premium programme
Greece	- Education Priority Zones (ZEP) targeting regions with the greatest disadvantage to enhance educational accessibility	The National Strategy and Action Plan for Roma Social Inclusion 2021–2030	- Extensive teacher professional development programmes are executed under ZEP

Table 9. Intervention Measures to reduce ESL (Portugal, Spain, Poland and Switzerland).

Country/Theme	Support for Disadvantaged Students	Inclusion Strategy for Roma	Teacher Professional Development
Portugal	- Educational Territories for Priority Intervention Programmes (Education Act 176/2012), programme Escola, Inclusive Education Edu Act 55/2018, promoting lingual diversity	- The National Roma Communities Integration Strategy (Conselho de Ministros, 2018), as defined in Resolution of the Council of Ministers no. 154/2018	
Spain	- Programa para la orientación, avance y enriquecimiento educativo and Unidades de Acompañamiento y Orientación 2021–2024	- Spain’s National Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Roma and a Programme to support Roma in Catalonia	- Included in Schools as Learning Communities Programme
Poland	- Targeted support for immigrant children/refugees/SEND Council Implementation decision 2022/382, Strategy for the Development of Human Capital provides financial and socio-emotional supports for disadvantaged students	- Programme for the Integration of the Roma Community in Poland for the period 2014–2020	- Included in teachers’ professionalisation programme
Switzerland	- Language support for immigrant children under HarmoS Agreement and Quality in Multicultural Schools initiative in Canton Zurich.	- Roma are recognised as an integral part of Swiss society though they do not fulfil the criteria to be recognised as a national minority. The other minorities include Yenish and Sinti	

In Ireland, for example, the DEIS initiative is a comprehensive intervention primarily focused on two core objectives: improving educational opportunities for those who commence education under disadvantaged circumstances and strengthening the capacity of the education and training system to disrupt the cycles of underprivileged communities (Department of Education, 2017, 2022). Furthermore, the Equal Start funding model was established in Ireland in 2024 to improve access and participation in high-quality ECEC for children experiencing poverty. Consistent with the DEIS model, Equal Start provides early childhood settings, operating in areas of socio-economic disadvantage with increased levels of government funding. The purpose of this initiative is to assist ECEC settings in supporting ‘priority cohorts’, including children living in homeless accommodation, Traveller and Roma children, and those seeking International Protection participate in early childhood care and education (Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 2025).

In England, with the goal of providing additional support for students who face inequality, the Pupil Premium Grant (introduced in 2011), has provided funding for free school meals for children in local authority care and schools in disadvantaged areas (OECD, 2023). To compliment this initiative, England has also introduced the Holiday Activities and Food Programme, which aims to provide additional supports during out of school hours for children from low-income families (OECD, 2023).

Similarly, Zones of Educational Priority (ZEPs) were introduced in Greece in 2010 of which their purpose is to provide additional resources, including teacher training, and intercultural programmes, to schools in socio economically disadvantaged areas. Through community engagement and positive discrimination policies, the focus of ZEPs is to reverse underachievement for immigrant and minority students (European Commission/Eurydice, 2014).

Similarly, Portugal and Spain have focused on inclusive education through targeted financial aid, psychosocial support, and community-based interventions (European Commission/Eurydice, 2023f). By way of example, Portugal has initiated programmes to

support disadvantaged communities and address underachievement and ESL. These programmes have demonstrable longevity, exemplified by the Educational Territories for Priority Intervention Programme (TEIP) and the Programa Escolhas, which remain active even after more than two decades.

In the case of Spain, two prominent initiatives exist; *the Programa para la orientación, avance y enriquecimiento educativo* (PROA+) and the *Unidades de Acompañamiento y Orientación 2021–2024* (UAO), constitute integral components of the broader Recovery, Transformation, and Resilience Plan, or *Plan de Recuperación, Transformación, y Resiliencia*, initiated in 2021 to provide additional support to vulnerable students. PROA+ is dedicated to bolstering academic achievements and promoting student retention in public and semi-private schools characterised by a significant population of vulnerable students, which typically accounts for at least 30% of the student body. The allocated resources can be employed for procuring additional educational resources, teacher training, or recruiting additional teaching staff (OECD, 2023). In sum, these efforts also demonstrate that a holistic approach that strongly emphasises local needs and fosters social inclusion to improve educational outcomes of vulnerable students.

Additionally, Poland and Switzerland have pursued systematic approaches to underachievement which are tailored to address educational inequalities. Firstly, the education system in Poland has prioritised human capital production in the supports they offer disadvantaged students. They achieve this by targeting an improvement of the education rates for disadvantaged students in the form of improving their employment prospects via financial aid, scholarships, and ICT investment in schools that serve these students (Rady Ministrów, 2013). Secondly, the Quality in Multicultural Schools (QUIMS) initiative in Switzerland provides additional resources to schools which have a high concentration of immigrant students. Key features of this initiative include providing language supports for non-native speakers of the dominant language(s), providing classes and activities on intercultural understanding, and encouraging parental engagement in their children's education (Meunier, 2011). Thus, both countries have provided targeted supports to disadvantaged students at risk of ESL under the guise of cultural responsiveness and human capital production.

As stated previously, the goal of these policies is to improve educational outcomes, and by extension, employment prospects, of children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Kozarzewski, 2008; Fatyga et al., 2001; Marchlik & Tomaszewska-Pękała, 2016). Overall, the measures set out above exemplify interconnected and holistic approaches to reversing educational inequality. Across the cases, a shared commitment to educational equality is evident; however, variation in approach reflects differing social and economic contexts and the attendant policy priorities.

4.3. Compensation Measures

Compensatory measures also play a key role in policy development and implementation across jurisdictions, mitigating the conditions that give rise to ESL. Some of the key routes which have been taken to this end are via alternative educational pathways, including VET and second-chance education. The intention is that pursuing this approach can improve employment prospects and align with labour market needs. A number of countries as summarised in Table 10 have taken these routes to reduce ESL including England, Greece, Ireland, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Switzerland.

Table 10. Compensation Measures to reduce ESL.

Country/Theme	Second Chance Education/Vocational Education and Training
England	- No major investment in further education and the fall in opportunities for mature students to attend higher education. - Availability of T Levels and apprenticeship opportunities.
Greece	- 15-year-old students choose between vocational or academic tracks
Ireland	- Youthreach, Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme, Back to Education Initiative
Malta	- Reintegration of vocational education and training (VET) within secondary schools, equivalent in status and academic level to mainstream education in the National Qualifications Framework
Poland	- VET and lifelong learning opportunities VET programme 2022–2025 - Education Act 176/2012
Portugal	- Accessible and relevant second chance schemes are also present - The Portuguese education system offers several options for adult education. VET learning at the secondary educational level is another significant strategy
Romania	- Pre-university Education no. 198 Second Chance Education for all Levels of Schooling - Remedial Learning; Programme 2.2 Reduction of ESL in Romania 2015–2020
Spain	- PRTR Plan, Organic Law on VET - Dual-Track VET (Jefatura del Estado, 2020)
Switzerland	- Dual-Track VET programme

Firstly, for young people pursuing full-time education, in England, there exists some alternative routes to the traditional A Levels (subject-specific academic courses studied as a gateway to university education). For instance, England has developed an alternative to the traditional A Levels called the T Levels. This qualification has been developed in close collaboration with industry stakeholders to ensure the practical skills needed in the various sectors are met via state funded education. The Greek VET model is similar to that of England's in a number of ways. Firstly, the VET model is made up of school based and work-based learning (WBL), the latter of which has been developed in alignment with the labour market and is regulated by the education and labour ministry (Cedefop, 2024a). Additionally, in the Polish context, VET programmes integrate both general and vocational education (Cedefop, 2024b), and in Portugal there are options to transition between VET and general education.

Secondly, in terms of pursuing second chance education as a compensatory measure in alleviating the scale and impact of ESL, Ireland and Malta have initiated programmes that have proven to be effective in reducing ESL. In the case of Ireland, early school leavers have been provided with compensatory supports via programmes such as the Back to Education Allowance (BTEI), Youthreach, and the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS). These programmes have proven to be effective for a number of reasons, namely the inclusion of part-time learning, financial supports, and a focus on transversal skills (Government of Ireland, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). In the case of Malta, the provision of VET programmes is more complex. While the overall responsibility for VET lies with the Ministry of Education, for the ever-important tourism sector, the Ministry for Tourism and Consumer Protection oversees the provision of VET programmes for this sector. Additionally, the Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) and the Institute of Tourism Studies also provide self-accredited VET programmes and apprenticeships covering seven distinct programmes.

Work-based learning (WBL) is a common theme shared by the programmes discussed above, with countries such as England, Greece and Poland prioritising practical experience and industry alignment in the provision of their compensatory programmes

(Department of Education, 2022; Cedefop, 2024a, 2024b) Moreover, in the two countries discussed in relation to second-chance programmes (Ireland and Malta), financial support is central to their success (Government of Ireland, 2022a, 2022b). Taken together, the evidence shows that while approaches to VET and second-chance education differ and are shaped by national priorities, labour-market demands and industry alignment there is also variation in how they are implemented across jurisdictions.

Within the EU's framework for reducing ESL, education and career guidance is recognised as a crucial measure that spans all three categories: prevention, intervention, and compensation. Guidance helps to prevent ESL by providing information and support to avoid risks, intervenes by assisting students facing difficulties, and compensates by creating opportunities for those who have already left education to re-engage and gain qualifications. These services provide structural supports for students, are bound by legal mandates, and are informed by national policies and procedures (Oomen & Plant, 2014; Psifidou et al., 2021). By way of example, the Education Act (2022) in England (Government of UK, 2022) ensures that impartial career guidance is offered to students between 12 and 18 years of age. In Ireland, the 1998 Education Act provides statutory obligations for schools to provide student centred guidance services while also ensuring that additional supports are offered to disadvantaged students (Department of Education, 2017). Finally, Malta and Poland have embedded career and wellbeing support into their national education frameworks. It is hoped that this approach would ensure that there is an integrated and holistic approach taken to the provision of these services.

Less positively, on review of these policies, there is variation in the delivery models used, with a clear delineation between school-based and external supports. In Greece, for example, there are individual and group career guidance sessions provided in conjunction with local industries to ensure individual and local effectiveness of the service (Euroguidance, 2022a). While in England, there is a reliance on external support and expertise in the provision of services, in Ireland, there is a focus on a whole-school approach which includes teachers, counsellors providing whole school and one to one support for students (Ofsted, 2023; Department of Education, 2017). Finally, Portugal's approach emphasises experiential learning, Romania integrates career guidance into their core curriculum, Malta separates personal and career counselling which ensures specialised support, and Poland offers career guidance support via public counselling centres (European Commission/Eurydice, 2023e).

The way guidance counselling is integrated into the curriculum is also worth exploring when considering it as a compensatory measure to reduce ESL. Guidance counselling is a compulsory subject from Year 8 in England (Ofsted, 2023), and a similar approach is taken in Poland and Romania (European Commission/Eurydice, 2023e; 2022a). Similarly, in Portugal and Greece, guidance counselling has been integrated into broader school activities (Euroguidance, 2022a). While in Ireland and Malta a more holistic approach is taken to guidance counselling whereby it is linked to broader strategies of ESL prevention (Department of Education, 2017; Euroguidance, 2022b).

Overall, guidance counselling is seen as a key component of policy initiatives aimed at tackling ESL in the above-mentioned countries and there is consistency in terms of the labour market alignment and stakeholder collaboration.

4.4. Successful Policy Approaches to Reduce ESL

Having established the importance of prevention, intervention, and compensation measures to reduce ESL, from policy to practice, this section examines four national initiatives that exemplify these measures.

Switzerland's consistently low ESL rates provide insight into a system where robust preventive measures have kept ESL to a minimum, while Portugal and Spain illustrate

how concerted reforms and targeted interventions can result in significant reductions in ESL. Ireland's DEIS scheme represents an inclusive, nationwide approach that integrates all three measures of prevention, intervention, and compensation to address educational disadvantage and promote school completion (Department of Education, 2022).

Within this, the analysis not only justifies the inclusion of varied national experiences but also highlights the importance of an evidence-based, critically reflective approach where each case demonstrates how contextually tailored, coordinated policy efforts can result in significant reductions in ESL, a proposition supported by research on this subject matter (Brown et al., 2025).

4.5. *The DEIS Programme*

The Irish model has pursued a whole-school approach via the DEIS programme, which was introduced in 2005 and represents a comprehensive strategy of prevention measures that consolidate multiple initiatives within its framework to address issues related to underachievement, engagement, and ESL resulting from students with low SES. It was envisioned as a pivotal strategy to effectively combat challenges in literacy, numeracy, unqualified school leaving, and educational advancement for disadvantaged students. (Department of Education, 2005). As such, key tenets of this initiative include literacy and numeracy supports, smaller class sizes, free school meals, and enhanced guidance counselling. A key feature of this initiative, which separates it from other European initiatives to reduce ESL, is the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme. This scheme seeks to strengthen ties between schools, parents, and the community by providing home visits and facilitating adult education for parents.

An evaluation of the impact of the DEIS initiative conducted by Weir and Kavanagh (2018) found that a thorough analysis of centrally held data spanning a 15-year period, from 2002 to 2016, reveals significant and positive trends in academic achievement, encompassing overall performance and performance in key subjects such as English and mathematics, as assessed in the Junior Certificate Examination. Additionally, when examining cohorts of students from 1995 to 2011, substantial positive trends have been identified in student retention rates, both leading up to the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Examinations. Furthermore, according to the Department of Education (2022), retention rates in DEIS schools reached 86.1% by 2022, which narrowed the gap with non-DEIS schools to 7.6%. However, despite these improvements, disparities in performance gaps persist.

4.6. *Portugal's Student Profile Initiative*

The Portuguese approach is underpinned by curricular flexibility via the Education Act 55/2018, which is a legislative framework governing all levels of education in both the public and private sectors, and it establishes the national education policy framework. Within the scope of this Act, Portugal has implemented two transformative policy measures aimed at addressing underachievement and effectively combating ESL. Firstly, it introduced the 'Profile of the Student at the End of Compulsory Education, and secondly, it granted schools greater autonomy in curriculum management and development to address the factors contributing to underachievement, thus foregrounding the importance of critical thinking, citizenship and sustainability. Through this initiative schools have also been given the autonomy to tailor the curriculum to their local contexts and needs through the inclusion of a multi-stakeholder approach (teacher, student, parents) and the use of project-based and interdisciplinary learning. The effectiveness of this curricular autonomy and flexibility has been supported by evidence as pedagogical approaches that lead to increased student engagement and improved outcomes (Allcock & Hulme, 2010; Bell, 2010; Bintz & Monobe, 2018; Haelermans et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2017).

While the Act has been in implementation since the academic year 2018–2019, a comprehensive evaluation of the impact of curricular autonomy on students' learning outcomes will provide insights into its effectiveness thus far. In theory, this policy measure holds significant potential for addressing ESL and underachievement.

4.7. Switzerland's Dual-Track VET System

Switzerland's approach to combatting ESL is underpinned by vocational excellence. As such, the VET system includes both dual vocational programmes (company-based practical education combined with theoretical education in vocational schools) and full-time school programmes (Findeisen et al., 2022). The VET programmes according to Scharenberg et al. (2016) also provide a solid base for a successful professional career. Due to their positive reputation, VET programmes have typically been regarded as a means to enable successful school-to-work transitions. Approximately two-thirds of Swiss adolescents attend a form of vocational education after compulsory schooling; with an extensive selection of over 230 training programmes to choose from and 80% of adolescents in the vocational track choosing a dual training programme (European Commission/Eurydice, 2022b; Swiss Coordination Centre for Research in Education [SCCRE], 2018). Finally, VET as the mainstream upper secondary programme serves 70% of Swiss young people. It prepares a broad cross-section of students including high achievers for careers in a range of occupations such as high-tech, human services, and health, as well as traditional trades and crafts.

4.8. Spain's Schools as Learning Communities

In Spain, the concept of social inclusion has underpinned the policy of 'Schools as Learning Communities.' This has been put into practice since 1995 and has subsequently led to approximately 80 schools implementing this initiative (Elboj et al., 2004). Since implementation, there has been an exponential growth in the adoption of Schools as Learning Communities along with a corresponding body of scientific evidence that has been accumulated highlighting the features of this approach that have led to its success, namely that this comprehensive, whole-school strategy is aimed at achieving enhanced learning outcomes for all students. As such, it has been proven to increase student confidence and motivation, improve social cohesion, and encourage greater involvement of families and the community in the educational process.

In summary, all of these initiatives include stakeholder engagement, evidence-based designs, and inbuilt flexibility. For example, the DEIS initiative (Ireland) and community model (Spain) prioritise the role of parents in their children's education and provide the corresponding support. While in Portugal and Switzerland there is heightened curriculum flexibility and focus on employment after leaving school. However, there are also differences in the focus of these initiatives. For example, while Ireland focuses on socio-economic disadvantage, Switzerland focuses more on aligning their education system with labour market demands. In this regard, when looking at the successes of these initiatives, it could be argued that these policies clearly demonstrate that a multifaceted, context-specific, data-driven, and whole school approach drives success in combating the conditions whereby ESL is an issue.

5. Discussion

An overarching theme of this review is that adopting a transformative paradigm to ESL highlights the importance of education systems overcoming conventional performance-based models of evaluation. This can be achieved by prioritising equity, inclusion, and systemic change in educational policy and practice. The adoption of this paradigm is grounded in relational and humanistic principles, which frames education as a powerful

tool to positively impacting life trajectories, particularly for historically marginalised children (Apple, 2012; Sen, 1997; García-Cid et al., 2025). The discussion and recommendations that follow draw on the above by integrating a preventive, interventionist, and compensatory analysis of strategies within this transformative paradigm, with the goal of alleviating ESL.

However, it is important to recognise that ESL and underachievement are driven by a web of systemic factors rather than isolated causes, including individual, socio-economic, institutional, cultural, and other dimensions. Tackling ESL, therefore necessitates a holistic strategy that engages with these multifaceted determinants in tandem. This perspective aligns with the transformative paradigm adopted here, which seeks broad systemic change rather than narrow, performance-based solutions. Notably, large scale efforts across the EU have yielded significant results in many countries in reducing ESL. Nonetheless, sustaining and expanding this progress especially in contexts of rising diversity remains a critical challenge (García-Cid et al., 2025; Gardezi et al., 2025).

Given the need to develop and adopt proactive strategies to circumvent structural barriers, the role of ECEC programmes has proven effective, particularly for children from marginalised groups. The above findings also demonstrate the necessity to include inclusive pedagogies that respond to cultural diversity and learning needs. To maximise the effectiveness of these initiatives, they should be provided in conjunction with community-based outreach programmes, which aim to identify and support families at risk of disengagement from ECEC programmes and to provide them with a comprehensive support system. Indeed, the literature demonstrates that, if these preventative measures are adopted early, they can reduce ESL rates by addressing causes rather than symptoms.

However, across all the jurisdictions covered in this review, it was found that preventative measures, in and of themselves, are insufficient. In these circumstances, interventionist measures are essential, and to have a positive impact, they must incorporate a holistic approach to identifying and supporting at-risk students. This should include developing protocols to identify at-risk students based on socio-emotional well-being, as well as the more traditional indicators of academic performance and socio-economic status. On the identification of at-risk students, the tailored provision of school counselling and peer mentoring should be provided to these students to improve their educational trajectory. The tailored and student-centred nature of these interventionist measures has the potential to transform the educational trajectories of students at risk of ESL.

Despite the holistic and student-centred nature of the above-mentioned preventative and interventionist measures that target at-risk students and subsequently reduce ESL rates, compensatory measures are also needed for students who have already exited formal education. The above literature showcases effective compensatory measures that offer opportunities for reintegration into the education system, including second-chance programmes and strategic partnerships among educational institutions, employers, and labour organisations. When second-chance programmes are developed in collaboration with the local community and focus on vocational training, they have proven to be effective. In a similar vein, the partnership model has proven to be effective at providing opportunities for re-engagement with education systems for underserved populations. Together, these compensatory measures offer jurisdictions another opportunity to alleviate ESL.

While this review has demonstrated the efficacy of these measures in alleviating ESL, it also outlines the steps needed to effectively implement them. Firstly, to incorporate the holistic nature of the transformative paradigm into these preventative, interventionist and compensatory measures, there needs to be meaningful and sustained engagement with majority and minority parents, students, and community organisations. The role of educators is key here in identifying and circumventing systemic inequalities in their

individual provision, as well as more broadly in the education system, and continuous professional development would have to be provided to this end. However, this does not only apply to educators that presently work within the education system, there is also a need for an evidence-based analysis of how well education systems prepare teacher education students to teach in increasingly diverse classroom settings. For example, a review of the teacher education curricula of in Austria and Ireland found that, ‘the teacher education curricula in both countries appear to reflect migration-related diversity in a marginal way and are certainly far off sequentially building up knowledge and competences of productively responding to the challenges of culturally diverse classrooms’ Herzog-Punzenberger et al., 2023, p.490).

It is also necessary to acknowledge that different social and cultural groups may respond differently to educational interventions. For example, even in a country such as Switzerland with a strong vocational education system, students from immigrant families often prefer academic schooling pathways, a phenomenon attributed to “immigrant optimism” whereby migrants have especially high aspirations for upward mobility (Tjaden & Scharenberg, 2017, p. 309). These ethnic choice effects illustrate the need for culturally responsive guidance and data informed decision making in order for supports to be tailored to diverse student aspirations and needs given that for example, in the case of Switzerland, ‘dropout from academic tracks is higher among migrants compared to Swiss natives’ (Tjaden & Scharenberg, 2017, p. 310).

Finally, education providers that incorporate the above-mentioned measures also need supports to develop and maintain a database that is disaggregated by race, socio-economic status, and migratory background. The purpose of this database is to maximise the impact of these measures, of which, there would also need to be concomitant professional development for educators, administrators, and school leaders to ensure that they are equipped to interpret and apply the data findings in an effective and appropriate manner. The totality of impact of these initiatives would ensure that the above-mentioned measures alleviate ESL. In this regard, it could be argued that the transition to a transformative paradigm to alleviate ESL is a methodical, incremental process that requires sustained engagement with stakeholders and enhanced data literacy skills.

The multifaceted nature of the successful policies profiled above, which incorporate preventative, interventionist, and compensatory measures, is their most prevalent similarity. This is exemplified by the DEIS Plan in Ireland and the Schools as Learning Communities in Spain, which incorporate both preventative and compensatory measures, while the Swiss dual-track VET programme contains all three types. These successful policies are also underpinned by scientific evidence and have incorporated input from the stakeholders who will be the most affected by their implementation; as such, efforts have been made to adopt an egalitarian approach to their evaluation.

For example, the DEIS initiative in Ireland has been identified as a significant policy in reducing ESL, contributing to Ireland’s ESL rate dropping to just 4% by 2023 (Gardezi et al., 2025a, p. 1). Indeed, an evaluation of the DEIS initiative found significant upward trends in exam performance and a narrowing of the achievement gap between DEIS and non DEIS schools over a 15-year period. Furthermore, improvements in DEIS schools occurred even for those schools serving higher concentrations of students from low-income backgrounds, indicating that the initiatives had a positive impact (Weir & Kavanagh, 2018). However, Weir and Kavanagh (2018) also caution that a significant gap still exists between DEIS and non-DEIS schools where disadvantaged students continue to experience poorer outcomes than their peers. Furthermore, students from certain marginalised communities within DEIS schools (for example, migrant and Traveller students) “still face poorer educational outcomes” (Gardezi et al., 2025a, p. 1) which suggests that even

proven, multifaceted programmes such as DEIS require ongoing support, evaluation, and refinement to further lessen gaps in attainment and ESL.

6. Conclusions

This policy analysis has explored the education policies of various countries with each demonstrating a shared commitment to reducing ESL by enhancing the overall quality of education. It is also clear that participating countries have meaningfully responded to the European Commission's recommendations to devise strategies that aim to contribute to the prevention of underachievement and ESL among children and young people.

However, a notable and recurrent issue, as documented in the literature, centres on the noticeable gap between policy pronouncements and their practical implementation. While policies outline the necessary measures, the intended benefits often fail to trickle down to schools and the target populations. In the case of support measures for disadvantaged communities, particularly in Romania, there is a lack of concrete programmes to reduce ESL. In contrast, other countries such as Portugal, Greece, and Malta have specific programmes in place, such as Escolhas Programa, ZEP, and the MLU that are used to address the unique needs of their respective populations.

Furthermore, despite the recognised significance of ECEC as an essential predictor of future educational success and a fundamental strategy in averting ESL in most participating countries, it generally remains either optional or mandatory for only one year of pre-primary education. However, there are exceptions to this which include Greece and Switzerland, where ECEC is mandated for a period of two years. Additionally, there have been a variety of approaches adopted in the provision of ECEC programmes. This includes some jurisdictions that significantly rely on private providers, exemplified by Ireland, while a more mixed approach has been adopted by other jurisdictions with both a public and private component to provision, as observed in Malta and Greece.

There is also near unanimity in the positive perception of guidance and counselling in facilitating students as they navigate their educational journey. Indeed, this is exemplified in this review in that in all jurisdictions there is an emphasis on expanding access to these services. For example, Poland has committed to providing these services to children as young as five years old. A key feature of this service in the participating jurisdictions is the collaboration with local educational institutions and industry, as is taking place in Switzerland and Malta. The intention of these collaborations is to respond to local labour market demands by including their needs in the development of curricula which feed into apprenticeship opportunities.

The review also highlights the need for more programmes that actively involve end-users, such as parents and students, and the individuals responsible for implementing these measures in schools, including school leaders, teachers, and other staff members, throughout every stage of initiatives aimed at addressing underachievement and students' well-being. Schools should also be equipped with a comprehensive network of support services, functioning as an end-to-end service model, to eliminate the burden on schools searching for services individually.

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