

Social Determinants of Underachievement in Europe and Buffering Aspects

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Introduction

SCIREARLY, which is a three-year project funded by the European Commission, focuses on enabling children to learn and thrive in school and complete their education. The project recognises the crucial role that schools play in a child's development and expresses concern over children who struggle or leave school prematurely. This initiative is a collaboration between various institutions from ten different European countries. Its main objectives include conducting research on effective practices in schools and understanding how some educational institutions successfully retain their students, providing them with the best opportunities for learning and well-being.

The key goals of SCIREARLY are as follows:

- **Research:** The project aims to build on existing research to identify what works effectively in schools, especially in keeping students engaged and motivated to complete their education.
- **Retention:** SCIREARLY seeks to gain insights into how certain schools are able to retain their students, reducing dropout rates, and ensuring that children have a more extended and fruitful educational experience.
- **Collaboration:** The consortium plans to collaborate with various stakeholders, including teachers, families, and others, to develop policies and practices based on their research findings. This collaborative approach ensures a holistic and inclusive effort to improve the education system.
- **Equity:** The overarching goal is to ensure that all children, regardless of their background or circumstances, have the opportunity to achieve their full potential in education. This means creating a more equitable educational system that supports every child's learning and well-being.

In summary, SCIREARLY is a multicountry initiative funded by the European Commission that seeks to address challenges in the education system by conducting research and developing policies and practices that help children thrive in school and complete their education. The project's focus on collaboration and equity underscores its commitment to ensuring that every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

The challenge of early school leaving

Leaving school earlier than what is considered ideal for children can indeed have significant and far-reaching consequences. These consequences not only affect the individual child but also have broader societal implications. Some of the key consequences associated with early school leaving (ESL) include, but are not limited to, the following:

- **Lower employment opportunities:** Early school leavers often have limited access to well-paying and stable job opportunities. They may find themselves limited to low-skilled, low-paying jobs, which can lead to a lifetime of economic hardship.
- **Increased risk of poverty:** Limited education and employment prospects can result in higher rates of poverty among early school leavers. This not only affects their own well-being but also places a burden on social welfare systems.
- **Health problems:** There is a well-established link between education and health. People with lower levels of education are more likely to experience health issues, and this can be exacerbated for those who leave school early.
- **Lower civic engagement:** Early school leavers often have limited participation in political, social, and cultural activities. They may be less informed about civic issues and have fewer opportunities to engage in community activities or contribute to society.
- **Higher crime rates:** There is a correlation between lower levels of education and criminal behaviour. Individuals who do not complete their education may be at a higher risk of becoming involved in criminal activities, which can have serious consequences for both the individual and society.

- **Reduced economic productivity:** A society with a significant number of early school leavers is likely to have a less skilled and productive workforce. This can affect the overall economic growth and competitiveness of a nation.
- **Intergenerational impact:** ESL can perpetuate a cycle of lower educational attainment within families. Children of early school leavers may be more likely to follow the same path, further perpetuating the negative consequences for future generations.

To mitigate these devastating consequences, it is essential to invest in education and provide support systems for at-risk students to ensure they stay in school and complete their education. This includes addressing factors such as poverty, inadequate school resources, and social support networks. Ensuring that all children have access to a quality education and addressing the root causes of ESL is crucial for the well-being of individuals and the overall health of society. SCIREALY is committed to ensuring that all students have an equal and fair opportunity not only to complete school but also to become full, active participants in their societies.

The structure of the project

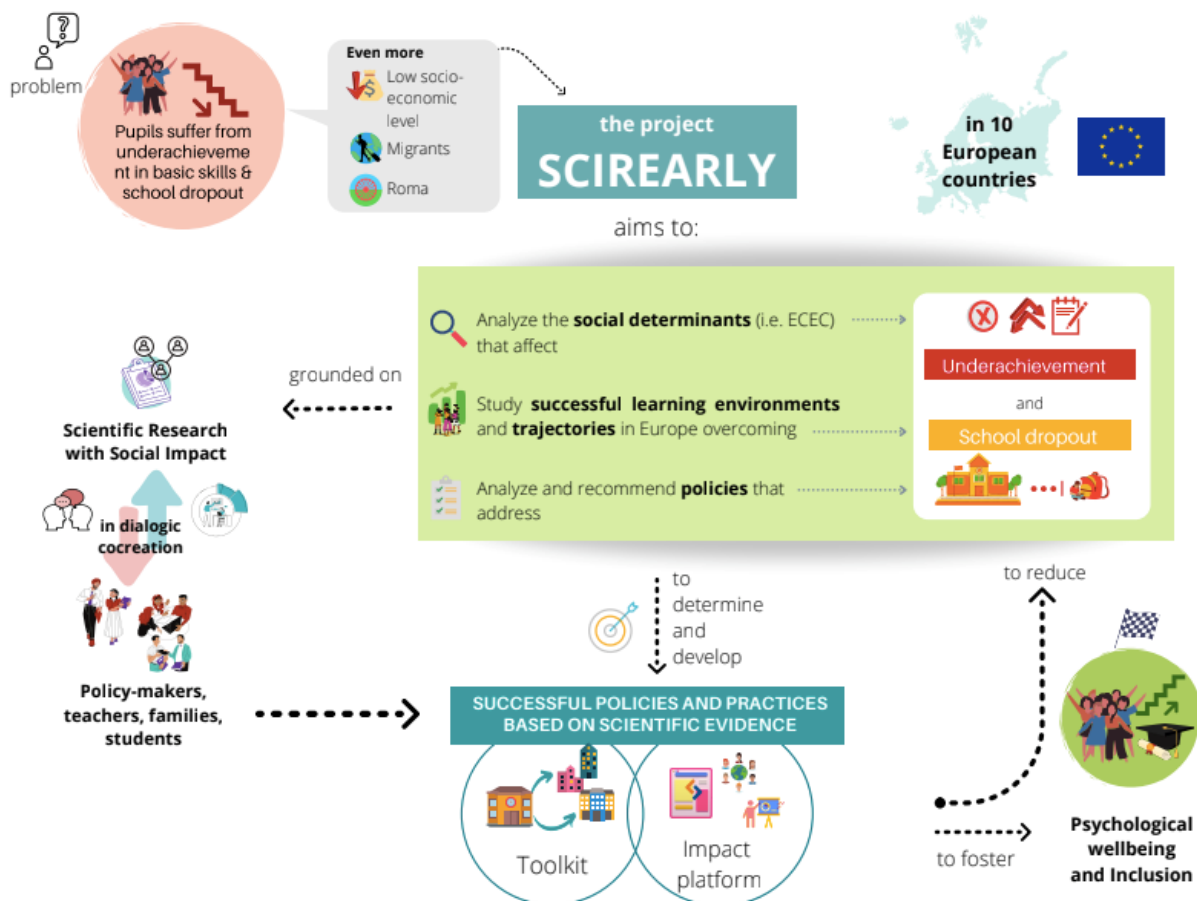
SCIREALY is supported by a consortium drawn from ten European countries comprising of research institutes, policymakers, and civic society partners. The full list of partners includes:

- University of Helsinki, Centre for University Teaching and Learning, Finland
- University of Malta
- University of Porto, Portugal
- Centre for Evaluation., Quality and Inspection (EQI), Dublin City University (DCU), Ireland
- CESIE, Italy
- The Directorate General for Education (DGE/)Ministry of Education, Portugal
- KMOP, The Social Action Innovation Centre, Greece
- University of Deusto, Spain
- European Parents' Association (EPA)
- The MHPSS Collaborative, Denmark
- Newcastle University, UK

The project is designed to last three years and will consist of nine work packages (WPs):

- WP1 Social determinants of educational underachievement in Europe and buffering aspects
- WP2 High-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) for enhancing learning outcomes for primary and secondary students
- WP3 Learning environments based on scientific evidence to address underachievement
- WP4 Replicable and scalable community-based research to address underachievement in Europe
- WP5 Succeeding against all the odds: socio-economic disadvantaged, Roma, migrants, and refugees
- WP6 Integration: evidence-based framework to address underachievement in Europe
- WP7 Dissemination, communication, impact, and advocacy
- WP8 Management
- WP9 Ethics

Figure 1. Graphical representation of SCIREALY project elements



The opening work package – Social determinants of educational underachievement in Europe and buffering aspects

This report is presented as the final outcome of WP1 which deals social determinants of educational underachievement in Europe and buffering aspects. The work package set itself the objectives of:

- Analysing the social determinants and root causes of underachievement and school dropout at primary and secondary education level.
- Mapping successful and less successful policies targeting the achievement gap from a comparative perspective.

We will now examine these issues in the context of three discrete reporting elements and draw some integrative findings at the end of the document.

Background

The issue of school failure in the form of ESL and academic underachievement is a longstanding one in very many countries both inside and outside the Union. A truly remarkable amount of research has been conducted into both the causes of such problems and the possible policies, initiatives, and interventions which might bring about transformative change in this most intractable of concerns. As we shall see, all this

effort can be considered to be bearing fruit to a very considerable extent. Many countries in the EU have had and continue to have significant reductions in the percentages of young people afflicted by the realities of ESL and academic underachievement.

This report both defines the many causes of ESL and academic underachievement but also illustrates the very significant decline in numbers of young people in many countries either leaving school early or not achieving their academic potential. It analyses in depth the most significant policies and initiatives which have brought about this most welcome progress but can do no more than list and briefly describe many others, such is the range of effort which is being devoted to the solution or amelioration of this complex problem.

This work package essentially subdivides into three parts. Section 1 examines the many interlinked causes of ESL and academic underachievement. Section 2 identifies policies and educational practices and initiatives from many countries which show evidence of being effective interventions in reducing the numbers of young people being failed by their school experience. Section 3, which consists in multiple ‘dialogic seminars’, is designed to consider not just the evidence emerging from the earlier sections but to suggest ways and approaches which might further improve policy and practice in this vital but very difficult field.

The conceptual framework

As a project, SCIREARLY is committed to drawing on a transformative paradigm using a multidimensional methodological approach that allows opportunities for personal inputs to be considered in the manner in which the project has been conceptualised and operationalised methodologically. In practice this has resulted in an approach to data collection that prioritises the voices of those traditionally marginalised, through the adoption of strategies such as the ‘dialogic seminar’. In addition, the project team has committed itself to foreground policies and practices arising from this transformative standpoint.

There has been a longstanding interest in the transformative power of social policy in general and educational policy in particular (Apple, 2013, 1988; Sen, 1997; Beresford, 2002). The recognition of the potential of educational policy interventions to change the trajectories of the lives of the most marginalised 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. 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. While conducting a comparative analysis of policy discourse and practices and identifying the measures pertaining to underachievement and ESL, particular attention is dedicated to selecting measures that employed a transformative approach.

In order to elucidate these issues, the SCIREARLY project developed a cross-cutting analytic framework that has allowed it to:

- a) Classify key policies and interventions using a prevention/intervention/compensation conceptual framework.
- b) Explore in greater detail policies that are ‘transformative’ in their systemic impact.

The sections of this report

In Section 1, the SCIREARLY consortium conducted a comprehensive examination of the academic literature to identify the root causes of underachievement and early leaving from the educational system. Additionally, legislative measures, policies, and policy-driven initiatives were scrutinised across nations with historically

low rates of school dropout and elevated levels of student achievement, as well as countries that have effectively reduced dropout rates and those still grappling with rates exceeding the EU's target.

To address the issue of academic underachievement and school failure identified and described in Section 1, Section 2 examines various educational practices and interventions across multiple tiers: the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels, which are substantiated by empirical evidence of social impact. These encompass 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, encompassing digital literacy and media literacy. Concurrently, these practices are also designed to promote psychosocial well-being and inclusivity. This comprehensive 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. Additionally, this examination delves into the existing scientific research and evidence to ascertain the effectiveness of these measures in addressing issues related to underachievement and ESL.

Despite the generally bright and encouraging picture of progress painted in Sections 1 and 2 showing that the proportion of ESL and academic underachievement in the EU has declined significantly over the past decade, not all countries have experienced such declines. Moreover, these negative experiences continue to impact to a greater extent on those from socio-economically disadvantaged communities and those – an increasing number likely to increase further – from immigrant and refugee backgrounds. Clearly, we must examine whether the policies and interventions outlined in Sections 1 and 2 can be further developed and expanded to meet the challenges. To try to do this, Section 3 used the innovative technique of dialogic seminars, involving key stakeholders, most importantly including parents and students as well as professionals in the field, to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of current policy and practice in the context of the significant problems remaining. The seminars, their methodology, and their outcomes are described in detail in Section 3 below.

Summary, conclusions, and recommendations

In the conceptualisation of this work package, it was designed to be a series of steps each building on the other. Firstly, in Section 1 the consortium analysed ESL and academic underachievement and the many complex and interlocking causes of both.

In Section 2, the field of analysis was the remarkable range of policies, interventions, and indeed the massive resources which have been deployed across the EU to tackle these problems, which to many had become endemic and perhaps, insoluble. Very positively, In Section 2 it is noted that all this effort has yielded impressive results in very many countries.

Yet in Section 3, the dialogic seminars, the key questions are the vital ones for the future. How can this progress be maintained and developed further; how can it spread to those countries whose progress has been slow; and perhaps, most of all, can we avoid a return to the worst of these failures in the context of increasing levels of immigrants and refugees to be integrated into societies and education systems. To tackle this key question, Section 3 brings together a wide range of opinion and expertise to seek the best ways forward.

Therefore, the final section of this report attempts to integrate the research and findings of the three earlier sections, not merely to report the main findings from each, but also to build on them, not only by recognising the progress that has been made but by identifying existing policies and interventions that can be expanded and also new approaches and ideas.

Section 1. Social determinants of underachievement and dropout

1.1. Background

This section outlines the main findings from the multidisciplinary systematic review and secondary data analysis conducted by the SCIREARLY team with the goal of mapping the existing scientific evidence around the influence of social determinants on students' underachievement and ESL and identifying the elements that have been shown to successfully counteract their effects. The systematic review focuses on studies published in peer-reviewed journals over the last 20 years in the early years, primary, and secondary education levels. In parallel, a secondary data analysis exploring a Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (2018) dataset was also conducted to supplement the existing literature yielded from the systematic review.

The main research question explored in the systematic review is, 'What does literature say about the social determinants (institutional, socio-economic, cognitive, cultural, linguistic, gender, psycho-emotional and well-being, and ECEC) and the root causes of underachievement in relation with ESL?'

Meanwhile, the specific objectives are as follows:

1. Analyse the effect of each of the social determinants on students' underachievement and ESL (institutional, socio-economic, cognitive, cultural, linguistic, gender, psycho-emotional and well-being, and ECEC) on students and impact on underachievement and ESL.
2. Understand the nature and degree of the impact of these social determinants on underachievement and ESL.
3. Collate data about how these social determinants impact different countries, cultures, and vulnerable groups differently or similarly.
4. Investigate which structures or determinants have the greatest impact on underachievement and ESL.
5. Examine whether there are combinations of social determinants that particularly impact vulnerable groups.
6. Find out what key social determinants are common among certain vulnerable groups, and those social determinants which, on the other hand, promote achievement.
7. Identify successful policy actions to combat underachievement.

1.2. General methodology of the systematic reviews

This section provides a description of the process adopted by the SCIREARLY partners for the systematic review, which was based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement methodology. The first step involved defining the key concepts included in the systematic review. The partners worked together and conducted several meetings to achieve a common understanding of the aim and nature of the task and the concepts that they were working with, as well as decide on the methodology to be adopted, and how the workload would be distributed among the team (Table 1). It was agreed that one of the initial challenges was to develop a definition for underachievement (as the key focus of the systematic review) as well as for each of the social determinants targeted.

Table 1. Distribution of social determinants among project partners

Partner	University of Malta	University of Deusto	University of Porto	Dublin City University	University of Helsinki	Newcastle University
Social determinant	Early childhood education and care	Institutional	Gender, Cognitive	Socio-economic, Cultural	Psycho-emotional and well-being	Linguistic

1.2.1. DEFINING UNDERACHIEVEMENT

Underachievement is defined in various ways. Thorndyke (1963) defined it as ‘achievement falling below what would be forecast from our most informed and accurate prediction, based on a team of predictor variables’ (p.19). It was agreed that the definition of underachievement in SCIREARLY and in this review would be based on that used by PISA, where underachievers in PISA are those pupils who fail to reach proficiency Level 2, i.e., the minimum level necessary to participate successfully in society (European Commission, 2020a). As such, underachievement is understood as a performance level below measured indications of ability (Siegle et al., 2012).

The PRISMA statement provides a strict and structured approach which also made it possible to combine findings from the separate reviews. The partners started by deciding on a common understanding of the different social determinants. This led to compiling a set of definitions for the social determinants. These definitions are found in Appendix 1. It was agreed that the databases used to extract the sources would be Web of Science, PsycINFO, and/or SCOPUS. In line with the description of WP1, only publications published in the past 20 years (i.e., from 2003) were to be extracted and included.

The partners also agreed that high-quality papers published in peer-reviewed journals, relevant books, research reports, and other grey literature from relevant public and private institutions were to be included. The intention was to take an interdisciplinary approach both in terms of the literature consulted (education, psychology, sociology, economy, linguistics, etc.) and the methods applied (quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods) in the studies. Based on these research decisions, the inclusion and exclusion criteria for all the systematic reviews were then determined (Table 2).

Table 2. Inclusion/Exclusion criteria used for the selection of publications in the screening process

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Focus on students from early years education, primary, and secondary education	Pertaining to studies conducted with students outside of early years, primary, and secondary school
Focus on the social determinant targeted	Not focused on the social determinant targeted
Focus on impact on underachievement and/or early school leaving (ESL)	Tackling the social determinant in isolation, without a link to the impact on underachievement and ESL
Publications include peer-reviewed papers in journals, books, policy documents, research reports, and other grey literature	Low-quality or unpublished research or literature
Published in 2003 or later	Published before 2003
Empirical studies conducted in the EU	Studies conducted outside the context of EU countries; Publications with no empirical data
Pertaining to relevant disciplines fields such as education, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, etc.	Pertaining to disciplines unrelated to education, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, etc.
Literature reported in English	Publication not in English

The general keywords and the specific ones for each determinant to search for literature on the databases when extracting sources were then discussed and agreed among the partners. The following general keywords to use together with specific keywords (for each social determinant) were identified and a similar approach for each social determinant was developed.

1.2.2. GENERAL KEYWORDS

Four common keywords (underachievement, ESL, school dropout, and school disengagement) were identified. These were to be used in combination with keywords related to the specific social determinant:

- **Underachievement** AND [keyword specific to the social determinant]
- **ESL** AND [keyword specific to the social determinant]
- **School dropout** AND [keyword specific to the social determinant]
- **School disengagement** AND [keyword specific to the social determinant]

The following combinations were then used with the keywords specific to the social determinants as shown below:

- **Students** AND **underachievement** AND [keyword specific to the social determinant]
- **Migrants** AND **underachievement** AND [keyword specific to the social determinant]
- **Vulnerable group** AND **underachievement** AND [keyword specific to the social determinant]
- **Policy** AND **underachievement** AND [keyword specific to the social determinant]

1.3. Literature review

To gain a systematic understanding of how different determinants affect students' achievement and ability to stay in school, the consortium researchers carried out a systematic literature review for each of the eight social determinants. The keywords used for the specific social determinants are as follows:

- **Institutional:** schools, assessment, student-teacher-ratio, lecturers' interest and commitment, school calendar stability, extent, teaching methodology, streaming, resources, single-sex schooling, student's peers, school facilities, teacher quality, school autonomy, decision-making level, education policies
- **Socio-economic:** financial, social, cultural, human capital resources, family, household income, parents' occupation, parents' educational level, poverty, access to learning
- **Cognitive:** Individual ability, learning capacity, attention span, engagement in learning, neurocognitive skills
- **Cultural:** society, groups, religion, family support, ethnicity, expectations, cultural deprivation
- **Linguistic:** bilingualism, migrant, self-study habits, motivation, plurilingual, textbooks, curricula
- **Gender:** boys, girls, gender identity, segregation, discrimination, teacher labelling, subcultures, feminisation of teaching, stereotypes
- **Psycho-emotional and well-being:** learning-related behaviour, problems relationships, mental health, defiance, impulsivity, disruptiveness, aggression, hyperactivity emotional problems, adolescence, anxiety
- **ECEC:** quality in early childhood, early childhood education and care, early years, child well-being, parent partnership, transitions in early childhood, professionalism, access, governance, pre-school, Kindergarten, toddlers, childcare, early years settings, babies, young children

The literature search took place between 25th January and 3rd March 2023 and the selection process was implemented in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. The eight research teams from the partnership

performed a rigorous search for quantitative and qualitative primary research sources on the publication databases using the agreed keyword combinations. The search procedure followed a series of screening exercises as is required by PRISMA according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria agreed by the consortium, in line with the requirements for validity, veracity, methodological quality, and reliability, according to the structure for carrying out a systematic review (Baker, 2016; Gough et al., 2019). The title and abstract were used to identify sources when running the keywords on the database. The sources downloaded were then screened for doubles and relevance accordingly until the publications relevant to the topic of the systematic review were finally identified. The guidelines for the methodology of the systematic review are included in Appendix 1. Table 3 provides the summary of the records identified and reviewed for each social determinant.

Table 3. Summary of records identified and reviewed for the systematic literature review for each social determinant

	Early childhood education and care	Linguistic	Socio-emotional and well-being ¹	Institutional	Gender	Cultural	Socio-economic	Cognitive
Records identified	3524	6521	28 (reviews and meta-analyses)	7049	779	141860	6184	666
Records screened by title and abstract	2038	6521	19 (reviews and meta-analyses)	544	606	1265	389	513
Reports screened by full text	702	291	14 (reviews and meta-analyses)	428	106	89	109	115
Studies included in review	24	30	466	29	53	59	80	84

1.4. Results – Key findings for each social determinant

This section summarises key results from the eight systematic reviews and focuses particularly on those elements that appear to be linked solely to one social determinant. The analysis highlighted the presence of certain elements connected to more than one single social determinant, showing the transversal nature of aspects such as teachers' and families' expectations as well as motivation and well-being, among others. Those elements connected to more than one social determinant are further developed in Section 1.5. As for Section 1.4, acknowledging that the elements surrounding underachievement and ESL do not work separately, the following discussion is devoted to summarising those exclusive elements encountered in each of the systematic reviews.

¹ In regards to the determinant socio-emotional and well-being, a review of review studies and meta-analyses was conducted. The reason for this was that there is an extensive amount of empirical research conducted in this field (for example: 487,273 articles in Scopus during the years 2014-2023), and this was the only rational approach to take to end up to the quality outcome.

1.4.1. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Decades of research points out the potential of ECEC to prevent ESL and enhance academic performance and well-being later in life. Key messages from the systematic review conducted on this social determinant are:

- a) The impact of robust **early numeracy and literacy programmes** (which include **families' inputs**) in alleviating risks of underachievement.
- b) **Early detection** of need for support and social assistance.
- c) Means to ensure affordable ECEC quality services.

Early numeracy and literacy programmes which include families' participation were reported to boost young children's vocabulary, phonological awareness of rhyme and alliteration, letter identification, understanding of books, and writing (Högström et al., 2015; Evangelou et al., 2007), while also enhancing parent-child quality interactions at home. The systematic review also highlights how the early detection of particular health-related conditions (such as epilepsy, development coordination disorder, or single-sided deafness) can be decisive in children's later academic achievement, attitudes towards learning, and development of pro-social behaviour (Toll & Van Luit, 2013; Nicolai et al., 2007; Sabbagh et al., 2006; Arras et al., 2021; Asendorph et al., 2008; Axberg et al., 2006). Although the studies focused on different countries and different contexts, the results point out that the earlier detection the better, and the measure of placing the children in segregated schools did not work well for any of them (more on this on Section 1.5). This conclusion connects with the urgency of ensuring access to affordable high-quality ECEC. Only one study delved into this issue (Gonzalez-Motos & Sauri Saula, 2022) which, after interviewing 34 mothers of under-three-year-olds in Barcelona (Spain), juxtaposed quality services on the one hand and state-funded services on the other. This supposed contrast between quality and public services needs to be revisited to better respond to current priorities in terms of ensuring universal high-quality access to ECEC.

1.4.2. COGNITIVE FACTORS

The cognitive social determinant refers to mental processes and abilities that influence learning and/or the conditions for learning, and therefore include functions such as thinking, attention, and memory (Roy, 2013). It is worth mentioning that, as cognitive functions do not operate in isolation from the social context, extracting purely cognitive determinants related to ESL and underachievement is a tricky exercise. Therefore, the systematic review focused on this issue identified functions such as **attention, memory, and self-regulation**, along with a set of medical-related conditions such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorders (ASD), and epilepsy that might impair cognitive functioning in different ways and may lead to underachievement.

As for ADHD, results revealed that early diagnosis and tailored clinical treatment enhanced graduation rates among students with this disorder, while the connection was unclear between ADHD and IQ levels studied in different contexts (Lecendreux et al., 2011; Tempelaar et al., 2017; Reilly et al., 2014; Caci et al., 2014; Cornoldi, 2010). As for students diagnosed with ASD, academic underachievement emerged as closely related to behavioural aspects and different processing of feelings and emotions (Moyse & Porter, 2015; Linnenbank et al., 2022). Again, school-based interventions proved to be effective in alleviating behavioural difficulties with students with ASD, fostering their social visibility while improving their school achievement and motivation (Leifler et al., 2022).

Several studies associated epilepsy with underachievement, particularly with the cognitive consequences of this medical condition such as spelling disorders, deficits in working memory and processing speed, among others (Brabcova et al., 2015; Chaix et al., 2006; Kaczmarek et al., 2016; Reilly et al., 2014; Reilly et al., 2015; Sabbagh et al., 2006). Frequency of seizures might be associated with underachievement, and this might be also explained by the tendency to exclude students with epilepsy from mainstream education (Chaix et al., 2006; Sabbagh et al., 2006).

1.4.3. INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS

Although institutional factors of underachievement were embedded into the wider educational picture, some stood out as solely institution-related elements affecting underachievement and ESL in Europe. Those were firstly, **grade repetition** and secondly, **accessible counselling** and school guidance.

The well-known measure of **grade repetition**, which requires children to repeat a grade level in school because they failed to meet required benchmarks or grade level standards, has accumulated evidence of negative effects on academic performance and students' well-being, leading to school dropout over decades (Kerekes, 2017; Longas-Mayayo et al., 2021). However, grade repetition continues to be implemented in many European educational systems. As early as in primary education, grade repetition before 12 years old was found to be the strongest predictor of grade repetition in secondary education, with significant consequences for ESL (Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015; Högberg & Lindgren, 2023; Longas-Mayayo et al., 2021). Evidence keeps telling us that grade repetition designed as a pure repetition of a given academic year (without providing additional materials or resources) does not leverage repeaters' achievement (Jerrim et al., 2022). In addition, students from ethnic minorities such as Roma tend to represent higher grade repetition rates (Alvarez & Gamella, 2018), which intersects with the negative effects of other social determinants such as socio-economic status (SES) and cultural background (Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015).

Accessible **counselling and school guidance** was a less prominent issue in the systematic review though worthy of attention, since it has been found that students between 14 and 16 years old acknowledge the value of accessible counselling services and guidance in the school setting in helping them consider different options as they shape their academic path (Hodgson & ours, 2014). On the other hand, when this service is not available, students revealed a feeling of lack of choices to direct their learning paths from a more flexible and needs-based perspective (Ahola & Kivela, 2007; Savvides et al., 2021).

1.4.4. SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS

SCIREARLY is committed to overcoming the determinism that links SES with educational outcomes and ESL, since this correlation accumulates a vast amount of scientific production resulting in little to no solutions to overcome the over-studied problem (Doyle et al., 2021; Freeney & O'Connell, 2012; Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015; McKinney, 2012; Parson, 2013; Spencer et al., 2017). Quality education frequently appears as linked with economic resources, and this rigid relationship hinders the **potential of human agency** to transform any given social context beyond its economic situation. One clear example of how socio-economic aspects linked to underachievement are dependent on many other elements that can be changed by human action is literacy proficiency and literacy confidence (Kellett, 2009). Those important elements linked to academic success are built in highly stimulating and favourable environments, and drawing solely on the socio-economic dimension of families, it has been stated that students from more advantaged backgrounds have those stimulating contexts at home while students with less advantaged realities do not have the same opportunities. However, the school context where children spend many hours emerges as an ideal space that offers a highly stimulating and favourable environment for all (Cockerill et al., 2021; Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012; Hadjar et al., 2021).

1.4.5. CULTURAL FACTORS

When studying culture as a social determinant of underachievement, it was found that there are limitations to the view around attributing ESL exclusively to conflicts among students' ethnicities, religion, culturally inspired gender roles, culturally dependent perspectives about education, or parents' lower educational aspirations (Van Den Berghe et al., 2022). Due to the holistic nature of culture and its influence in the entire society, the systematic review did not reveal aspects that are exclusively related to the culture when it comes

to better understanding ESL and underachievement. However, results revealed the ‘immigrant optimism hypothesis’, which refers to the comparably **high educational aspirations that immigrant and ethnic minority groups have towards their children** (Dollmann & Weißmann, 2020). It is remarkable how this aspiration ultimately results in both significantly higher achievement in terms of success as well as comparably higher dropout rates. On the other hand, a **lack or incomplete knowledge of the educational mechanisms** that families from ethnic minorities report might be linked with less informed decisions and weaker opportunities to support their children’s academic journeys, resulting in dropout because of this ‘information asymmetries’ (Hartas, 2016; Luu et al., 2019). Lastly, a potential solution emerges from the systematic review when some studies reflect on the need for a **more culturally diverse teacher workforce** (e.g. teachers from different ethnic backgrounds, teachers speaking minority languages) in alignment with the culturally diverse populations that exist in schools, which might enhance students’ self-confidence and increase their motivation (Khalifa et al., 2016).

1.4.6. LINGUISTIC FACTORS

Out of the four main dimensions that emerged from the systematic review focused on linguistic factors (linguistic bias, intercultural awareness and linguistic practices, issues linked to curriculum, and autonomy and agency), three of them relate to cultural background. In this regard, it is important to understand that although many European countries have encouraged students with migrant backgrounds to abandon their first language in favour of the language of instruction, research now recognises that this disadvantages immigrant students further and that **linguistic diversity can in fact strengthen academic achievement** (Agirdag & Vanlaar, 2008; Backus & Yagmur, 2019). As such, there is a call for initial teacher training and continued professional development to directly address linguistic diversity awareness (Hamilton, 2013; Møller et al., 2014) and for the **recruitment of bilingual/multilingual teachers, including those who speak minority languages** (Karpati et al., 2014; Lamonica et al., 2020; Martinez-Usarralde et al., 2017). Indeed, multilingual education should not mean segregation, tracking, or ability groupings but that students should be encouraged to learn from one another’s linguistic diversity (Agirdag & Vanlaar, 2008).

1.4.7. GENDER FACTORS

Gender has a transversal nature as it appears across most of the systematic reviews implemented. Regardless, some particularities were identified to better understand the potential effect of gender in ESL and underachievement. In particular, these relate to the **underachievement of boys**, the **perceived gender stereotyping of students’ performance**, and the **shortage of male teachers** (and the feminisation of teaching, particularly in pre-school education and primary education).

Scientific literature shows a gendered problem when exploring underachievement and ESL, as research continues to show a persistent trend of significantly lower achievement and **higher dropout rates among boys** compared to girls (Bayon-Calvo et al., 2021; Bastos et al., 2009; Cavaco, 2021; Cavaglia, 2021; Borgna & Struffolino, 2017). By the age of seven, girls outperform boys in all core subjects (reading, writing, and mathematics), and the gap remains at the secondary level, except for mathematics, where the difference is almost imperceptible (Cavaglia et al., 2020). This relates to the perceived **gendered stereotypes of performance**, although research has evidenced that this expectation of differential achievement and potential can become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Hartley & Sutton, 2013; Wolter et al., 2015).

As for the relation of the imbalanced proportion of female and male teachers with underachievement and ESL, it remains **unclear whether teachers’ gender has a say** in students’ engagement and achievement. Research points out that based on students’ perceptions, the quality of teaching rather than gender is crucial to ensuring their academic success and overall well-being in different educational stages (Francis et al., 2008; Carrington & McPhee, 2008; Salis et al., 2019; Grønberg, 2013; Mora 2012; Geerdink et al., 2010; Bhana et al., 2022).

1.4.8. PSYCHO-EMOTIONAL AND WELL-BEING FACTORS

Issues related to well-being as a social determinant of underachievement appear deeply interconnected, showing overlaps between school engagement, emotional regulation skills, mental health, sense of belonging, and overall school climate (Allen et al., 2022; Bradshaw et al., 2021; European Commission, 2021; Schleiser et al., 2019). It is noteworthy that **emotionally supportive and trusting teacher-children relationship** as well as with other school staff stood out as a building block for students' well-being and school-engagement (Khalfaoui et al., 2021; Greenwood & Kelly, 2016; Martins et al., 2022; Yang & Huang, 2022; Quin, 2017). **Positive classroom climate and inclusive peer interactions** were also found to be instrumental in children's well-being and prevention of behavioural problems, particularly in multicultural and disadvantaged contexts (Greenwood & Kelly, 2016; Khalfaoui et al., 2021; Martins et al., 2022). Experiencing bullying, abuse and violence and other forms of marginalization increases the risk of mental health issues both for victims and perpetrators (European Commission, 2021).

1.5. An integrated overview of the relationship between the social determinants on underachievement

As everything is linked to human nature, interconnections are also found in the social determinants of underachievement and ESL. This section offers a synthesis of the four aspects that more prominently came up across the eight systematic reviews:

- a) Family involvement as key factor to prevent and reduce underachievement and ESL.
- b) Segregation-based practices, which undermine achievement and well-being.
- c) School engagement and motivation, which positively correlate with less underachievement and ESL.
- d) Teachers' expectations and curriculum design as influential to reducing or aggravating these issues.

Decades of research demonstrate the key role of **families'** organic **involvement** in school across different educational stages. Early numeracy and literacy programmes that include families' inputs have proven to enhance young children's vocabulary acquisition, phonological awareness, and letter identification while increasing pro-social behaviour (and reduced hyper-activity) among children (Evangelou et al., 2007; Högström et al., 2015). Particularly when the school context includes different cultures and ethnicities, the involvement of families in school does increase the cultural capital of the educational setting, alleviating the effects of poverty or marginalisation (Payne, 2018; Balenzano et al., 2019; Morris et al., 2016; Chevalier et al., 2013; Behtoui, 2017; Vryonides, 2007; Khattab & Modood, 2018; Hartas, 2016).

On the other hand, practices based on **segregation** are demonstrated from different levels of analysis (ECEC, institutional level, socio-economic perspective, and the linguistic sphere) to have devastating consequences both for academic achievement and well-being. For instance, tracking policies and practice have resulted in an increased achievement gap between students from different groups and intensified conflicts and social cohesion problems (Agirdag & Vanlaar, 2008; Freeney & O'Connell, 2012; Straková, 2007; Brannstrom, 2004; Frehill & Dunsmuir, 2015; Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015). In addition, tracking practices have been found to hamper students' self-esteem, self-confidence, motivation, and school engagement, which was another main dimension that came up transversally (not only when exploring the well-being social determinant of underachievement and ESL but also when looking at linguistic social determinant, socio-economic, and ECEC) (Lasarte et al., 2020; Duffy & Elwood, 2013; Gadeyne et al., 2004; Zhang et al., 2016). Indeed, students' motivation and their engagement towards school and school-based activities have been demonstrated to

prevent and even revert risk of underachievement, consequently minimising the rates of ESL (Khalifa et al., 2016; Schmitsek, 2022; Spiegler et al., 2018; Meletiou-Mavrotheris et al., 2020). It is noteworthy that teachers' way of communicating and interacting with students was found to be an asset to increase and enhance students' motivation and sense of belonging towards school – two important elements that are directly associated with less risk of underachievement and ESL (Warne et al., 2020). This has been identified in scientific literature as a particular element within the 'teacher quality' dimension (Makarova & Herzog, 2013; Duffy & Elwood, 2013; De Castro & Pereira, 2019).

An element that emerged from institutional and cultural aspects from the systematic reviews is **curriculum design**. Results on this regard highlighted that fixed or mainstream curricula that are not sensitive to the cultures embedded in the school context are an institutional factor of underachievement and ESL in Europe (Cudworth, 2008; Lambrev, 2015; Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2014). In the case of Roma communities, Cudworth (2008) demonstrated that when the school curriculum fails to acknowledge Roma culture and its traditions, underachievement and ESL rates increase among Roma students. On the other hand, a curriculum design rooted in a critical pedagogical approach and clear and coherent rules and opportunities for out-of-school activities emerged as drivers to foster academic engagement and avert ESL among at-risk students (MacMaoilir & McGillicuddy, 2022; Pelin et al., 2022).

1.5.1. SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS

After addressing the relationship between the different socio-determinants and their influence on ESL and underachievement, a secondary data analysis was carried out to complement the information obtained from the systematic reviews. For that purpose, the PISA (2018) dataset was explored since it offers a comprehensive insight into the themes targeted by this report.

Although the PISA (2018) dataset has been extensively analysed, most of the reports have exclusively focused on socio-economic aspects, and those analyses have rarely offered insights into potential drivers or transformative elements to prevent and overcome ESL and underachievement. For instance, Gamazo and Martínez-Abad (2020) stated that the most relevant variable to predict school performance is SES, arguing that 'performance in low-SES schools is affected in greater measure by country-level socio-economic indicators such as GDP [Gross Domestic Product], and individual educational indicators are relegated to a secondary level' (p. 1). Another vastly explored variable to explain academic performance has been the ethnicity of students. For example, Karakus et al. (2023) suggested that the general academic performance of migrant students is strongly associated with their migrant status (first-generation or second-generation), which leaves little room for non-racist discourses.

However, SCIREARLY's approach seeks to go further by exploring the variables influenced by human agency. In other words, the secondary data analysis conducted focused on malleable elements or those aspects that human action can change. Thus, a non-experimental study design was conducted based on cross-sectional data (secondary panel data from the PISA 2018² assessment). Specifically, we studied students' perceptions and beliefs about their school experience, considering whether they had never repeated a grade (Group 1) or whether they had repeated two or more grades (Group 2) from a sample of 397,082 students enrolled in the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) 3. The analysis revealed differences between students with good academic performance and those who performed poorly. All the results are shown in Appendix 2.

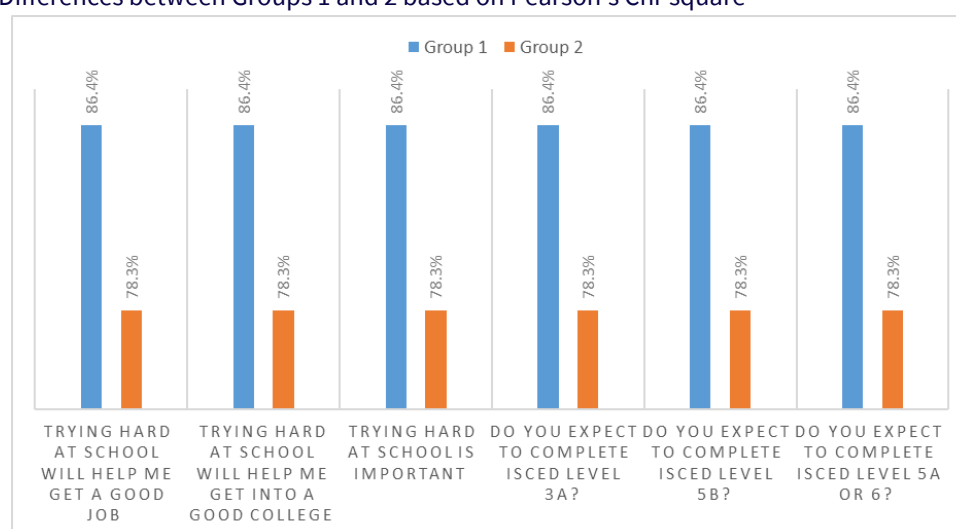
There were significant differences (Pearson's Chi-square) between the two groups regarding their perception about their experience regarding teachers' interaction, practice, and expectations, which the systematic review identified as an institutional factor linked to underachievement and ESL. Particularly, students from

² <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/2018database/>

Group 2 (with two or more years of grade retention) reported that their teacher had **less interest in their learning processes**, they **rarely receive extra help and support** from the teacher when needed, that clear goals for students' learning were barely set, and they perceived that the information regarding what they need to learn was unclear (ST100Q01TA, ST100Q02TA, ST100Q03TA, ST102Q01TA, ST213Q01HA, ST102Q04TA). Also, students that had repeated any grade twice or more perceived that the teacher did **not continue explaining until they achieved a full understanding** of the issue studied, nor did he or she ask questions to check whether students had indeed understood the lesson (ST100Q04TA, ST102Q02TA). Moreover, students from Group 2 reported **less confidence towards their ability** to do well in the course, as well as a lack of understanding of their points of view from their teacher (ST211Q01HA, ST211Q02HA). Rarely did these students get inspired by their **teachers' enthusiasm or enjoyment in teaching**, nor could they appreciate **the passion of the teacher towards the topic** of the lesson (ST213Q02HA, ST213Q04HA, ST213Q03HA). In addition, those students reported feeling barely understood by their teachers and a lack of support or individual help when they reported navigating difficulties (ST211Q03HA, ST212Q02HA, ST212Q01HA).

The data showed that there is a strong relationship between the students' perception about their teachers' attitudes and behaviours at school and students' academic performance. To further investigate the students' perceptions, we also explored **their expectations about school and future career**. There were also significant differences (Pearson's Chi-square) between the two groups, as can be seen in Figure 2. The tables are presented in Appendix 2.

Figure 2. Differences between Groups 1 and 2 based on Pearson's Chi-square



These results reveal an interesting finding: those students who had repeated a grade twice or more showed **lower expectations of achievement and a weaker belief that they will get promoted to the next grade or reach university**. They also believed to a lesser extent that their **efforts** at school will lead them to get a **good job in the future**.

1.6. Key takeaways from the systematic reviews

Overall, the main messages identified from the systematic reviews are the following:

- 'Reproductionist' approaches hinder the agency of students and communities.
- Few elements operated in isolation, and holistic interpretations of underachievement and ESL offer better solutions.
- Early school detection and preventive measures are key to counteract underachievement.

- Transformative lens at all levels (individual, school, and community) are needed to reverse and prevent ESL.

Evidence from the systematic reviews shows that social determinants rarely act in isolation, and that holistic interpretations on the causes of and solutions to ESL and underachievement offer a more useful approach. Early school detection and preventive measures are also found to be key in more effectively tackling these issues. Equally as important, the findings suggest that reproductionist approaches limit the potential of students' and communities' human agency, and that a transformative lens offers compelling solutions that draw on individual and collective capacity for societal change.

Appendices

- Appendix 1. Social Determinants of underachievement and school dropout -Systematic Review Reports
- Appendix 2. Secondary Data Analysis
- Appendix 3. Mapping successful and less successful policies to tackle underachievement – National Reports
- Appendix 4. Co-creation of successful policies – Report on Dialogic Seminars

Section 2. Mapping successful policies to tackle underachievement – Cross-countries policy analysis report

2.1. Background

To address the issue of academic underachievement and school dropout, the SCIREARLY project endeavours to examine various educational practices across multiple tiers: the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels, which 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, encompassing digital literacy as well (specifically, media literacy). Concurrently, these practices are designed to promote psychosocial well-being and inclusivity. The comprehensive 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 undertaking, the SCIREARLY consortium conducted a comprehensive examination of the academic literature to identify the root causes of underachievement and early leaving from the educational system (Section 1). Additionally, legislative measures, policies, and policy-driven initiatives were scrutinised across nations with historically low rates of school dropout and elevated levels of student achievement, as well as countries that have effectively reduced dropout rates and those still grappling with rates exceeding the EU's target. While conducting a comparative analysis of policy discourse and practices and identifying the policy measures pertaining to underachievement and ESL, particular attention is dedicated to selecting measures that employed a transformative approach. Additionally, this examination delves into the existing scientific research and evidence to ascertain the effectiveness of these measures in addressing issues related to underachievement and ESL.

This section of the report, Section 2, presents a comparative policy analysis involving 11 European countries. The insights gleaned from this analysis are leveraged to formulate evidence-based recommendations for policy approaches and practices meant to address educational underachievement while concurrently addressing the issue of underachievement.

The primary objectives of this policy analysis are:

- Map successful and less successful policies targeting the achievement gap from a comparative perspective.
- Evaluate successful and less successful policies and practices based on scientific research and evidence.
- Evaluate orientation of policy discourse with reference to prevention, intervention and compensation measures.
- Examine policies and practices from a transformative approach and study their social impact.
- Propose transferable and scalable policy measures that have proven to reduce ESL and underachievement.

In the context of WP1, this comprehensive analysis of policies forms a pivotal component, constituting the second major task within the SCIREARLY framework. This endeavour is driven by the overarching goal of assessing the efficacy of extant policies in relation to the European target of reducing ESL rates to 9% by the

year 2030. The analytical process entails a meticulous examination of policies enacted at various levels, including the 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 2012 to 2021 for all member states of the EU (EU-27), is instrumental in the identification of the countries that are included in the policy review.

TOWARDS A TRANSFORMATIVE PARADIGM

As a project, SCIREARLY is committed to drawing on a:

transformative paradigm using a multidimensional methodological approach that allows opportunities for personal and systematic transformation.

As has already been noted, this impacts the manner in which the project has been conceptualised and operationalised methodologically. In practice it has resulted in an approach to data collection that prioritises the voices of those traditionally marginalised through the adoption of strategies such as the dialogic seminar. In addition, in the SCIREARLY application, the project team has committed itself to ‘examine policies and practices from this transformative approach’.

There has been a longstanding interest in the transformative power of social policy in general and educational policy in particular (Apple, 2012, 1988; Sen, 1997; Beresford, 2002;). As we have seen in Table 5, the recognition of the potential of educational policy interventions to change the trajectories of lives of the most marginalised 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. 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.

In order to address these issues, the SCIREARLY project developed a cross-cutting analytic framework that has allowed it to:

- Classify the key policies using the prevention/intervention/compensation framework identified (Section 2.3).
- Explore in greater detail policies that are ‘transformative’ in their systemic impact (Section 2.4).

In Section 2.4 specifically, we will look at three such policy interventions drawing on each of the national policy contexts analysed with a view to developing a deep and rich understanding of how targeted policy interventions can transform systems and lives.

The task was spearheaded by the Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection at DCU in Ireland. They conducted a detailed analysis of Eurostat data to identify relevant countries for the analysis and provided a comprehensive policy analysis framework, which served as the structural foundation for the subsequent analytical endeavours. Furthermore, DCU, in close collaboration with partner institutions, developed a standardised template for the policy analysis report. This template serves as a structured framework for the systematic presentation of findings, policy insights, and recommendations arising from the comprehensive policy review.

The other partner institutions that have made valuable contributions to this task include the University of Newcastle in England, KMOP in Greece, CESIE in Italy, Deusto in Spain, and the University of Portugal in Portugal. The collective expertise and collaborative synergy among these partner institutions are instrumental in ensuring the rigour, comprehensiveness, and relevance of the policy analysis, with the

ultimate aim of informing evidence-based policy approaches to combat underachievement and ESL in the realm of education.

2.2 Methodology

This section outlines the process for selecting countries for policy analysis and the methodology adopted for this analysis.

The SCIREARLY team initiated their selection based on underachievement and ESL rates within the EU. In May 2023, the team accessed Eurostat's Early School Leaving Data from 2012 to 2021 (Table 4). This dataset revealed discernible trends, leading to the categorisation of countries into three groups:

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

Each partner country initially selected its own nation and one other for a policy review aimed at addressing underachievement and ESL. 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. Italy and the UK, both unable to reduce ESL rates, were automatically included due to their consortium membership, and Romania was selected by one of the partners. Consequently, a total of 11 countries were included in the policy review, categorised as follows:

- Category 1: Poland, Switzerland, and Slovenia.
- Category 2: Greece, Ireland, Malta, Portugal, and Spain.
- Category 3: Italy, England, and Romania.

Several meetings were conducted to discuss the process and finalise the policy review template, which also included the protocol for the task. Partners prepared individual country reports using the template provided by DCU. Each country report comprised four main sections: a description of legislation and policy measures or systemic strategies addressing underachievement and ESL; a review of these measures in academic literature; an assessment of these measures in alignment with EU recommendations for prevention, intervention, and compensation measures addressing ESL; and identification of gaps in policy discourse and implementation, and recommendations.

The analysis was conducted at two levels: first, based on academic literature, and second, in the context of EU recommendations for ESL prevention, intervention, and compensation measures. The overarching principle throughout the analysis was the consideration of the whole-school approach as a transformative approach.

This report represents the culmination of a two-phased research study. During the initial phase, all consortium partners individually prepared policy review reports for the designated countries selected for examination. Subsequently, these reports were collectively reviewed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the policies and measures implemented in each country, and notes were taken on aspects of potential significance. In accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis methodology, the selected items were subjected to coding, leading to the identification of overarching themes. All members of the DCU team engaged in multiple rounds of reading and review of the policy analysis reports, culminating in the development of a provisional table of themes and subthemes. Additionally, the interrelationship between

these themes was established. Ultimately, the themes were assigned appropriate names, and analytical narrative was developed.

Table 4. Three categories of countries with their early school leaving (ESL) rate 2012–2021

Countries with consistently low ESL rates	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Poland	5.7	5.6	5.4	5.3	5.2	5	4.8	5.2	5.4	5.9
Switzerland	5.5	5.6	5.6	5.2	4.9	4.5	4.4	4.4	4	4.9
Croatia	5.1	4.5	2.8	2.8	2.8	3.1	3.3	3	2.2	2.4
Slovenia	4.4	3.9	4.4	5	4.9	4.3	4.2	4.6	4.1	3.1
Countries with significant improvement in ESL rates	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Spain	24.7	23.6	21.9	20	19	18.3	17.9	17.3	16	13.3
Portugal	20.5	18.9	17.4	13.7	14	12.6	11.8	10.6	8.9	5.9
Malta	18.1	17.1	17	16.3	15.6	14	14	13.9	12.6	10.7
Greece	11.3	10.1	9	7.9	6.2	6	4.7	4.1	3.8	3.2
Ireland	9.9	8.7	6.7	6.8	6	5	5	5.1	5	3.3
Countries struggling	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Romania	17.8	17.3	18.1	19.1	18.5	18.1	16.4	15.3	15.6	15.3
Italy	17.3	16.8	15	14.7	13.8	14	14.5	13.5	13.1	12.7
Norway	14.8	13.7	11.7	10.2	10.9	10.4	9.9	9.9	9.9	12.3
United Kingdom	13.4	12.4	11.8	10.8	11.2	10.6	10.7	10.9	-	-
Bulgaria	12.5	12.5	12.9	13.4	13.8	12.7	12.7	13.9	12.8	12.2
Hungary	11.8	11.9	11.4	11.6	12.4	12.5	12.5	11.8	12.1	12
Cyprus	11.4	9.1	6.8	5.2	7.6	8.5	7.8	9.2	11.5	10.2
Germany (until 1990 former territory of the Federal Republic of Germany)	10.5	9.8	9.5	10.1	10.3	10.1	10.3	10.3	10.1	11.8

2.3. Summary of common prevention, intervention, and compensation measures: Cross-case analysis

An in-depth examination of national and regional regulations, as well as policy measures, employing the framework established by the European Commission with the primary aim of mitigating ESL and tackling underachievement – with a focus on prevention, intervention, and compensation – has unveiled a shared thread of commonality across a majority of the policy contexts (as reflected in Table 5). Nevertheless, it is imperative to acknowledge that the suitability, accessibility, and efficacy of these measures exhibit substantial variations. The themes or policy measures to address underachievement and ESL during the last ten years in the countries under review included expanding provision and affordability of ECEC; enhancing relevance and flexibility of curriculum; ensuring provision of guidance and counselling across educational levels; regulatory supports for school attendance, participation, and retention (prevention measures); support for socio-economically disadvantaged communities; Roma inclusion strategy; teachers' professional development (intervention measures); and good quality vocational education and training (VET) and 'second chance' educational pathways (compensatory measures). Among the array of prevention strategies, an eminent area of emphasis is ECEC, as every country has taken great strides in this direction to make the service available for all the children of that age group. Concurrently, with respect to intervention measures, addressing underachievement among students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds emerges as recurrent and predominant policy component. All countries have made substantial efforts to ensure equitable education by addressing barriers that may hinder the access of children and young people to quality education. Notably, VET programmes emerge as a significant compensatory action across all the countries under review.

However, other measures do not stand out as major actions, and the promotion of underachievement or tackling ESL appears to be a secondary theme. For instance, school attendance and retention have regulatory support in Ireland and England. In the remaining countries, these are often subsidiary components of intervention actions. For example, in Greece, increased school attendance and retention rates are expected and observed through remedial teaching practices. Similarly, professional development for teachers to create inclusive learning environments and adapt the curriculum to engage all learners, except in Poland, where the law on Pre-university Education #198 emphasises the restructuring of the initial training of teachers and strengthening on-the-job teacher training, is considered a subsidiary action within the intervention measures. For example, in Ireland, teachers and school leaders have priority access to professional development courses through the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme, while in Greece, teachers working in 'Education Priority Zones' (Zones Ekpaideftikis Proteraiotitas, or ZEPs) are provided with extensive training opportunities.

In response to the 2011 European Commission Communication for an EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, most countries have developed their Roma inclusion strategies, focusing on the four pillars: education, health, housing, and employment (European Commission, 2011). The measures taken in this regard are relatively similar, with the exception of Switzerland, where Roma are not recognised as a national minority, although the cantons take measures to support other minorities such as Yenish, Sinti, and Manouches (The Federal Council, 2018). Similarly, England lacks a long-term strategy for Roma, Gypsies, or travellers. Therefore, for this particular section, we have selected ECEC, support for disadvantaged communities, and VET and second-chance education as key policy measures using the preventive/intervention/compensation framework.

Among other directives, the European Commission places significant emphasis on the provision of guidance and counselling services, extending to all students, as these services form an integral component of the multifaceted framework encompassing preventive, interventionist, and compensatory actions. Guidance and counselling contribute to prevention measures by strengthening the connection between education and the workforce, underscoring the advantages of completing one's education for future employment prospects. This involvement can take various forms, such as work experience placements and increased collaboration with employers in educational institutions. In terms of intervention measures, guidance and counselling aid students in making informed career choices and navigating transitions within the education system and into the workforce. Additionally, they play an essential role in compensation measures by supporting various pathways back into mainstream education and training, often through transition classes with a strong focus on guidance to bridge the gap between past academic challenges and reintegration into mainstream education. Consequently, guidance and counselling services are recognised as integral components of prevention, intervention, and compensation policies, as recommended by the European Commission (Oomen & Plant, 2014). Without exception, guidance and counselling services form a major component of education provision in all countries and an exclusive subsection (Section 2.3.4) is allocated to these services in this section of the report.

Table 5. Policy analysis

Themes Country	Prevention measures				Intervention measures			Compensation	Unique features
	Early childhood education and care	Curriculum	Guidance and counselling	Attendance	Support for disadvantaged students	Inclusion strategy for Roma	Teacher professional development	Second chance education and vocational education and training	
England	The compulsory school age is 5 years. Government-funded early childhood education and care (ECEC) schemes are available for all 3- and 4-year-olds	All schools that are maintained by local authorities must teach specified programmes, National Curriculum for England. The Early Years Foundation Stage sets curriculum for children 5 and under	Guidance and Special Education Needs & Disabilities, guidance for pre-school children and their families in disadvantaged areas, mostly school-based work. There is no government-funded counselling programme.	Education Act 1996, Pupil Premium Funding – may deal with non-academic barriers to success in school, such as attendance	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 £1 billion programme for Roma and Gypsies	Teacher professional support under Pupil Premium programme	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	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)	National Curriculum – adapting the curriculum to meet the policy developments in education and emerging social needs	Guidance and counselling to facilitate transitions and help early school leavers re-enter the education system (Law 4823/2021 and Law4547/2018)	The Law 4368/2016 refers to increased attendance and retention through compensatory education and remedial teaching (Law 2910/2001 about access to education)	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	15-year-old students choose between vocational or academic tracks	

Ireland	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	Centralised national curricula	Education Act 1998 Section 9 provision of guidance and counselling to all post-primary students. Enhanced Guidance Initiative (under Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Education [DEIS]).	Education Welfare Act 2000	DEIS plan to address barriers to achievement among disadvantaged children and young people	National travellers and Roma Inclusion Strategy	Included in DEIS programme	Youthreach, Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme, Back to Education Initiative	Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) and strong collaboration among School Completion Programme, Education Welfare Officer and Home School Community Liaison

Themes Country	Prevention measures				Intervention measures			Compensation	Unique features
	Early childhood education and care	Curriculum	Guidance and counselling	Attendance	Support for disadvantaged students	Inclusion strategy for Roma	Teacher professional development	Second chance education and vocational education and training	
Malta	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	A National Curriculum Framework for All. Curriculum adaptation according to school context included in both Strategic Plans (2014–2020 and 2023–2030) to address early school leaving (ESL)	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.	Nationwide electronic platform for recording student attendance. Article 5 Education Act, Chapter 327	Enshrined in National Inclusive Education Framework, availability of means-tested Children's Allowance, Services offered by Migrant Learners Unit and mentioned in National ELET 2023–2030	No separate plan covered through disadvantaged communities support	Included in both Strategic Plans (2014–2020 and 2023–2030) to address ESL	Reintegration of vocational education and training (VET) within secondary schools, equivalent in status and academic level to mainstream education in the National Qualifications Framework	Data profiling undertaken for youths aged 15–24 not in education employment or training. Secondary School Certificate and Profile serving as a comprehensive record of students' formal, informal, and non-formal learning.

Poland	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	The National Curriculum forms the basis of instruction in all schools	Integrated skills strategy 2030 – guidance and counselling for people at all walks of life and all age groups	Law on School Education (Prawo oswiatowe) about what school education includes	Targeted support for immigrant children/refugees/SE ND 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	VET and lifelong learning opportunities VET programme 2022–25	Teachers' Professionalisation Journal of Law 2019 items 2215/4
Portugal	Participation in early childhood education (from age 3 to starting age of compulsory primary education 6 years) Education Act 176/2012. ECEC provision is not compulsory.	Curriculum autonomy and flexibility Education Act 55/2018. The National Curriculum is similar for all public schools across the country.	Decree Law no. 190/91 and Education Act 176/2012. It is a specialised service available for children ages 5–16/17	Programa Escolhas for improvement in the student attendance rate by providing support to do homework on daily basis. Decree Law no. 176/2012 regulates the enrolment and attendance.	Educational Territories for Priority Intervention Programmes (Education Act 176/2012), Programa Escolhas, Inclusive Education Edu Act 55/2018, promoting lingual diversity	The National Roma Communities Integration Strategy (ENICC, 2018), as defined in Resolution of the Council of Ministers no. 154/2018		Education Act 176/2012 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.	Profile of student at the end of compulsory education, curriculum autonomy and flexibility

Themes Country	Prevention measures				Intervention measures			Compensation	Unique features
	Early childhood education and care	Curriculum	Guidance and counselling	Attendance	Support for disadvantaged students	Inclusion strategy for Roma	Teacher professional development	Second chance education and vocational education and training	
Romania	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,	Curriculum adaptation as a part of Inclusion of Roma Strategy 2012–2020 and 2022–2027 Government Decision no. 1221/2011 and 560/2022	Guidance and counselling systems introduced by Law of Education (1/2011). Guidance and counselling a dedicated school subject integrated into the National Curriculum.	School attendance is referred to in Policy on Inclusion of Roma Children. Education Law about general mandatory education.	Pre-university Education no. 198 Healthy Meal Programme, social grant, free transport, school supplies	Policy Inclusion of Roma Minority 2012–2020 and 2022–2027	Law on Pre-university Education no. 198: adapting teaching according to the needs of the student (Reduction of ESL in Romania 2015–2020) a) Teacher training, the development of higher education; b) restructuring the initial training of	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	Law on Pre-university Education no. 198 – grants awards, honours and facilities to teachers working in school units from marginalised communities

	apart from the preparatory year in primary school for 6- to 7-year olds.	The National Curriculum sets framework of curricula in school education.					teachers; and c) strengthening of on-the-job teacher training		
Spain	The LOMLOE ³ also introduced changes for ECEC. For instance, 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.	School as Learning Communities, PDC ⁴ , LOIF ⁵ (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.	Organic Law 3/2020 introduces guidance as a fundamental student entitlement	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.	Programa para la orientación, avance y enriquecimiento educativo and the 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	LOMLOE (2020), PRTR Plan, Organic Law on VET, Dual-Track VET	School Learning Communities (successful educational actions). Dialogic model of teacher professional development under the framework of Learning Communities.

Themes Country	Prevention Measures				Intervention Measures			Compensation	Unique features
	Early childhood education and care	Curriculum	Guidance and Counselling	Attendance	Support for disadvantaged students	Inclusion strategy for Roma	Teacher professional development	Second chance education and vocational	

³ Ley Orgánica 2/2006, de 3 de mayo, de Educación

⁴ Programas de Diversificación Curricular

⁵ Ley Orgánica 3/2022, de 31 de marzo, de Ordenación e Integración de la Formación Profesional

								education and training	
Switzerland	Pre-primary education is compulsory for children aged 4–6 and they are granted access to 15 hours of free ECEC per week.	Federal Act on national languages HarmoS Agreement. ⁶ There is no National Curriculum: each canton is responsible for drawing up the curriculum.	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).	The HarmoS Agreement also promotes school attendance.	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		Dual-Track VET programme	

⁶ The Intercantonal Agreement on Harmonisation of Compulsory Education

2.3.1. PREVENTION MEASURE

Early childhood education and care

In recognition of the well-established import of ECEC with regard to school attainment and student retention, it is noteworthy that all the nations encompassed within this policy assessment have regulations or policy directives designed to bolster ECEC. These regulatory frameworks, however, exhibit small variations in their administrative oversight, as they may be administered by either public or private entities. Furthermore, disparities exist in the delineation of age groups eligible for free enrolment, the presence of a specialised curriculum, and the implementation of quality assurance protocols across the ECEC provision. ECEC arrangements vary across the countries under study. However, the primary qualification for early childhood educators in most countries is a bachelor's degree, although other qualifications are also accepted. All the countries under examination have instituted systems to ensure quality assurance in ECEC, with these systems primarily serving two essential objectives: ensuring compliance with regulatory standards and enhancing the overall quality of education delivered to young children.

In **England**, government-funded early education schemes provide free childcare for eligible two-year-olds and all three and four-year-olds, with voluntary ECEC attendance based on parental choice (UK Parliament Post, 2021; OECD, 2023). England adheres to the 'early years foundation stage' (EYFS) for children from birth to five years old, applicable to all early years education providers (Government of UK, n.d.). Moreover, staff must have at least a full and relevant Level 2 qualification, and early years teachers need a degree, along with specific GCSE qualifications and early years initial teacher training (OECD, 2023; Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years, 2023). Meanwhile, Ofsted undertakes regular inspections of providers registered on the Ofsted Early Years Register to assess overall quality and compliance with the statutory framework for the EYFS (Government of UK, 2023). In the case of low-income families, the government gives vouchers to further cover the costs of the pre-school.

Additional support for ECEC service is provided through the Family Hubs and the Start for Life programme, which was launched in 2021. This initiative has led to the establishment of a network comprising 75 Family Hubs funded for two years. These hubs aim to enhance access to a wide range of integrated support services for families with children aged 0–19 months. The Family Hubs and Start for Life programmes are jointly overseen by the Department for Health and Social Care and the Department for Education. Their primary objective is to offer comprehensive support to those in need of additional assistance to reach their full potential. These Family Hubs serve as 'one-stop shops', bringing together multiple organisations and encouraging professionals to collaborate, making it easier for families to access the help they require. They are likely to provide guidance on various areas, including infant feeding, mental health support, health visits, and parenting classes.

Greece provides ECEC for children up to four years old through public infant/childcare structures (Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs), with private structures under the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, offering free pre-schools and compulsory ECEC for ages four to six (European Commission/Eurydice, 2023a; Family and Job, 2018a). Greece's Pre-School Curriculum for Kindergartens is managed by the Institute of Educational Policy, while Day Care Nurseries lack an explicit curriculum (European Commission/Eurydice, 2023a; Family and Job, 2018a). In 2009 all-day school programmes were extended to the pre-primary level and all-day Kindergartens were introduced. An all-day Kindergarten operates on an extended timetable for at least eight hours per day compared to four hours a day in the case of 'regular' Kindergartens (Koutsogeorgopoulou, 2009). As far as the ECEC educators' eligibility criteria is concerned, the country mandates a four-year degree from a Technological Educational Institute for Nursery and Childcare Teachers (Doliopoulou, 2017). Greece adopts a centralised model, with the Municipal authorities assuming the central role in supervising and monitoring the quality of public infant/childcare structures (European Commission/Eurydice, 2023a).

In **Ireland**, pre-school provision is available for children aged three to five, combining education and childcare services, primarily managed by private entities, with a free pre-school service for three hours a day, five days a week⁷. As regards ECEC curriculum framework, a comprehensive National Curriculum Framework titled ‘Aistear in Action’ is in place (TUSLA, 2023b). A majority of ECEC staff holds ISCED Level 4 qualifications, with an increasing number possessing ISCED Level 6 qualifications (OECD, 2022). Three agencies have the responsibility to monitor and evaluate the quality of ECEC settings. The quality assurance encompasses TUSLA’s⁸ regulatory compliance and registration protocols, the Department of Education Inspectorate’s education-focused inspections for publicly funded pre-primary programmes, and financial oversight by Pobal (OECD, 2022).

In **Malta**, ECEC (from birth to under five years) is not compulsory while the first two years of compulsory primary education (six- to seven-year-olds) are considered part of ECEC. However, free childcare is offered through government services and registered childcare centres (European Commission/Eurydice, 2022b). Malta follows a centralised approach with the ‘National Curriculum Framework for All 2012’ covering ECEC for various age groups (Government of Malta, 2012). Teachers managing up-to-three-year-olds must have a minimum of a two-year full-time post-secondary qualification, while those teaching three- to five-year-olds are expected to have either a Certificate in Kindergarten I or a Diploma in Kindergarten II (Sollars, 2017). Malta has entrusted the Directorate of Quality and Standards in Education with the responsibility of external quality assurance for ECEC services, coupled with the implementation of the National Standard for ECEC Services (0–3) (Government of Malta, 2021).

Poland mandates one year of pre-school education for six-year-olds and extends the right to three- to five-year-olds, with the number of free hours determined locally, providing public and private pre-schools and public transport if certain conditions are met (Schreyer & Oberhuemer, 2017). The country outlines the aims of pre-school education (three to six years) in the national core curriculum for pre-school education, regulated by the Minister of National Education. Kindergarten teachers have been required to have a bachelor’s degree as a minimum qualification since 2012 (Żytco & Pacholczyk-Sanfillipo, 2017). For supervising ECEC settings for children up to the age of five, Poland adopts a comprehensive approach, involving the Ministry of Family and Social Policy and local commune-level authorities. The quality assurance mechanisms employed mirror those found in the school education system, including external quality assurance as part of the pedagogical supervision system (Schreyer & Oberhuemer, 2017).

Portugal offers optional pre-primary education, providing 25 hours of free instruction per week for children starting at age four, encompassing children aged three to six (European Commission/Eurydice, 2023b). The ‘Curriculum Guidelines for Pre-School Education’ (OCEPE) govern pre-primary education for children aged three and above, excluding those below three years (European Commission/Eurydice, 2023c). To become an ECEC educator, a professional must hold a three-year bachelor’s degree in Basic Education followed by a master’s degree in Pre-School Education or Pre-School and Primary Education (Araújo, 2017). The educational system and school evaluations are jointly overseen by the Inspectorate-General of Education and Science and the Directorate General for Education and Science Statistics.

Romania made the final year of ECEC compulsory in 2020, with plans to lower the starting age to four years in 2023, offering public sector ECEC without fees, except for meals in some cases (European Commission/ Eurydice, 2022d).

⁷ <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/education/pre-school-education-and-childcare/early-childhood-care-and-education-scheme/>

⁸ The Child and Family Agency- state agency responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children

The country has recently adopted a new ECEC curriculum, unifying the approach from birth to age six (European Commission/ Eurydice, 2022e). The most common qualification requirement for ECEC teachers is a bachelor's degree, with the main Initial Professional Studies programme being the bachelor's degree in Pedagogy for Primary and Pre-primary Education (Ciolan et al., 2017). The ECEC quality assurance encompasses three agencies: County School Inspectorates for evaluating the educational processes in pre-academic education, the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-academic Education for institutional evaluations of pre-academic education institutions, and the Ministry of Education for evaluating the entire education system (European Commission/Eurydice, 2022f).

In **Spain**, ECEC is organised into two cycles⁹ of three years each and according to a law the second cycle is free of charge; there are plans to extend free access to the first cycle as well to students at risk of poverty and social exclusion (European Commission/Eurydice, 2023d). Curriculum aspects for the first cycle are determined by Autonomous Communities, while the Ministry of Education defines core curricula, objectives, contents, and evaluation criteria for the second cycle at the national level (Family and Job, 2018b; European Commission/Eurydice, 2023d). In Spain, early childhood education (ECE) teachers must hold a four-year bachelor's degree (Arrabal, 2017). The evaluation of the quality of the education system in pre-primary, primary, and secondary education involves multiple bodies, including the State Educational Inspectorate, the National Institute for Educational Evaluation, educational inspection bodies of the Autonomous Communities, and evaluation bodies within the Autonomous Communities themselves (European Commission/Eurydice, 2023d).

Switzerland mandates compulsory pre-primary education for children aged four to six, with mostly public provision, while ECEC for children up to four years old is predominantly offered by private institutions (OECD, 2021; Faeh & Vogt, 2021). The ECEC sector employs two main curriculum frameworks, the 'Orientation framework for ECEC' for children up to four years old in centre-based settings, and a coordinated curriculum for children aged four to six in pre-primary settings (OECD, 2021). Switzerland requires pre-primary staff to hold a bachelor's degree (ISCED Level 6), while staff working in centre-based settings for children aged up to four can have a VET diploma (ISCED Level 5) (OECD, 2021). The country predominantly aligns its quality assurance responsibilities for childcare, particularly for children under four years old, within the realms of social and family policy rather than educational policy, relying on cantons and communes to enforce requirements for childcare facilities, encompassing aspects such as staff training, staff-to-child ratios, educational approaches, safety protocols, and hygiene standards (European Commission/Eurydice, 2022j).

2.3.2. INTERVENTION MEASURE

Support for disadvantaged communities

Differences in educational success are closely linked to individual characteristics and socio-economic background. Factors such as parents' financial resources, educational attainment, exposure to cultural activities and knowledge, and the quality of parent-child relationships all play a significant role. Research has consistently shown that a student's educational achievement is strongly influenced by the SES of their parents (Borgna & Struffolino, 2017; Considine & Zappalà, 2002; Fan et al., 2012; Traag & Van der Velden, 2011). Children from low socio-economic backgrounds often face disengagement and underachievement. 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. Educational

⁹ ECEC in Spain is divided into two cycles of three years each: cycle 1 covers children up to two years of age and corresponds to ISCED level 010, and cycle 2 covers three to five years of age and corresponds to ISCED level 020.

systems should take proactive measures, including identifying early warning signs, offering differentiated instruction, organising extracurricular activities, involving parents in their children's education, and equipping teachers with pedagogical tools to create inclusive learning environments. All the countries studied in this research have developed and implemented policies to enhance the opportunities and outcomes for such students.

In the UK, including **England**, there has been a longstanding commitment at the national level to bridge the academic attainment gap between children from different socio-economic backgrounds. This goal has driven various policies and initiatives over the past decade. One notable policy introduced to address this issue is the Pupil Premium, designed to enhance the educational outcomes of disadvantaged children. This programme builds on the foundation of providing free school meals to eligible students. Regionally and locally, there has been a consistent focus on narrowing this attainment gap, with combined authorities also implementing policies aimed at mitigating the impact of economic disadvantage on children's educational achievement.

The provision of free school meals is mandated by the Education Act 1996, while for infants, these meals are provided under the Children and Families Act, which was implemented in March 2014. Free school meals serve as a vital support system for society's most disadvantaged children, offering them a daily nutritious meal that aids in concentration, learning, and academic success. Eligibility for free school meals is contingent on the recipient's family receiving one or more designated benefits, such as income support or income-based jobseeker's allowance. Among the 8.4 million children in state schools across England, approximately 3.4 million qualify for free school meals during term-time, at an estimated cost of £460 per child for the 2022–23 academic year. The specific value of a free school meal may vary by region but is approximately £2.40 per meal.

In England, a universal infant free school meals scheme ensures that all children in reception, year one, and year two are guaranteed a free lunch, often accompanied by milk. Some local authorities have extended this benefit to all primary school children, irrespective of parental income. Notably, the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, has announced a comprehensive scheme to provide free meals to all primary school students across London in the 2023/2024 academic year. This initiative, costing £130 million, aims to offer free meals to 270,000 children who are not already receiving such support.

Pupil premium

The Pupil Premium Grant, introduced in 2011, serves as a pivotal element of the current policy landscape aimed at enhancing the educational achievements of underprivileged or disadvantaged students attending state-funded schools in England. This grant represents additional funding allocated directly to schools for the benefit of eligible children. These eligible children encompass those who qualify for free school meals, have met this criterion at any point in the past six years, have been or are currently in the care of local authorities, and the children of military families. Notably, in the fiscal year 2023–2024, the allocation for Pupil Premium spending is set to rise to nearly £2.9 billion. The funding allocation per pupil varies, with primary and secondary schools receiving £1455 and £1035, respectively, while children in the care of local authorities receive £2530.

To ensure the effective utilisation of this funding, schools are guided by the Education Endowment Foundation, an entity that assesses the effectiveness of various approaches, including high-quality teaching, targeted academic support, and interventions designed to overcome non-academic barriers. Schools are held accountable for their utilisation of Pupil Premium funds, necessitating the publication of their Pupil Premium strategy on their respective websites. Moreover, schools are held accountable by the Ofsted, the English inspectorate system, and their school governors.

Catch-up premium: Coronavirus November 2020 and recovery premium 2022

In England and Northern Ireland, the UK government has introduced supplementary provisions to address time-limited grants aimed at pupils eligible for the Pupil Premium or those in specialist settings. This funding primarily focuses on classroom-based learning, with a particular emphasis on the provision of tutoring to help students catch up on learning they missed due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic restrictions and to mitigate rising school absences. For state-funded schools, there is additional funding of £145 per pupil, with children in special schools receiving £290, provided that they are eligible for the existing Pupil Premium, based on free school meals. The funds are intended for supporting the quality of teaching, including staff professional development, offering targeted academic support such as tutoring, and addressing non-academic barriers to academic success, which may include matters related to attendance, behaviour, and social and emotional support.

A substantial portion of the UK government's educational recovery funding has been directed towards the National Tutoring Programme. This programme allows for tutoring services to be offered through either separate delivery partners or school-led tutoring. School-led tutoring enables schools to hire tutors directly or use existing staff members. In the initial stages of this policy's implementation, the majority of the funding was directed toward the separate delivery partner.

Holiday Activities and Food Programme

Starting with a pilot in 2018 and a broader roll-out in 2021, the UK government has allocated funding to local authorities for the Holiday Activities and Food Programme. This initiative aims to provide support to children who are recipients of free school meals during school holiday periods. The holiday provision extends to school-aged children from reception to Year 11 (15–16-year-olds) who qualify for benefits-related free school meals. Local authorities are encouraged to open holiday clubs to children who do not receive free school meals but can pay to participate. The objective is to offer consistent and easily accessible enrichment activities, extending beyond merely providing breakfast or lunch. These activities involve children and parents in food preparation and foster local partnerships, especially with voluntary and community organisations. Minimum provisions have been established, with local authorities that have a six-week summer holiday expected to provide participating children with at least four weeks of face-to-face programming, spanning a minimum of 16 days. Similar provisions are in place for the Easter holidays.

Based on the 2022 country report from Eurostat, approximately half of the underprivileged students in **Greece** are experiencing low levels of academic achievement, indicating a pressing need for addressing both the quality and equity of the educational system. As an acknowledgement of the issue, several reform initiatives have been undertaken in Greece education policy landscape. Notably, Law 3879/2010 (article 26, par. 1a and 1b) (GG 163 A/2010) introduced the concept of ZEPs, with the primary aim of fostering equal access to education for all students within the educational system and augmenting overall learning outcomes. This programme, co-financed by Greece and the EU, seeks to enhance educational accessibility and combat academic underachievement by channelling additional financial resources and human capital to participating schools, thereby targeting regions with the greatest disadvantages. A key component of this effort involves considering the distinct instructional expenses associated with students to ensure that schools receive adequate funding to support underprivileged students, a principle recognised by the OECD (2012). The delineation of priority zones is determined based on various socio-economic and educational criteria, encompassing educational institutions from the pre-primary to upper secondary levels.

In the wake of the enactment of the law on ZEPs in 2010, the Ministry of Education issued a Ministerial Decision to define the specific geographic areas where this initiative would be applied. These regions were chosen based on

these defining characteristics of ZEPs. These zones encompass primary and secondary schools located in areas characterised by low scores across fundamental indicators of school integration, including well-being, the educational attainment of adults aged 33–43, the prevalence of poverty, and overall educational levels. Additionally, these zones were identified in areas with a notable concentration of foreign, Roma, or other minority student populations (Eurydice, 2014).

The concept of ZEPs in Greece is grounded in the principles of positive discrimination and underscores a comprehensive approach to education, with a strong emphasis on community involvement. This initiative seeks to establish a permanent institution within the Greek education system that integrates school districts and institutions serving sensitive social groups (SSGs) based on local needs (Eurydice, 2014).

Several actions have been implemented to support primary and secondary schools within ZEPs. These actions aim to address the significant issue of high school-failure rates among repatriate and foreign students in Greek schools, with the objective of ensuring an equitable educational experience for these groups compared to their native counterparts and contributing to their social integration. Additionally, intercultural educational initiatives have been introduced in secondary education, facilitated by international cooperation and ZEP Enhancement Coaching Courses designed for students belonging to SSGs. Furthermore, educational programmes have been initiated with a specific emphasis on culture and the facilitation of the integration of students from SSGs into primary schools.

Between 2013 and 2014, the programme underwent an expansion, encompassing more than 1500 schools, with a predominant focus on primary education, to encompass approximately 190,000 students. Simultaneously, an extensive teacher training initiative was introduced, complemented by the inclusion of nutritional provisions in the programme's offerings (Koutsogeorgopoulou et al., 2014). The establishment of reception and remedial classes complemented these measures. Starting in 2018, ZEP reception classes, designed for upper secondary school-aged children, were also incorporated into the educational landscape (Ministerial Decree 3727/2017). For the school year 2019–2020, nearly 1700 ZEP classes were introduced, spanning both primary and secondary education. As a part of intercultural education measures, a flexible scheme for institutional and educational intervention is provided for students with limited Greek language proficiency. This adaptable framework empowers schools to choose the intervention strategy that best suits their needs, offering additional teaching support to aid students in adapting and seamlessly integrating into their mainstream classes. This institutional framework encompasses two distinct categories of courses within the school timetable: reception classes I ZEP, tailored for learners with minimal or zero Greek language proficiency, and II ZEP, designed for learners with moderate Greek language proficiency, which may still present challenges in mainstream classes (European Agency, 2020). In 2019, further opportunities were announced to introduce ZEP reception classes with a focus on language acquisition and integration in primary schools, or on reducing school dropout and enhancing basic literacy and numeracy skills in secondary schools. As per the OECD's observations in 2018, effective ZEP schools have demonstrated their positive impact through staff collaboration, instructional consistency, and effective school administration. Nonetheless, it is important to highlight that analogous policies implemented in various other OECD nations have yielded mixed outcomes (OECD, 2018a).

DEIS is a comprehensive intervention as well as prevention measure in practice in designated schools in **Ireland** since 2005. The DEIS plan is primarily focused on two core objectives: improving educational opportunities for those who commence their educational path under disadvantaged circumstances and strengthening the capacity of the education and training system to disrupt the cycles of underprivileged communities. A substantial portion of the responsibilities undertaken by school leaders, teachers, the Department of Education, and its related organisations is dedicated to ensuring that every student encountering educational difficulties receives the most extensive

support possible. Notably, the DEIS programme has undergone revisions in 2017 and 2022 with the aim of extending its reach to all such students within educational institutions and providing tailored assistance to schools grappling with a substantial concentration of disadvantaged students (Department of Education, 2017, 2022). (For further information on this programme please see Section 2.4.1 of the report.)

Within the context of their national inclusive education framework¹⁰, the Ministry of Education in **Malta** shares a fundamental goal of ensuring that learning opportunities are not only accessible but also available to learners of all ages. This inclusivity extends to those who may encounter specific challenges, including individuals from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, migrant backgrounds, or regions affected by economic decline. Inclusion, in this context, signifies that educational institutions should be welcoming and open to children, regardless of their circumstances. This includes children with special needs, disabilities, those originating from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, migrant backgrounds, geographically depressed areas, or regions affected by conflict, without discrimination based on factors like gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, or sexual orientation.

To achieve these objectives, several key principles are employed. These principles encompass the encouragement of comprehensive, critical self-reflection both at the individual and institutional levels regarding the advancement of inclusive practices. School educators are guided in the implementation and ongoing evaluation of inclusive policies and practices. This process involves the presentation of evidence detailing the planning for inclusion, fostering commitment to inclusive practices and policies at both the individual and institutional levels. Furthermore, the provision of high-quality education is emphasised, ensuring that all learners receive the necessary support to promote social equity and contribute to the realisation of an inclusive society.

Specific support measures¹¹ are in place to assist children hailing from families facing socio-economic disadvantages. These measures encompass the provision of guidance and counselling services delivered by qualified school personnel, with additional support available from education psychosocial practitioners through the National Schools Support Services. Furthermore, students in this category may receive supplementary assistance under Scheme 9, which includes provisions like photocopies, daily lunches, uniforms, and stationery (European Commission/Eurydice, 2022c).

In 2021, the Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights introduced a means-tested Children's Allowance Supplement. This initiative grants €50 per child per year to Children's Allowance beneficiaries who surpass the means testing threshold of €25,409. For beneficiaries falling below this threshold, an award of €70 per child per year is provided. It is worth noting that this supplement is offered in addition to the regular Children's Allowance benefit. In Budget 2022, a €10,000 fund was launched to support vulnerable students. Under this initiative, the government allocated €10,000 annually to the heads of state primary and secondary schools. These funds are designated for the procurement of food and essential resources to aid students coming from disadvantaged family backgrounds (European Commission/Eurydice, 2022c).

Additional measures are designed to facilitate the integration of immigrant minor children, including those born to asylum seekers or refugees, into mainstream schools. Unaccompanied refugee minors, who are under the age of 18

¹⁰ https://meae.gov.mt/en/Public_Consultations/MEDE/Documents/MEDE_Inclusion_Framework_A4_v2.pdf

¹¹ <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/malta/support-measures-learners-early-childhood-and-school-education#:~:text=Specific%20Support%20Measures,-Support%20measures%20specific&text=Such%20learners%20may%20also%20be,Social%20Policy%20and%20Children's%20Rights>

and arrive in Malta, are identified as at-risk learners. These support measures aim to alleviate the educational obstacles stemming from linguistic, social, and cultural differences. The oversight and implementation of these support initiatives fall under the jurisdiction of the Migrant Learners Unit (MLU). They encompass a range of strategies, including the development of care and transition plans to aid these children's integration into mainstream schools, language support to help them attain proficiency in both Maltese and English, and initiatives to foster awareness and respect among their native peers for the newcomers' languages, customs, beliefs, and cultural diversity, thereby promoting their inclusion within the classroom.

Furthermore, interagency collaboration ensures that these children and their families have access to essential living necessities. Collaboration is encouraged among all parties involved in the education of migrant children, including school leadership teams, families, and various service providers. This collaboration is facilitated through the Community Liaison Workers' service. The community liaison team within the MLU actively establishes valuable and constructive connections between migrant families and schools. They do so with a deep appreciation for the unique requirements, distinctive characteristics, and sensitivities inherent in a multicultural environment. The community liaison (CL) team plays an essential role in aiding schools to create inclusive environments by addressing cultural and language barriers that could impede mutual understanding and cooperation. Additionally, the CL team facilitates the work of psychosocial professionals in educational institutions, ensuring they can effectively reach out to and assist families who require their services (The Migrant Learners Unit, 2022).

In **Poland**, as in most of the countries, the challenges of underachievement and ESL are associated with various factors e.g., environmental factors encompassing parental and socio-cultural expectations, as well as gendered role expectations. Psychological factors, such as low self-esteem, play a role, along with economic aspects like family financial situations and the capacity to cover educational expenses. Furthermore, other factors, which involve familial issues and learning disabilities, also contribute (Federowicz & Sitek, 2011; Kozarzewski, 2008; Fatyga et al., 2001). Notably, certain high-risk populations within Poland, including individuals from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, those with special educational needs, and those from Roma or migrant backgrounds (including asylum seekers and refugees), are particularly vulnerable to underachievement and ESL (Marchlik & Tomaszewska-Pękała, 2013).

The Strategy for the Development of Human Capital 2013 in Poland aimed to improve the overall quality of life in the country by investing in human capital. To align with the Europe 2020 strategy, SDHC adopted three key objectives: first, increasing the national employment rate; second, raising the percentage of young individuals engaged in or having completed tertiary education; and third, reducing the number of people at risk of poverty (Rady Ministrów, 2013). However, several barriers impeded the realisation of these objectives. These included low enrolment in early childhood care and education programmes, especially among disadvantaged larger families, a mismatch between school-based skill development and labour market requirements, disinterest in vocational schools, the absence of a comprehensive and up-to-date Polish Qualification Framework and register, and inadequate labour market participation among individuals with special needs and disabilities.

To address these challenges and support socio-economically disadvantaged students, actions were taken at the national level by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (Eurocultura et al., 2016). These actions included increasing the availability of financial and socio-emotional support for students, and offering scholarships, school benefits, and extracurricular activities to alleviate financial burdens. Furthermore, to mitigate digital exclusion, the government allocated approximately €81 million to local governments for the procurement of ICT equipment for underprivileged students. These efforts were complemented by initiatives in schools and for teachers, supported by the operational programme 'Digital Poland', and further reinforced by

investment endeavours under Online Student Engagement, both backed by the European Regional Development Fund (European Commission, 2020b).

The Polish government's proactive approach through these measures aimed to enhance educational access and equity for all students, aligning with the goals of reducing underachievement and ESL across the nation.

Portugal has initiated enduring programmes to support disadvantaged communities and address underachievement and ESL. These programmes have withstood the test of time, exemplified by the Educational Territories for Priority Intervention Programme (TEIP) and the Programa Escolhas, which remain active even after more than two decades (Azevedo, 2021).

The Policy (Strategy) Programa Escolhas¹², established in 2001, is a national initiative overseen by the Secretary of State for Equality and Migrations, integrated into the High Commissariat for Migrations. Its mission encompasses the promotion of social integration, equal opportunities in education and employment, combating social discrimination, fostering civic participation, and enhancing social cohesion, with particular emphasis on children and young people facing socio-economic vulnerability.

The Escolhas programme comprises eight sequential project stages, each lasting approximately two years, evolving from the initial focus on preventing criminal behaviour to promoting social inclusion, equality, social cohesion, and non-discrimination, especially among minority and immigrant children in vulnerable contexts. The methodology has transitioned to a decentralised model, empowering local institutions like schools, non-governmental organisations, and training centres to create, implement, and evaluate projects tailored to their respective communities.

In the current eighth stage, there are 105 projects operating nationwide, structured into three intervention areas:

1. Education, digital inclusion, training, and qualification.
2. Employment and entrepreneurship.
3. Community dynamisation with a focus on health, participation, and citizenship.

The programme encompasses three core measures:

1. Measure I – Promoting school success, reducing school dropout and ESL, fostering training, professional qualification, and digital competencies.
2. Measure II – Promoting employment, work skills, school-to-work transition, and entrepreneurship initiatives.
3. Measure III – Promoting health, sports, artistic and cultural activities, non-formal education, personal and social development, and community engagement.

Escolhas projects involves children and young people between 6 and 25 years old, belonging to vulnerable contexts, including those who have dropped out of school or left early, are not working or studying, are in the juvenile protection system, or are victims of discrimination (or belong to discriminated-against groups). These individuals receive regular support tailored to their individual plans and objectives.

¹² https://issuu.com/programaescolhas/docs/revista_escolhas_43

Education has been a top priority for Escolhas, with a strong focus on addressing ESL, absenteeism, and school failure. Projects are designed based on a diagnosis of local needs and problems, implementing a diverse set of activities like after-school support sessions, school mediation, and workshops. These activities employ non-formal education strategies and methodologies to provide differentiated pedagogical support to these groups.

The impact of Escolhas has been evaluated externally (7th edition, 2019–2020), revealing positive outcomes such as improved literacy, increased attendance rates, enhanced learning skills, greater school success, improved digital literacy, and changes in attitudes toward the value of education among participating youth (Alexandre et al., 2020). This evidence underscores the effectiveness of these longstanding initiatives in Portugal.

The TEIP was launched in 1996 and has seen three distinct phases of implementation: TEIP1 (1996/2005), TEIP2 (2006/2011), and TEIP3 (2012/2021). Presently, this programme encompasses 136 schools or school clusters located in areas characterised by social and economic disadvantage, severe poverty, social exclusion, violence, indiscipline, and high dropout rates. TEIP serves as a compensatory measure aimed at enhancing educational quality, achievement, and the transition to the workforce. It achieves this by adapting teaching approaches to the specific context, promoting community integration and involvement. Participants in Alvares's (2014) study emphasised the significance of measures like TEIP2, investment in social benefit schemes, positive discrimination initiatives, especially concerning students with special educational needs, tutorial support programmes, and Portuguese language classes for foreigners, which play a crucial role in the inclusion of immigrant populations.

In **Romania**, the legislation on pre-university education, known as no. 198 of 7/5/2023, is a comprehensive framework that establishes the foundation for inclusive and high-quality education for all primary education beneficiaries in the country. The primary beneficiaries are defined as those who are at risk of facing stigmatisation, discrimination, neglect of their cultural identity, segregation, school dropout, or school failure. This progressive law aims to provide educational equity and inclusion for a wide range of students facing various challenges in their educational journey.

As per the law's provisions, students falling into several categories are considered at risk of social exclusion. These categories include students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, those in isolated environments, students from socially marginalised groups, students with disabilities, and children and young people from vulnerable Roma communities who are susceptible to school dropout or school failure. Additionally, the law recognises the unique needs of pregnant students, ensuring their right to adapted education to prevent school dropout.

The law goes on to outline specific programmes and initiatives aimed at addressing the challenges faced by these students. These programmes include the second chance programmes tailored to primary, secondary, and high school education, with provisions for individuals who have exceeded the age corresponding to their respective class. Furthermore, there is the 'Remedial Learning' programme, which focuses on supporting students with learning difficulties or those lagging behind in their studies. It particularly targets students at risk of dropping out or leaving school early, as well as Romanian children arriving from abroad.

A significant aspect of this legislation is the establishment of the Integrated National Programme to Reduce School Dropout. This programme features essential components such as free transportation, social grants, and the provision of school supplies. Under this programme, students identified as being at risk of dropping out receive priority access to initiatives like the School After School programme, the national Remedial Learning programme, psycho-pedagogical counselling activities, and free camps organised in state-owned leisure centres. The

programme also includes a monitoring mechanism through the County Directorates of Pre-University Education, in coordination with the Bucharest Municipality Directorate of Pre-University Education, resulting in the production of an annual report on dropout rates. Furthermore, it is closely associated with the Healthy Meal programme, which contributes to the overall well-being of students.

The legislation recognises the importance of collaboration between various educational stakeholders, including public, private, and confessional educational institutions, and local public administration authorities. These entities are encouraged to form school consortia to enhance opportunities for the development of educational units in disadvantaged, mountainous, rural, or isolated areas. This collaborative approach seeks to minimise the risk of school failure and ESL, fostering a more inclusive educational environment.

Additionally, the law provides for the allocation of scholarships designed to support students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, vulnerable groups, or those facing special medical circumstances. These scholarships aim to create favourable conditions for student participation in educational activities, ultimately improving achievement and preventing school dropout while fostering an environment where all children and young people can thrive in their educational pursuits.

Two prominent initiatives, in **Spain**, 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. Vulnerability is broadly defined to encompass those lacking essential needs like food and shelter, as well as educational resources such as digital tools, school supplies, and access to extracurricular activities. This group also includes students with special needs and gifted students. The programme allocates specific funding to regional communities across Spain, based on several key indicators such as the educational attainment of the 25- to 64-year-old population and the enrolment rates of 15-year-olds, among others. The regional authorities are responsible for distributing these funds to educational institutions. The allocated resources can be employed for procuring additional educational resources, teacher training, or recruiting additional teaching staff (OECD, 2023, p. 15).

Conversely, the UAO primarily centres on the promotion of guidance and support measures for primary and post-compulsory secondary students, with a particular emphasis on those hailing from disadvantaged or vulnerable backgrounds. The budget for both PROA+ and UAO is distributed to regional communities, which then undertake the task of allocating these finances to selected schools that cater to a substantial number of vulnerable students, including those situated in rural or remote areas.

In addition to these, within the framework of the European strategic agenda aimed at achieving inclusive and high-quality education for all, the region of Extremadura has introduced the Programme for Academic Improvement and Inclusion, as regulated by the Order of 15 September 2015, by the Consejería de Educación y Empleo Junta de Extremadura and co-financed by the European Social Fund. This initiative originated as part of the broader Plan of Educational Success and Reduction of Early School Abandonment in the Extremadura region for 2014–2020, aligning with other programmes such as IMPULSA and COMUNIC@ (Soler et al., 2021).

The programme's primary objective is to elevate academic achievement and mitigate the adverse impact of socio-economic, cultural, and ethnic factors contributing to academic challenges among students from disadvantaged backgrounds. To this end, participating primary and secondary schools are required to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the socio-cultural context surrounding the school's location and implement interventions in two key areas: with students and with their families, in accordance with the recommendations of the European Social Fund (García-Martínez et al., 2021). The programme places a strong emphasis on reducing social exclusion among students at risk by enhancing their proficiency in fundamental skills such as language and mathematics.

According to an OECD (2019) report, in the year 2018, **Switzerland** witnessed a notable increase in the percentage of students with immigrant backgrounds, rising from 24% in 2009 to 34%. Among this demographic, consisting of foreign-born students or those with at least one immigrant parent, approximately three out of seven students faced socio-economic disadvantages. As observed in many OECD nations, Switzerland's educational landscape also demonstrated a significant performance gap between socio-economically advantaged and disadvantaged students (OECD, 2018b, 2019). The academic underachievement of immigrant students in Switzerland can be attributed to several associated factors, such as limited language skills, lower parental education levels, and lower family incomes, rather than merely their immigrant status (Meunier, 2011). In Switzerland as a whole, immigrants tend to face disadvantages when compared to Swiss nationals (Perez Garcia, 2020). Recognising this challenge, the Canton Zurich initiated the Quality In Multicultural Schools (QUIMS) programme to address these issues and enhance educational outcomes.

QUIMS is a programme for school and teaching development with the aim of reducing education disadvantages. It supports schools with many students from foreign-speaking, immigrant, and socially disadvantaged families. The programme supports schools that are particularly challenged to ensure good learning performance and good education opportunities. This applies especially if the share of students from lower social classes and from educationally disadvantaged families is large (Kanton Zürich, 2023).

Under the QUIMS initiative, schools where over 40% of students have a mother tongue other than German are included. In the city of Zurich, 119 schools are part of the QUIMS programme, which endeavours to reduce educational inequalities and elevate the overall quality of education in these schools. This is essential to ensure that all schools are equally appealing to both Swiss middle-class families and their non-Swiss peers, thereby preventing the emergence of 'ghetto schools'.

In the canton of Zurich, the programme is obligatory for all public schools where more than 40% of students come from immigrant backgrounds (excluding Germany, Austria, and Liechtenstein). To ensure the programme's success, a dedicated QUIMS officer is appointed, undergoing specialised certification training. This designated officer is responsible for organising and coordinating QUIMS activities for the entire teaching staff. New schools that join the programme receive introductory training and continuous monitoring and support during their initial two years of participation. Teachers are provided with ongoing training opportunities and the chance to collaborate, sharing insights and experiences with other schools.

The QUIMS programme offers additional financial resources and professional support to schools, provided that the allocated funds are used to develop specific projects aligned with the programme's objectives, tailored to local needs. The programme primarily aims to facilitate integration; foster a shared culture of appreciation, respect, and understanding through the engagement of intercultural mediators to facilitate communication between parents and teachers; and establish parent councils (OECD, 2018). According to an evaluation of the programme, QUIMS contributed effectively in improving the writing skills of students across various grade levels, resulting in positive

outcomes in reading proficiency and a smoother transition to secondary education and vocational training. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that QUIMS schools continue to exhibit lower performance levels in comparison to other schools in both these aspects (Roos, 2017; Canton of Zurich, 2017).

Additionally, the HarmoS Agreement¹³ covers the national language targets and migrant students who very often belong to low socio-economic backgrounds and face challenges in terms of the educational achievement; the agreement has also sought to enhance the language skills in the education system across the different cantons. According to the Swiss Education Report 2023, the key principles related to language teaching approved by the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Minister of Education in 2004 form the basis for the corresponding articles in the HarmoS Agreement as well in the Federal Act on the ‘National Languages and Understanding between the Linguistics Communities’. These key principles include the promotion of the local languages at all school level, the promotion of a second national language and a foreign language during compulsory schooling, then the promotion of the first language of students with the migration background through instruction in the native language and culture, and finally the promotion of language exchange with classes from different linguistic regions. The cantons participating in the HarmoS Agreement are committed to supporting the voluntary native language and culture (Heimatliche Sprache und Kultur) teaching, provided that it conforms to principles of religious and political neutrality. These efforts are financed by local entities and associations as indicated in the 2023 Education Report.

2.3.3. COMPENSATION MEASURE

Vocational education and training and second chance education

For young people pursuing full-time education, in **England**, there exist some alternative routes to the traditional A Levels (subject-specific academic courses studied as a gateway to university education), for instance, T Levels, which is a relatively recent qualification designed in close collaboration with employers; technical and vocational qualifications tailored to specific professions or sectors; and applied qualifications, which offer a broader overview of a particular sector, preparing students for the practical demands of various industries.

For those looking to combine employment with their studies, apprenticeships have a well-established tradition in England. Apprenticeships offer the opportunity to gain practical training while employed, with dedicated study time allocated to complement the chosen role, typically amounting to around 20% of the working hours. Apprenticeships span different levels, starting at Level 2 (equivalent to a GCSE level, often pursued at the age of 16), and progressing to Levels 6 and 7 (comparable to bachelor’s and master’s degree levels). These apprenticeship standards are defined by ‘trailblazer’ groups, representing employers and sector organisations, and have replaced the previous apprenticeship frameworks phased out since 2017/18. The introduction of an apprenticeship levy in 2017 mandated all UK employers with an annual pay bill exceeding £3 million to contribute to an apprenticeship service account, with funds dedicated to apprenticeship training and assessment. However, this fund’s perceived inflexibility has garnered criticism, resulting in unused funds and a significant decline in new apprenticeship starts since the levy’s implementation.

To address this issue, the government has made some adjustments to the requirements, but new apprenticeship starts still remain notably lower than figures preceding the levy’s introduction. Other in-work options for individuals aged 16 and older include traineeships, supported internships, and school leaver schemes with large companies, which resemble graduate recruitment programmes. Degree apprenticeships, introduced in 2014, present an

¹³ Intercantonal Agreement on Harmonisation of Compulsory Education for the joint policy goals of the confederation and cantons.

appealing alternative to traditional three-year degrees or master's programmes, offering apprentices the opportunity to earn a salary while bypassing tuition fees.

T Levels, a more recent addition to the educational landscape, were launched in September 2020. These two-year courses are designed to be on par with the existing three-A-Levels system and were developed in close collaboration with employers. There are currently 16 T Levels available nationwide, with an aim to expand the offering to a total of 24. T Levels differ from apprenticeships in that they are predominantly classroom-based but include a significant industry placement requirement, amounting to at least 315 hours, equivalent to approximately 45 days or nine weeks. Additionally, a one-year T Level transition programme exists for individuals post-GCSE study. Adequate funding has been allocated for T Level providers, encompassing delivery and capital funding, while funding for other vocational courses in England is being reviewed and gradually phased out.

The Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022, as proposed by the Department for Education in 2022, claims to revolutionise the post-16 education landscape to equip individuals with the essential skills for successful and rewarding employment and careers. This act introduces a legal obligation for colleges and providers to collaborate with local employers to develop skills plans, modifies the student loans system to allow learners flexible access to higher-level education and training from 2025, empowers intervention measures for underperforming colleges, and ensures that all school pupils are connected with providers of technical education. This way, they receive information about apprenticeships, T Levels, and traineeships, which are promoted alongside traditional A Levels. The act also highlights a focus on green skills training as a priority.

In **Greece**¹⁴, VET operates under state regulations and involves a combination of school-based and work-based learning (WBL). This educational framework is available at both the upper secondary and post-secondary levels, with the overall responsibility shared between the education ministry and the labour ministry.

The process of tracking students begins at the conclusion of lower secondary education when 15-year-old students make a major choice between vocational or academic tracks. Upper secondary education, which encompasses unified upper secondary schools (lyceum) and vocational upper secondary schools (epagelmatiko lykeio, or EPAL), spans a duration of three years but is not compulsory. Students aspiring to pursue tertiary education must undertake the Panhellenic examination, which serves as a gateway to higher education institutions, comprising 22 universities and 14 technological education institutes across Greece.

At the post-secondary level, VET is offered in two distinct formats:

- One-year apprenticeship programmes (European Qualification Framework, [EQF] Level 5, WBL 100%) provided by EPAL schools in collaboration with the Manpower Employment Organisation. These programmes are exclusively accessible to individuals possessing a lower-secondary school Leaving Certificate.
- Two-and-a-half-year VET programmes (WBL > 60%) offered by both public and private vocational training institutes (Ινστιτούτο Επαγγελματικής Κατάρτισης) to upper secondary graduates. These programmes enable learners to obtain an attestation of programme completion. Alternatively, they can opt to take VET certification examinations, comprising practical and theoretical components, which are conducted by the National Organisation for the Certification of Qualifications and Vocational Guidance. Successful completion leads to the attainment of an EQF Level 5 certificate. EPAL graduates who choose to continue their studies in a related field can directly enrol in the second year of their chosen programme.

¹⁴ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/greece-u2>

Additionally, continuing vocational training is available to adults through centres for lifelong learning. These centres are operated by various entities, including regional authorities, municipalities, social partners, chambers of commerce, professional associations, higher education institutions, and private organisations.

Ireland features three prominent programmes that provide alternative pathways or a second chance for young people at risk of ESL or those who left school prematurely. These programmes include the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI), Youthreach, and the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS).

The BTEI, also known as the Part-Time Further Education Programme, primarily caters to young adults and individuals who have not achieved a Leaving Certificate or a comparable qualification. It offers the flexibility to balance education with family and work commitments. While the BTEI is open to anyone who has discontinued full-time education, preference is given to those without a Leaving Certificate. This programme focuses on delivering part-time courses tailored to the educational needs of adults and individuals over 16 with limited formal qualifications or with literacy challenges. Priority is given to those facing significant educational disadvantages, and these government-funded courses are offered free of charge (Government of Ireland, 2022a).

Youthreach provides a comprehensive two-year programme that combines education, training, and practical work experience for unemployed individuals who left school early and lack qualifications or vocational training. Targeted at youth aged 15–20, it offers training in basic skills, hands-on work experience, and a broad spectrum of general education subjects, all integrated with modern technology. Personal development and core skill enhancement, including literacy, numeracy, communication, and IT, are key components of this programme. Participants have the flexibility to select from various vocational options and engage in practical work experience. Youthreach centres, managed by Education and Training Boards, serve as educational hubs, and programme participants are eligible for training allowances as well as additional allowances covering meals, travel, and accommodation (Government of Ireland, 2022b).

VTOS is an educational and training initiative that provides individuals currently unemployed with a fresh start. It offers a diverse range of courses designed to enhance skills and employability. To qualify for VTOS, applicants must meet specific criteria, including being over 21 years old, having been unemployed for at least six months (equivalent to 156 days), and receiving designated social welfare benefits. VTOS courses are completely tuition-free, and participants may be eligible for meal and travel allowances. These full-time courses typically extend up to two years, with a weekly attendance commitment of 30 hours. VTOS presents a valuable opportunity for individuals seeking to upgrade their skills and improve their employment prospects (Government of Ireland, 2022c).

In **Malta**¹⁵, the Ministry for Education holds the overarching responsibility for VET. Additionally, the Ministry for Tourism and Consumer Protection is specifically tasked with overseeing VET programmes in the tourism sector. Malta boasts two prominent state-run VET providers: the Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) and the Institute of Tourism Studies. These institutions, operating at EQF Levels 1–8, are recognised as self-accrediting further and higher VET establishments. Furthermore, Malta's VET landscape has seen a rise in private VET providers. Notably, in 2019, MCAST introduced apprenticeship degrees spanning seven distinct programmes.

¹⁵ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/malta-u2>

The My Journey – Achieving through Different Paths reform initiative has ushered in a compulsory secondary school system designed to bolster enrolment in vocational and applied subjects. Its overarching goal is to amplify the flexibility of educational pathways and enhance the appeal of VET. As part of this comprehensive educational reform, secondary school students, while still required to cover their compulsory core subjects (including Maltese, English, Mathematics, Science, and IT), have the opportunity to choose from a selection of academic, applied, and vocational subjects. All these options are delivered within a personalised and inclusive learning environment under the same educational umbrella. Importantly, this reform seeks to ensure ‘parity of esteem’ across all diverse learning programmes, enabling students to attain levels up to Malta’s Qualifications Framework Level 3 – a level equivalent to the EQF Level 3 – as they engage in various forms of learning and assessments.

To further underpin VET programmes, Malta’s qualifications framework sets the overall parameters for programmes at EQF Levels 1–5. This framework governs the distribution of key competences, which decrease with level, and shapes sector-specific skills and underpinning knowledge, which increase with level.

In **Poland**¹⁶, VET is structured with three tiers of governance: national (involving ministries), regional (led by school superintendents, mainly focusing on pedagogical supervision), and county (pertaining to school administration). VET primarily encompasses school-based upper secondary and post-secondary programmes. Upper secondary programmes are designed to integrate both general and vocational education.

As a part of Poland’s ongoing vocational education reforms, the Ministry of Education and Science has formulated the Vocational Education and Training Plan for 2022–2025. This strategic plan aims to further align students’ training with the current labour market’s requirements. It encompasses specific initiatives, such as fostering increased engagement and interest from potential employers and adapting curricula to better address market demands, particularly considering recent technological and digital shifts. Additionally, the plan aims to broaden the range of occupational choices for students with special needs and disabilities while enhancing the participation of local government in expanding vocational education and implementing the Integrated Skills Strategy.

VET in **Portugal**¹⁷ encompasses several notable characteristics. Firstly, it emphasises permeability, both horizontally and vertically, fostering the transition between various VET programmes and general education as well as enabling the acquisition of double certification (educational and professional) across all VET programmes. Furthermore, it has witnessed a substantial increase in upper secondary education participation. Notably, early leaving from education and training has displayed a steady decrease, now falling below the EU-27 average, marking a significant achievement.

These distinctive features of VET in Portugal are underpinned by essential principles. They encompass a diverse array of programmes catering to both young individuals and adults, aligning VET provisions with the demands of the labour market, and offering flexibility in the type and duration of courses for adult learners. Ensuring the quality of VET involves accrediting publicly funded VET providers, as well as teachers and trainers, with external evaluations playing a pivotal role in maintaining high-quality standards. The national qualifications system plays a crucial part in setting upper secondary education as the minimal level of achievement. Its governance model hinges on active involvement from various VET providers, sector councils, and social partners, all working collaboratively to establish common objectives and effective instruments.

¹⁶ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/poland-u2>

¹⁷ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/portugal-u2>

In **Romania**¹⁸, initial VET encompasses upper secondary and post-secondary levels. Upper secondary education's first two years are mandatory for all learners, including those pursuing VET in grade 9. Admission to these programmes is contingent on the successful completion of national examinations in mathematics and the Romanian language, possession of a lower secondary diploma, and a final mark transcript for all subjects. Some VET schools may require entry examinations. To progress to tertiary education, all upper secondary graduates must pass baccalaureate examinations.

The oversight of initial VET rests with the Ministry of Education and Research. The National Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training Development plays a coordinating role in developing training standards for qualifications. These standards are validated by sectoral committees, coordinated by the National Authority for Qualifications and approved by the ministry. The participation of social partners in these committees is integral to supporting VET implementation. Continuing VET falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection.

At the upper secondary level, the VET landscape is characterised by several distinctive programmes. These include three-year school-based VET programmes that provide graduates with a professional qualification at EQF Level 3, for professions such as cooks. These programmes are offered by 'professional schools' and are delivered in partnership with employers who furnish mandatory in-company training for learners as a part of WBL. Additionally, there are four-year technological programmes (ISCED-P 354) that confer an upper secondary school leaving diploma and the EQF Level 4 'technician' qualification in various fields. Technological high schools and colleges sometimes offer these programmes, featuring a 25% WBL component. Learners who have completed two years of a technological programme can opt for short VET programmes, providing a professional qualification at EQF Level 3. These programmes are coordinated by VET schools and are primarily delivered by employers. Young and adult early leavers from education and training can access these programmes after completing a second chance programme. Lastly, four-year vocational programmes (ISCED-P 354, EQF Level 4) grant graduates professional qualifications in diverse areas and an upper secondary school leaving diploma. These programmes are offered by colleges, with up to 15% of the curriculum designated for WBL.

In the post-secondary realm, VET extends to one- to three-year higher VET programmes (ISCED-P 453), culminating in a professional qualification at EQF Level 5, for professions such as opticians. These programmes are organised by technological schools or colleges/universities and offer secondary school graduates an avenue for advancing their qualifications.

In **Spain**¹⁹, the responsibility for initial VET rests with the education authorities, while continuing training falls under the purview of education and employment authorities. Although both areas share consultation bodies, they maintain distinct governance structures and objectives.

The emphasis on the VET system was further underscored by *Plan de Recuperación, Transformación, y Resiliencia* PRTR's Component 20, known as the Strategic Plan for the Promotion of VET or Plan Estratégico de Impulso de la Formación Profesional. Within this framework, a substantial allocation of €2 million was designated to facilitate reforms aimed at the comprehensive transformation and modernisation of the country's VET system. This transformation is driven by the objective of aligning the system with the ever-evolving demands of various economic

¹⁸ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/romania-u2>

¹⁹ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/spain-u2>

sectors, fostering enhanced employability, and ultimately elevating the productivity and competitiveness of businesses.

The impetus behind these efforts includes a multifaceted approach that seeks to bolster the ranks of qualified professionals, with a substantial 60% of the overall budget directed toward this goal. It encompasses endeavours such as the evaluation and accreditation of non-formal learning, the promotion of digital transformation within the VET sector, including the establishment of specialised centres of excellence, and a commitment to promoting equitable innovation and internationalisation throughout the VET system (Consejo Económico y Social España, 2023).

Employment authorities play a pivotal role in administering training programmes that address the skill requirements of companies and workers, whether they are currently employed or seeking employment. This includes managing employment-training schemes and regulating apprenticeship contracts.

The General Council for Vocational Training serves as the national government's advisory body on VET policy, comprising representatives from national and regional public authorities, employer organisations, and trade unions. These stakeholders collaborate in designing occupational standards across various economic sectors and contribute to the development of VET qualifications.

Within the domain of initial VET, there are upper secondary programmes, encompassing both basic and intermediate qualifications, which are integrated into the education system. These programmes extend over a duration of two years, equivalent to approximately 2000 hours, and involve a combination of WBL within a company and classroom-based instruction at a VET school:

1. Basic programmes (ISCED 353) are accessible to students in the final year of compulsory education, typically aged 15 or 16. They offer an opportunity for students at risk of leaving education without qualifications to refine their foundational skills, prepare for specific occupations, and attain a basic VET qualification. Successful students may subsequently transition to upper secondary VET programmes, in some instances, also achieving the compulsory secondary qualification that opens pathways to general education.
2. Intermediate programmes, commencing at age 16 following compulsory education, lead to technician qualifications (ISCED 354). The possibility of advancing to higher VET programmes in the same field exists, typically through an admission procedure.
3. At the tertiary level, higher programmes (ISCED 554) culminate in advanced technician qualifications. Graduates from these programmes can further their education by accessing bachelor programmes, usually through an admission procedure.

Graduates who have completed intermediate and higher VET programmes have the option to pursue specialisation courses within the same field of study. These courses serve to expand occupation-specific skills and align participants with the evolving digital requirements of the economy.

Switzerland's VET dual-track programme is considered the best programme in the world. Further details are available in Section 2.4.3 of the report.

2.3.4. GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING

Guidance and counselling services play a vital role in helping students make informed choices and navigate transitions within their educational and training journeys, including the transition from education to employment.

These services minimise the risks associated with inadequate information and unrealistic expectations, empowering learners to make decisions aligned with their interests, abilities, and future career aspirations. They also contribute to reducing dropout rates and ESL. Furthermore, for individuals who have prematurely discontinued their education or training, guidance and counselling can provide valuable assistance in facilitating their re-entry and successful completion of upper secondary education (Oomen & Plant, 2014; Psifidou et al., 2021). This corresponds with the European Commission's recommendations for addressing ESL through prevention, intervention, and compensation measures.

Research indicates that students who have formulated a career plan tend to exhibit increased retention rates and a more positive engagement with their educational pursuits (Haug & Plant, 2015; Oomen & Plant, 2014; Psifidou et al., 2021). The systematic provision of career education and guidance can further facilitate the often crucial transitions between various educational levels, pathways, and entry into the workforce. Effective study skills and career education should be seamlessly integrated into the curriculum, commencing in the early stages of education, with the aim of helping learners gain insights into their individual strengths and talents. The delivery of career education may take the form of a compulsory topic, a distinct subject, or may be seamlessly woven into the curriculum as a cross-curricular subject. To provide effective lifelong guidance, a comprehensive array of both curricular and extracurricular activities is essential. These activities encompass initiatives such as work experience programmes, job shadowing, career-oriented games, and taster courses across different educational domains (European Commission, 2015). Despite these overarching recommendations provided by the European Commission, the countries examined in this study have instituted their guidance and counselling services in a diverse array of formats.

In contrast to Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, government-funded school counselling services are not available in **England**²⁰. Nevertheless, the Department for Education issued non-statutory guidance in 2016, designed to assist school leaders in establishing or enhancing counselling services within primary and secondary schools. This guidance offers practical insights into the process of initiating or enhancing existing counselling provisions, encompassing various aspects like the decision-making process regarding the employment or contracting of counsellors, financial considerations, service delivery models, administrative oversight, and quality assurance measures. Additionally, it elaborates on the integration of counselling within a broader framework of promoting mental health and well-being throughout the entire school community. This holistic approach encompasses strategies for enhancing well-being and resilience, raising awareness of mental health topics through the curriculum, combating the stigma surrounding mental health, evaluating the effectiveness of the pastoral support system, and the leadership's role in this context (Department for Education, 2016).

In 2013, the legislative obligation to guarantee access to impartial careers guidance was expanded to encompass students in Year 8 (12 – 13-year-olds) and those up to the age of 18, spanning across schools, further education colleges, and sixth-form colleges. In 2022, this responsibility was further extended to students in Year 7. Starting in 2018, all educational institutions, including schools and academies, have been mandated to grant various education and training providers access to students in Years 8–13, enabling them to provide insights into apprenticeships and technical education pathways. This obligation was fortified in 2022 by introducing a new requirement necessitating schools to offer a minimum of six encounters with education and training providers. As of January 2023, these encounters' content and duration have also been stipulated. It is important to note that while these requirements do not encompass customising encounters to students' specific needs, the statutory guidance

²⁰ Education (Careers Guidance in Schools) Act 2022 and Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022.

does acknowledge the potential for schools to do so. Additionally, institutions like colleges and local authorities are compelled to collaborate with employers in the development of local skills enhancement strategies, ensuring that educational provisions align with local, regional, and national demands. This process is overseen by employer representative organisations (Ofsted, 2023).

In the educational landscape of **Greece**, teachers bear the responsibility of not only imparting academic knowledge but also guiding and nurturing their students throughout their scholastic journey. Concurrently, regional educational coordinators oversee the academic and pedagogical guidance provided by teachers within their respective areas. This coordination involves close collaboration with school principals and schoolteachers' boards to ensure the seamless operation of educational processes.

Within the schoolteachers' board, found at all levels of the educational system, a multifaceted set of concerns takes centre stage. These include monitoring and enhancing students' academic progress, offering guidance and support to students in various aspects of their educational journey, and addressing any learning difficulties that may arise.

The implementation of career guidance programmes in Greece falls under the purview of the Centres for Interdisciplinary Assessment, Counselling, and Support (KEDASYs) – formerly known as KESYs. KEDASYs play a crucial role in providing vocational guidance services to students. Recent legislation, such as Law 4823/2021, has brought about important changes to the institution of school career guidance. These changes encompass both administrative reorganisation and functional and educational restructuring. A significant development is the creation of a distinct position, the Head of Career Guidance Officer, in each Directorate of Secondary Education. This initiative aims to foster communication and cooperation among the Heads of Career Guidance, serving in the Directorates, and the Heads of Career Guidance who are part of Counselling and Guidance Offices, as regulated by Law 4547/2018. This collaborative effort seeks to effectively address the current needs of students in terms of counselling and career guidance services (European Commission/Eurydice, 2022a).

Their work extends to provision of career guidance, with an emphasis on students and their parents or guardians. This guidance is executed at both the team and individual levels. At the team level, career guidance programmes are planned and implemented within school units, through organising workshops and providing essential information regarding the labour market, upper secondary and tertiary education programmes, and pathways to higher education. This information also encompasses activities aimed at raising awareness and facilitating the smooth transition of students into adulthood and the labour market. On an individual level, counselling plays an important role in guiding students through career choices and assisting them in the development of a strong personal and professional identity. This personalised counselling helps students align their decision-making processes with their unique personality traits and aspirations (Euroguidance, 2022a; European Commission/Eurydice, 2022a).

The responsibility for providing guidance and counselling services is enshrined in **Irish** law, specifically Section 9 of the Education Act 1998. These services within schools aim to assist students in developing self-awareness, exploring opportunities, taking responsibility for their choices, and making informed decisions. The guidance process encompasses various aspects, including personal, educational, and career counselling. Importantly, it also plays a critical role in preventing ESL by offering additional support to students who may be at risk. In Ireland schools are provided with differentiated guidance and counselling supports based on their geographical location and the degree of socio-economic disadvantage of the population they serve. Schools with DEIS status have access to the Guidance Enhancement Initiative that offers them extra hours of guidance and counselling service (Department of Education, 2017). Moreover, schools with a significant population of non-national students, through the

abovementioned law are also required to recognise and cater to the unique needs of these students from diverse cultural backgrounds, providing them with tailored guidance and counselling services.

The guidance and counselling service encompasses early identification and support for at-risk students, the promotion of school attendance strategies, raising awareness about the consequences of ESL, and delivering information on further education, training, and employment opportunities. Both school leadership and guidance counsellors play a major role in facilitating smooth transitions between different educational levels, ensuring effective communication structures are in place, and offering support to students with special educational needs. Guidance counsellors are expected to possess a deep understanding of senior cycle options and provide guidance to students as they transition to further education, training, or employment. An inclusive approach is essential in the school's guidance plan, taking into account the diverse needs of all students, including those with special educational requirements, minority ethnic groups, the Traveller community, and those enrolled in Post-Leaving Certificate or VTOS. The planning process is expected to be a collaborative effort involving school management, guidance counsellors, staff, students, parents, and other stakeholders to ensure a comprehensive approach (Department of Education, 2005).

The major framework governing career guidance policy development in **Malta** is the Career Guidance Policy for Schools (2007). This policy instigated the formal separation of career guidance from personal counselling within the public educational sector, ushering in the provision of two distinct services tailored to students. As a consequence, the policy ensured that all students in compulsory schooling are granted access to career guidance services provided by specialised career guidance practitioners. These practitioners constitute a new infrastructure and work on a full-time basis, catering to students in both primary and secondary schooling, in addition to the existing guidance teachers who teach a subject while also holding guidance responsibilities. Notably, since August 2017, this service extension encompasses several post-secondary institutions, signifying a significant step in the evolution of career guidance services (Euroguidance, 2022b).

A comprehensive guidance and counselling strategy is articulated within the framework of the Early Leaving from Education and Training (ELET) Plan 2014–2020, which was also embraced in the recent ELET 2023 Strategy. This strategic approach endorses the role of guidance and counselling across all educational levels, encompassing preventive, intervention, and compensation measures aimed at addressing ESL and enhancing educational achievement. The strategy advocates for a holistic approach to transition processes, including flexible educational pathways and comprehensive career guidance services integrated throughout primary and secondary schools. The envisioned career guidance service seeks to expand students' horizons beyond conventional stereotypes, encouraging them to explore a diverse array of learning pathways and career opportunities. Particular emphasis is placed on students facing learning challenges or those from disadvantaged backgrounds, with the goal of helping them navigate educational system options aligned with their capabilities and employment prospects.

Within this strategic framework, a clear differentiation is established between counselling and career guidance, facilitated through the appointment of dedicated counsellors, career advisers, and trainee career advisers within educational institutions. The strategy underscores the role of the Early School Leaving Working Group in enhancing transition programmes, fostering connectivity across various educational cycles and sectors, and facilitating engagement with civil society and the business sector to gain contemporary insights. Furthermore, the strategy highlights the integration of national and international qualification frameworks into the National Curriculum Framework, with the Secondary School Certificate and Profile serving as a comprehensive record of students' formal, informal, and non-formal learning throughout the five-year secondary school cycle. This record functions as

a valuable tool for supporting potential early school leavers in transitioning into further and higher education, ultimately enhancing their prospects (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2014).

Counselling and guidance, known as psychological and pedagogical support, are integral aspects of nurturing students in nursery schools, educational institutions, and other educational settings in **Poland**²¹. These practices encompass a multifaceted approach, which involves evaluating each student's individual developmental and educational requirements, as well as considering their psychological and physical capabilities, in conjunction with the environmental factors that may influence their performance within these educational contexts. Subsequently, the identified needs are systematically addressed. Counselling and guidance sessions are among the array of psychological and pedagogical support mechanisms extended to children and young learners. Moreover, this form of support is not limited to students alone; it is also extended to parents and teachers through counselling or guidance sessions, workshops, and training programmes. The overarching goal of this support is to assist parents and teachers in resolving educational and learning challenges faced by students while simultaneously enhancing their own educational skills, thereby increasing the efficacy of psychological and pedagogical support provided to students (European Commission/Eurydice, 2023b).

To facilitate this, counselling sessions, workshops, and training programmes are administered by a cadre of professionals, including teachers, class/group tutors, and specialists. In cases where a student does not make requisite progress despite the provision of psychological and pedagogical support, the head of the respective nursery school or educational institution, with the consent of parents or adult learners, may request an evaluation and diagnostic assessment from a counselling and guidance centre. This assessment aims to pinpoint the issues at hand and recommend suitable strategies for resolution (European Commission/Eurydice, 2023b).

Career guidance is an essential component of the educational landscape, accessible to all students. Since 1 September 2019, educational institutions, except art schools, have been legally mandated to engage in career guidance activities at all educational stages. In primary and secondary schools, career counselling takes place during compulsory general education classes and sessions linked to the selection of education and profession, conducted within the framework of psychological and pedagogical assistance. Additionally, schools offering vocational education integrate career counselling into compulsory vocational education classes, while from grade 7 of primary general school onward, students benefit from additional career counselling sessions (European Commission/Eurydice, 2023b).

Poland boasts an extensive network of public counselling and guidance centres that serve as invaluable resources for mental health support, education, and career counselling. These centres, which are accessible to students and families throughout the nation, are offered completely free of charge. In accordance with the guidelines set by the National Centre on Education and the Economy (NCEE, 2023), primary and secondary schools are mandated to furnish students with essential guidance to aid them in their decision-making processes concerning educational trajectories and future careers.

The dedicated mission of Poland's school counsellors centres on delivering top-tier, comprehensive school counselling services tailored to meet the diverse needs of all students. Their programmes are meticulously designed

²¹ Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 1 February 2013 on detailed rules for the operation of public psychological and pedagogical counselling centres, including public specialist centres and Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 9 August 2017, on the principles of organising and providing psychological and pedagogical assistance in public kindergartens, schools, and institutions.

to empower students to enhance their academic, social, career, and personal attributes, fostering their development into responsible and productive members of society. A fundamental commitment is directed toward recognising and nurturing the individuality of each student, facilitating the realisation of their maximum potential. To achieve these objectives, counsellors skilfully deploy strategic, timely, and personalised interventions, customising educational experiences to amplify capabilities, bridge achievement disparities among high and low-performing groups, and promote positive decision-making.

Furthermore, the Integrated Skills Strategy 2030 sets its sights on establishing a modernised, transparent, and easily accessible system for skills assessment and anticipation. This endeavour revolves around the reinforcement of counselling and guidance systems that cater to individuals from all walks of life, ultimately facilitating their skills development and fostering an environment conducive to lifelong learning.

In **Portugal**²², the provision of guidance and counselling services in basic and secondary education is distinct from other countries like Switzerland. Specialised services within schools, rather than being integrated into the curriculum, are responsible for offering professional guidance. Specifically, these services are administered by Psychology and Guidance Services and are available in every public school, catering to children between the ages of 5 and 16 or 17, marking the conclusion of compulsory education. The role of career guidance and counselling in Portugal is fulfilled by psychologists, aligning with the belief that career development should be embedded within broader psychological development, as posited by Vondracek et al. (2019). These services primarily aim to assist students in making informed career decisions, navigating transitions, and preparing for diverse roles in different contexts, encompassing student life, domestic responsibilities, work, and community engagement. All major stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and students, actively participate in the guidance process, carrying out various tasks, such as supporting identity development, fostering information research skills, and facilitating the acquisition of career management capabilities. Additionally, they engage in informative activities related to the education and training system, organise study visits and activities connected to the labour market, prepare for educational and professional transitions, encourage participation in concrete experiential learning opportunities like internships and job shadowing, and promote awareness among parents, guardians, and the broader community regarding career decision-making. The availability of psychology and guidance resources in schools is perceived as an essential contributor to enhancing student achievement, reducing ESL, promoting the appeal of vocational education, and ensuring a better alignment between young people's skills and the requirements of the labour market, as affirmed by the Director-General for Education (n.d.).

The Education Act 176/2012²³ delineates the integral role of guidance and counselling in shaping educational trajectories, facilitating adult learning programmes, and ensuring seamless transitions from education to the workforce. Crucially, the selection of a vocational path is contingent upon the assessment conducted by guidance and supervision teams, and it requires the approval of parents or legal guardians. Moreover, students should retain the opportunity to rejoin regular educational tracks following the completion of each cycle, provided they meet the requisites for the corresponding examination.

At the secondary level, measures aimed at averting school dropout and ESL are prominently centred on the identification and resolution of learning challenges among students. These measures encompass various considerations and strategies, including the assessment of guidance and support technical teams to redefine

²² Decree Law no. 190/91, 17 May.

²³ Decree-Law 176/2012. Available from: <https://dre.pt/pesquisa/-/search/179057/details/maximised>.

students' educational paths and guide them toward more suitable tracks. Adult learning programmes represent a viable alternative for students aged 16 or older who seek to further their education. The choice of educational tracks is influenced by a thoughtful evaluation of students' prior experiences and motivations by the guidance teams. Furthermore, the reinforcement of guidance and counselling capabilities is prioritised, featuring the significant role played by technical support and guidance in the educational system.

In the **Romanian** K-12²⁴ education system, guidance and counselling services are provided through two primary avenues: within school counselling offices or as a dedicated school subject integrated into the National Curriculum. The inclusion of counselling as a separate and compulsory discipline in lower secondary education dates back to 2004. The overarching objective of guidance and counselling in Romania is to deliver personalised interventions for personal development and facilitate the smooth transitions of individuals as they progress through various educational stages and into the workforce. The key providers of these services include schools, universities, and public employment offices (Euroguidance, 2023).

Guidance services within the school setting are governed by the Law of Education (1/2011) and the Order of the Ministry of Education no. 5555/2011. During primary education, educational guidance is typically overseen by the class teacher in close collaboration with the children's parents and the school psychologist. The National Curriculum designates a dedicated curricular area known as 'Counselling and Guidance', which caters to the educational guidance of students. In the context of primary education, the curriculum frameworks allow for the allocation of one hour per week for counselling and guidance within the school-based curriculum. Additionally, there exists a central curriculum offering for this specific curricular area, officially sanctioned through an Order of the Minister of Education (European Commission/Eurydice, 2022g).

At the secondary level, educational and vocational guidance is an integral component of the National Curriculum, typically delivered by the class teacher in conjunction with students' parents and the school counsellor. The curriculum frameworks designate one hour per week for this curricular area, applicable across all phases of secondary education. For this curricular area, centralised curricula have been established, officially approved by an Order of the Minister of Education, delineating the educational objectives and content for each phase, while also offering methodological recommendations to guide teachers in achieving the objectives and developing specific skills within this particular curricular area (European Commission/Eurydice, 2022g).

Specifically, guidance and counselling for vocational and technical education are realised through the subject 'Vocational Guidance and Counselling', designed for the technological path and directed at students in Grades 11 and 12. Additionally, there are offices for psychological and pedagogical assistance situated within schools with student populations exceeding 800 and operating under the jurisdiction of County Centres of Psychological and Pedagogical Assistance. Schools with smaller enrolments access psychological and pedagogical assistance services provided by other schools. Moreover, each county hosts County Centres of Educational Assistance and Resources, further enhancing the provision of guidance and counselling services (European Commission/Eurydice, 2022g).

Career counselling services in pre-university education are administered through the School Offices of Psycho-pedagogical Assistance, overseen by the County Centre of Psycho-pedagogical Assistance at the county level, with higher-level coordination by the Ministry of Education and Research and the Institute of Education Sciences at the national level (Andronic & Andronic, 2011).

²⁴ 4–5-year-olds – 18–19-year-olds

In **Spain**, the national education legislation known as the Organic Law 3/2020, dated 29 December, amending Organic Law 2/2006, dated 3 May, on Education introduces the concept of guidance as a fundamental student entitlement and a key element of educational quality. One of the fundamental principles outlined in this law is the provision of educational and professional guidance, designed to foster personalised learning that contributes to the holistic development of students in terms of knowledge, competencies, and values.

Each regional administration is under the obligation to furnish dedicated services and allocate resources, such as expert professionals, to ensure the successful academic progress of students. Within the Autonomous Communities (regions), educational authorities and schools maintain their own departments that oversee educational, vocational, and career guidance. Similarly, institutions providing compulsory secondary education, baccalaureate programmes, and VET, as well as universities, establish their own guidance services. These services encompass the provision of information, assistance, guidance, and advisory support to students (Euroguidance, 2022c).

There are two specialist programmes being undertaken in Spain to strengthen guidance and counselling services. The first one, the Programa de Refuerzo, Orientación y Apoyo, known as PROA (now known as PROA+), is a guidance and support initiative (European Commission, 2013) founded in 2005. Its original purpose was to address ESL and disparities in access to high-quality education by delivering specific assistance to schools enrolling a significant proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Vidmar & Veldin, 2018). PROA encompassed two primary components: the Programme for School Guidance (Programa de Acompañamiento Escolar, or PAE) and the Programme for Support and Reinforcement (Programa de Apoyo y Refuerzo, or PAR). PAE concentrated on aiding students with learning difficulties through tailored support in small group settings and extracurricular activities. In contrast, PAR aimed to enhance the overall performance of secondary schools and implement focused measures within both the school and family contexts (García-Pérez & Hidalgo, 2014).

The UAO represents the second initiative aimed at fostering guidance and support measures for primary and post-compulsory secondary students, with a particular focus on those at a high risk of grade repetition and ESL. This programme operates through a collaborative approach involving various stakeholders, facilitating tutorial sessions and educational-professional guidance while also fostering enhanced cooperation between educational institutions and families. It offers a range of tools and resources that empower parents and guardians to actively engage in their children's education. Similar to the PROA+ programme, the UAO's funding is allocated to regional communities, which are responsible for distributing resources to selected schools catering to a substantial number of vulnerable students or those situated in rural or remote areas. The financing of UAO is secured through the NextGenerationEU funds provided by the EU, with a total budget of €124 million allocated for the span of three academic years from 2021 to 2024 (OECD, 2023, p. 16).

In **Switzerland**²⁵, the responsibility for school career guidance and academic counselling primarily lies within the school system and involves managing transitions from primary to lower secondary levels or adjusting to changes in subjects or academic levels at lower secondary and upper secondary levels. Teachers and school administrators serve as the primary points of contact for students and their parents in this regard (European Commission /Eurydice, 2022h). The Swiss education system is distinguished by early academic selection, where young individuals must make a pivotal choice between pursuing a general education path or opting for a VET route after completing eight years of compulsory schooling (Kamm et al., 2020). Transitions within the educational system, particularly from lower secondary to upper secondary levels, do not always follow a straightforward trajectory. A notable portion of

²⁵ Vocational and Professional Education and Training Ordinance, VPETO Article 4.

young individuals, particularly those who may not excel academically or for various other reasons, may not immediately proceed to upper secondary education. In such cases, interim solutions are accessible, such as bridge-year courses. These transitional phases are facilitated by specialised career guidance teachers who assist students, whether in lower secondary or during bridge-year courses, in their career decision-making process. This assistance encompasses various aspects, including fostering the personal development of young individuals, offering insights into the professional world, and aiding them in organising work placements. General information on the transition from primary level to lower secondary level is provided by the cantonal school authorities (European Commission/Eurydice, 2022h; Kamm et al., 2020).

Career guidance education is integrated into the regular curriculum at both lower secondary and upper secondary levels, including programmes like bridge-year courses that prepare students for the workforce. When students have chosen a specific career path, dedicated teachers offer support in securing apprenticeships, including guidance on developing an application file. Specialised career guidance teachers collaborate closely with various stakeholders involved in the career exploration process, such as parents, career counselling centres, businesses, government authorities, and VET schools.

In addition to academic counselling provided at schools, each canton maintains a coordinating body for occupational, study, and career guidance. Depending on the size of the canton there may be additional regional occupational, study, and careers advisory offices. For lower and upper secondary level students the regional occupational, study, and career guidance offices provide comprehensive information and guidance. Usually, information events are organised at the schools at which students and their parents are informed of the opportunities for career and study choices as well as entry into the labour market (European Commission /Eurydice, 2022h).

2.4. Successful policy approaches

This section examines the distinctive policy measures implemented by countries that have effectively addressed ESL and achieved notable improvements in learning outcomes for their students. Scientific evidence such as research studies, student achievement data, population statistics and evaluation findings corroborate that these measures have actually been ‘transformative’ in their systemic impact. In many instances, these strategies were developed through a transformative approach that actively engaged end-users in shaping the implementation plans. Such an approach not only ensures the relevance of the policies but also nurtures a sense of ownership and commitment among all stakeholders involved. The following analysis sheds light on these innovative policies and their impact on reducing ESL and enhancing educational outcomes.

2.4.1. DELIVERING EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY IN SCHOOLS – IRELAND

The DEIS programme 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 socio-economic disadvantages. Introduced in 2005 based on the recommendations of the Educational Disadvantage Committee (EDC), the DEIS programme was envisioned as a pivotal strategy to effectively combat challenges in literacy, numeracy, unqualified school leaving, and educational advancement for disadvantaged students. The successful execution of the DEIS plan was also viewed as forming a foundation for the future educational endeavours (Department of Education, 2005).

The DEIS programme as a wide-ranging intervention cum prevention strategy emphasises enhanced collaboration among schools, parents, and the community, exemplified by the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL).

Furthermore, it provides literacy and numeracy programmes tailored to support the learning needs of students falling behind, implements smaller class sizes in primary schools to facilitate one-on-one teacher–student interactions, administers school meals programme, and offers school book grants to assist students who face financial constraints. The programme also prioritises increased access to professional development opportunities for school leaders and teachers within DEIS schools, including participation in the Incredible Years Programme. Additionally, students benefit from the Friends for Life Programme and gain priority access to the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). For DEIS post-primary students, an enhanced guidance and counselling service is also available. The School Completion Programme complements the DEIS school support programme by offering various forms of assistance through after-school and out-of-school programmes. To ensure students leave school with a qualification, through the DEIS initiative the Leaving Certificate Applied and Junior Certificate School Programmes are introduced (Department of Education, 2017).

As recommended by the EDC, the DEIS programme underwent multiple evaluations conducted by the Education Research Council (ERC) and rigorous monitoring by the School Inspectorate within the Department of Education. ERC’s evaluations encompassed various aspects of the programme, including ‘The evaluation of DEIS at post-primary level: Closing the achievement and attainment gaps’ (2018), ‘The evaluation of DEIS: Achievements and attitudes of students in urban primary schools from 2007 to 2016’ (2017), and ‘A report on the first phase of the evaluation of DEIS. Report to the Department of Education and Skills 2011, among others. To inform their evaluations, the ERC engaged a diverse range of stakeholders through focus groups and interviews, including students, parents, teachers, school staff, and principals. Additionally, they conducted analyses of student achievement data and academic performance data from the PISA study in 2018, and administered short literacy and numeracy tests. The outcome of these evaluations indicated that the DEIS programme has achieved success in enhancing student retention rates and academic achievement. Notably, progress continues to be observed among students in DEIS post-primary schools. Extending the trend analysis to include data from recent years reaffirms the sustained positive trajectory and the narrowing of the achievement and attainment gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools (Weir & Kavanagh, 2018). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that a performance gap between students in DEIS and non-DEIS schools still persists.

Weir and Kavanagh (2018) investigate the longitudinal trends in academic achievement and student retention within post-primary schools in Ireland by utilising data provided to the Educational Research Centre as part of the comprehensive evaluation of the School Support Programme under the DEIS initiative. 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 are identified in student retention rates, both leading up to the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate examinations.

Notably, the retention rate for DEIS schools for the 2015 entry cohort reached 86.1%, reflecting an increase from the previous year’s rate of 84.8%. Furthermore, the gap in retention between DEIS and non-DEIS schools has narrowed to 7.6%, marking a reduction from the 8.6% difference observed in 2020 (Department of Education, 2022). These findings signify the DEIS programme’s effectiveness in enhancing student performance and retention over the years, emphasising its success in addressing educational disparities.

The DEIS programme has undergone significant revisions in 2017 and 2022, primarily aimed at enhancing transparency and objectivity in the criteria for designating schools as DEIS and expanding the provision of DEIS resources and support to all eligible students. The overarching goal is to harness education as a means of breaking

down barriers and interrupting the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage, equipping learners to participate, succeed, and contribute effectively to society within an evolving context (Department of Education, 2017). These revisions have involved extensive engagement with education stakeholders, including teacher unions, parent representatives, and management bodies (Department of Education, 2022).

The DEIS programme adopts a multifaceted approach. On one hand, schools are encouraged to embrace a ‘whole-school approach’, fostering connections with parents, families, and the local community to provide personalised support to each student. On the other hand, the programme emphasises cross-sectoral and interagency collaboration. For instance, the Professional Development Service for Teachers plays a pivotal role in developing literacy and numeracy programmes for schools while also training teachers for their implementation. Furthermore, schools’ guidance counsellors collaborate with further education and the NEPS, and HSCL and School Completion Programme (SCP) work in tandem, jointly planning school activities. Other collaborating agencies or departments include the Department of Social Protection (to oversee the School Meal Programme); Department of Health; Department of Housing, Planning, Community, and Local Government; and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

A salient feature of the DEIS programme is the differentiation of resources and support based on the level of disadvantage and geographical location. Schools are also tasked with formulating DEIS action plans and setting actionable targets tailored to their specific needs. The evaluation of the DEIS action planning and implementation at the school level, conducted by the Inspectorate at the Department of Education, has revealed that engagement with the DEIS planning process exerts an overall positive impact. Statistical reports compiled by the Department and other stakeholders throughout the lifespan of DEIS consistently demonstrate improvements in attendance, retention, and progression figures. Another notable outcome of the programme is the increased adoption of whole-school approaches to literacy development (Department of Education, 2015). This approach exemplifies the transformative nature of DEIS, wherein schools, taking into account the perspectives of parents and students, formulate their DEIS plans, aligning with the overarching goals of the programme.

Another distinctive element within the policy framework addressing underachievement and ESL in Ireland is the HSCL Scheme, which stands as an unparalleled initiative globally. Under the auspices of DEIS, the HSCL programme endeavours to promote collaborative partnerships among parents, educators, and community-based family support services. HSCL Coordinators, typically teachers selected from participating schools, are granted a leave from their teaching responsibilities, extending up to a maximum of five years, to engage intensively with and provide support to parents and guardians. The overarching objective of HSCL Coordinators is to work closely and collaboratively with the primary adults in the child’s life to enhance their educational outcomes.

Central to the HSCL Coordinator’s role are home visits, serving as the cornerstone for building robust relationships with parents and guardians. Additionally, HSCL Coordinators orchestrate parent classes within the relevant school(s) and offer valuable information and guidance to parents and guardians concerning their access to community-based programmes and support services. Furthermore, the HSCL programme extends its support to families during critical transition phases, including the shift from early education to primary school, from primary school to post-primary school, and ultimately, from post-primary school to further and higher education, vocational training, or employment opportunities (TUSLA, 2023a).

The DEIS plan is characterised by close collaboration among key services, including HSCL, the SCP, and the Education Welfare Service (EWS), all operating under the umbrella of the TUSLA Education Support Service. These services are dedicated to establishing strong relationships with schools and the families of students. The HSCL

programme conducts parent education initiatives to empower parents in actively participating in their children's education. The SCP manages after-school and extracurricular activities, working in collaboration with local communities, youth clubs, sports associations, and various statutory entities (TUSLA 2004a, 2004b). Concurrently, the EWS is responsible for monitoring school attendance and related matters, offering support to both students and their families. These services work together to reinforce and complement each other's responsibilities.

The success of the DEIS programme is firmly rooted in robust scientific evidence, meticulously collected and assessed through extensive evaluations conducted by the ERC. These evaluations have systematically examined the programme's impact on student achievement and retention, consistently revealing positive trends over time. The ERC's rigorous analysis of centrally held data, including academic performance data from the Junior Certificate Examination and student retention rates, provides compelling empirical support for the programme's effectiveness. Moreover, the utilisation of statistical reports and engagement with various stakeholders have further enriched the evidence base, reaffirming DEIS as a vital intervention that has significantly contributed to narrowing the educational attainment gap and fostering inclusive education.

2.4.2. STUDENT PROFILE AT THE END OF COMPULSORY EDUCATION AND CURRICULAR AUTONOMY AND FLEXIBILITY – PORTUGAL

In Portugal, the Education Act 55/2018, a comprehensive legislative framework governing all levels of education in both the public and private sectors, establishes the national education policy framework. Within the purview 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. As a first step of these initiatives, a diverse array of stakeholders – including teachers, academics, families, students, and social representatives – were involved in extensive deliberation and consultation (Liebowitz et al., 2018). The outcome was the establishment of a comprehensive matrix comprising principles, values, and competency domains that students are expected to acquire and develop throughout their educational journey. These encompass principles such as inclusion, adaptability, boldness, and sustainability, a range of competencies including critical thinking, creativity, reasoning, and problem-solving, as well as values like citizenship, participation, curiosity, reflection, and innovation. In pursuit of this objective, as outlined in the Profile of the Student at the End of Compulsory Education, it stipulates that primary decisions concerning curriculum and pedagogical matters are entrusted to schools and educators.

Curriculum autonomy and flexibility

This legislation places a significant emphasis on the curriculum as a tool for local school management and development and acknowledges the achievements of certain schools that have effectively addressed key factors contributing to underachievement by tailoring their approaches to fit unique contexts and the specific requirements of their students. Within this context, schools are granted greater autonomy to pursue the multifaceted objective of ensuring that all students attain the competencies outlined in the Profile of the Student at the End of Compulsory Education. The legal framework necessitating this flexibility in curriculum management also actively promotes interdisciplinary collaboration, which is to be achieved through the establishment of pedagogical teams. Furthermore, students are provided with a broad spectrum of subject choices, complemented by a comprehensive citizenship education, project-based methodologies, and effective communication strategies. This strategic approach aims to empower schools to adapt their educational offerings to specific contexts and cater to the diverse needs of their student body, thereby enhancing overall educational outcomes.

Among other guidelines that are offered include improved quality of teaching and learning through the use of differentiated instruction and formative assessment to adjust the curriculum to the potentialities and difficulties of students. It is envisaged that the effective implementation of curricular autonomy enables schools to identify successful curricular options pertinent to their specific and unique context. Curriculum autonomy and flexibility also allow schools to create inclusive learning environments that promote equality and non-discrimination by building their curriculum in response to the diversity and heterogeneity of their students and which in turn ensures equal access to the curriculum and eliminates barriers to learning. Teachers have a pivotal role in developing and evaluating the curriculum and making decisions about the options to be included, their feasibility, and adequacy, while students and their guardians are involved in the school's curricular options.

In accordance with the law (Decree Law no. 6 July, p.2930)²⁶, there is a strong emphasis on fostering an inclusive school environment that champions equality and non-discrimination. This emphasis is rooted in the understanding that such an environment is essential for creating a context where diversity, flexibility, and innovation can effectively address the varying needs of students in their access to the curriculum and learning. The primary goal of this approach is to eliminate obstacles and stereotypes that may hinder educational progress. Recognising the key role of teachers in the curriculum's development and evaluation is fundamental. Within this framework, teachers are regarded as administrators who actively contribute to curriculum design, reflect on the choices to be made, assess their feasibility, and ensure their appropriateness for the students they serve. Moreover, it is considered essential to engage students and their guardians in the school's curricular decisions. This proactive involvement allows for a more comprehensive understanding of students' needs and preferences, thereby ensuring that the curriculum aligns closely with their educational goals. Furthermore, this policy measure acknowledges the varying aspirations of students and provides them with the opportunity to complete their compulsory schooling through suitable options. This is particularly significant because secondary education offers diverse pathways to students based on their vocational interests and educational requirements.

Furthermore, the law stresses interdisciplinary and articulated curriculum management. This involves the development of projects that integrate knowledge from different disciplines. These projects are expected to be planned, implemented, and evaluated collaboratively by groups of teachers. This interdisciplinary approach aims to enhance the depth and breadth of learning experiences. Collaborative and interdisciplinary work is highly valued in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of teaching and learning processes. This collaborative approach results in a dynamic and enriching educational environment. Each student's progress and individual pathways are highly respected as the foundation for success and the realisation of their full potential. This personalised approach acknowledges that students have unique strengths and areas for growth. The importance of foreign languages is recognised as a means for global and multicultural identity. It facilitates access to IT while promoting linguistic diversity among students and the broader community, celebrating various cultural identities. Lastly, both external and internal school evaluations are acknowledged as essential components of the education system. These evaluations help ensure the quality and effectiveness of educational practices, contributing to ongoing improvement and accountability.

The curricular autonomy and flexibility, along with the guidelines for their implementation in schools – particularly focusing on differentiation, an interdisciplinary approach, and project-based learning, as proposed in Education Act 55/2018 – have been supported by scientific evidence as pedagogical approaches that lead to increased student

²⁶ <https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/55-2018-115652962>

engagement and improved outcomes (see, e.g., Allcock & Hulme, 2010; Bell, 2010; Bintz & Monobe, 2018; Campbell & Henning, 2010; Haelermans et al., 2015; Taylor, 2017). Studies conducted in Portugal, such as those by Cavalcanti dos Santos and Leite (2020), Ferreira (2020), and Silva and Fraga (2021), have welcomed these changes and anticipate positive effects on overall school success. The Act has been in implementation since the academic year 2018–2019; however, 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.

Developing a curriculum that is thoughtfully tailored to the unique needs of students and that actively engages them in the learning process is considered an 'intervention as well as preventive measure' according to recommendations put forth by the European Commission for addressing ESL. An engaging and relevant curriculum not only supports academic achievement but also fosters student engagement and enthusiasm for learning (prevention). By tailoring the curriculum to fit the diverse contexts and specific requirements of students, educational institutions can create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment, and in this way it is an intervention measure, too. This approach empowers students to overcome potential obstacles and stereotypes, thus promoting their overall success and well-being within the education system (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Cedefop, 2014).

2.4.3. DUAL-TRACK VOCATIONAL AND TRAINING PROGRAMME – SWITZERLAND

In Switzerland, 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 are prestigious and provide a solid base for a successful professional career (Scharenberg et al., 2016). 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 school; with an extensive selection of over 230 training programmes, 80% of adolescents in the vocational track choose a dual training programme (European Commission/Eurydice, 2022i; Swiss Coordination Centre for Research in Education [SCCRE], 2018). VET is the mainstream upper secondary programme, serving 70% of Swiss young people. It prepares a broad cross-section of students including high achievers for careers in a range of occupations – high-tech, human service, and health, as well as traditional trades and crafts, so white-collar as well as blue-collar. It enjoys very strong Hoffman & Schwartz).

The training companies shoulder the responsibility of imparting hands-on, trade-specific expertise to apprentices during their tenure. This encompasses equipping apprentices with the necessary practical skills and knowledge relevant to their chosen vocations. Conversely, the vocational schools assume the role of nurturing theoretical understanding among apprentices, catering to both trade-specific and general knowledge domains. Notably, apprentices receive a modest salary from their training companies during their apprenticeship, albeit significantly lower than the wages earned by fully employed workers.

Under the aegis of vocational and professional education and training, several educational provisions are included: VET, tertiary-level professional education, and continuing professional development. Switzerland's distinctive landscape primarily revolves around dual-track VET programmes at the upper secondary level and an expansive array of non-university tertiary-level professional education initiatives.

The Federal Vocational and Professional Education and Training Act (Bundesgesetz über die Berufsbildung) and the Vocational and Professional Education and Training Ordinance (Verordnung über die Berufsbildung) constitute the pivotal legal framework governing VET in Switzerland. VET in Switzerland is a collective responsibility, involving collaborative efforts from the Confederation, cantons, and professional organisations.

Confederation through the State Secretariat for Education, Research, and Innovation holds a strategic role in managing and developing vocational education and training. Its responsibilities encompass legislation, enacting VET ordinances, recognising educational courses for VET instructors, promoting innovation, ensuring quality assurance, and overall system development. Cantonal authorities are actively engaged in the development and oversight of VET. They are also responsible for implementing federal legislation, supervising VET, managing career information and advice centres, and promoting apprenticeships. The professional organisations, comprising trade associations, industry bodies, social partners, and other relevant entities, exercise considerable influence. They define the content and objectives of VET programmes, establish national qualification procedures, and organise intercompany courses. In the domain of dual-track VET, the cooperation among stakeholders plays a pivotal role in bridging the gap between educational institutions and workplace-based learning, with an increased focus on ensuring the overall quality of the system. Therefore, to institutionalise and regulate this collaborative effort, legal frameworks are in place, encompassing the formulation of formal guidelines and procedures to guarantee its realisation (Sauli, 2021).

The core objective of VET at the upper secondary level lies in facilitating the transfer and acquisition of knowledge and competencies imperative for the effective execution of occupational tasks. The following form the essential components of the VET curriculum: the VET programme endeavours to equip learners with the specific qualifications necessary to competently and confidently engage in their chosen occupations. The learners are provided with basic general education, essential for enabling them to access the labour market, sustain economic engagement, and become integral members of society. They are also given knowledge and skills spanning economic, environmental, social, and cultural domains, fostering their ability to contribute to sustainable development. Through the curriculum a disposition for lifelong learning is instilled in the learners, empowering them to exercise independent critical judgement and make informed decisions.

VET can be completed through two primary avenues:

1. Two-year VET Programme: This track leads to a Federal VET Certificate, offering a federally recognised professional qualification. It is designed to accommodate individuals with less demanding requirements.
2. Three- or Four-year VET Programme: This path culminates in the attainment of a Federal VET Diploma, reflecting the acquisition of specialised vocational qualifications.

The plausible next phase can be the Federal Vocational Baccalaureate (FVB) that offers a comprehensive, in-depth general education and complements the three- or four-year VET programme. The FVB is a hybrid qualification that integrates components from both tracks: general education and VET (Jüttler et al., 2021). Moreover, VET programmes leading to the Federal VET Diploma can be supplemented with additional general education, enabling learners to earn a Federal Vocational Baccalaureate – a testament to their enhanced academic and vocational prowess. Graduates holding a FVB enjoy the privilege of enrolling in related fields of study at universities of applied sciences without the burden of additional examinations. However, it is essential to recognise that supplementary admission conditions may be in place, encompassing prerequisites like internships, aptitude assessments, and more. In cases where the VET programme does not align with the desired field of study, individuals have the option to complete a one-year qualifying internship to meet admission requirements (European Commission/Eurydice, 2022i).

Furthermore, Switzerland offers bridge-year courses (interim solutions), which function as an intermediary stage between lower secondary and upper secondary education levels. These courses cater to individuals who opt not to

immediately enrol in institutions providing upper secondary education following the completion of lower secondary education. Bridge-year courses serve multiple purposes, including addressing academic, language, or other deficiencies, guiding young individuals in making informed decisions regarding post-compulsory education, and serving as a transitional solution to rectify imbalances in the supply and demand of training opportunities (SCCRE, 2023).

According to the EU recommendations, this Swiss VET dual-track programme is a combination of preventive and compensatory measures that keep the students engaged in their learning and simultaneously provide an alternative to general education which is prestigious and flexible. This programme has high completion rates and the unemployment rates of youth in Switzerland are very low (Hoffman & Schwartz, 2015; Sauli, 2021). The most important feature of the programme is its flexibility. As students chose their VET pathway when they are very young, which is very likely to have consequences for career-choice readiness (Findeisen et al., 2022), the system has the option for them to switch to the career they choose by studying the relevant components. They can also switch from VET to universities by undertaking the supplementary examination known as ‘Passerelle’ aptitude test (European Commission/2022). These flexible educational routes facilitate mobility and mitigate the potential pitfalls associated with academic dead-ends (OECD, 2009). The programme’s success can be attributed to its robust interagency collaboration, effective governance structure, and flexibility.

2.4.4. SCHOOLS AS LEARNING COMMUNITIES – SPAIN

In Spain, the concept of ‘Schools as Learning Communities’ was initially put into practice in 1995, leading to approximately 80 schools adopting the learning-community approach (Elboj et al., 2002, p. 114). Subsequently, a substantial body of scientific evidence has been accumulated, demonstrating the efficacy of this approach as a comprehensive, whole-school strategy aimed at achieving enhanced learning outcomes for all students. It encompasses increased student confidence and motivation, improved social cohesion, and greater involvement of families and the community in the educational process. The INCLUDE-ED project (2006–2011), which focused on strategies for inclusion and social cohesion through education in Europe and was funded by the European Commission under the 6th Framework Programme of Research, stands out as one of the ten most successful projects in terms of its social impact. The project promoted the idea of schools as Learning Communities through evidence-based approaches to teaching and learning. The initiative identified a set of successful educational actions (SEAs) that have proven effective in promoting academic achievement and social cohesion across diverse educational contexts. Examples of these SEAs include the implementation of interactive groups, dialogic literary gatherings, extended learning time, homework clubs, tutored libraries, family education programmes, community educational involvement, dialogic models for conflict prevention and resolution, and dialogical pedagogical training (Flecha, 2015; Morla-Folch et al., 2022).

Developed by the Community of Research on Excellence for All (CREA), this project is rooted in robust research foundations, and CREA has extended the concept of Learning Communities to all levels of education, encompassing early childhood, primary, and secondary schools. According to a study conducted by García-Carrión and Díez-Palomar (2015), mathematics assessments have shown positive outcomes stemming from the adoption of these SEAs. Currently, nearly 9000 schools are implementing SEAs, with Spain alone contributing almost 56 scientific papers that affirm the effectiveness of these actions.

Acknowledging the strong scientific evidence and social impact of Learning Communities and SEAs, several regional councils in Spain, including Andalusia, Aragon, Catalonia, Castilla-La Mancha, Basque Country, Valencia, and the

autonomous city of Ceuta, have adopted Learning Communities and SEAs as effective educational strategies (The Network of Learning Communities, n.d.).

Within the spectrum of dialogic gatherings, a noteworthy component among the SEAs is the inclusion of dialogic teacher professional development seminars. These seminars are anchored in the collective examination of pertinent scientific research in pedagogy and education, yielding demonstrable enhancements in student outcomes. Participants in these seminars – including teachers from pre-primary, primary, and secondary levels, academic advisers, and school principals – engage in an intellectual forum where they delve into scholarly literature and engage in thoughtful discussions centred on selected readings. These exchanges adhere to the principles of egalitarian dialogue, creating an environment that respects diverse perspectives and encourages participants to articulate substantiated arguments. This collaborative endeavour offers a unique opportunity for teachers to engage in a profound reflection on their pedagogical practices, utilising evidence-based literature to enrich their professional knowledge and refine their instructional methods (Rodríguez et al., 2020). This pedagogical approach not only contributes to the ongoing development of teachers but also solidifies their commitment to delivering high-quality education to all students (Roca et al., 2015). The dialogic teacher education approach, characterised by its success, has been implemented at various educational institutions, including the University of Castilla-La Mancha (de Guzmán Romero, 2012), Valencia (Roca-Campos et al., 2021), and across regions such as Aragon, Catalonia, and the Basque Country (Flecha & Puigvert, 2005).

Another integral facet of the SEAs is family and community educative participation, encompassing training sessions tailored for parents and other community members within the school setting. These training sessions are organised and administered by the community itself, with participants actively determining the content and format of the training based on their specific needs (Girbés-Peco et al., 2019). The training initiatives span a range of topics, all geared toward enhancing skills and fundamental knowledge essential for navigating contemporary society. These initiatives empower parents and families to assist their children with homework, engage in shared reading, and provide academic support, all while honing their own skills and employability prospects. Some illustrative examples include tutoring in the local language, technology proficiency, and mathematics proficiency (Flecha, 2015; Girbés-Peco et al., 2019).

The cornerstone of the success achieved by Learning Communities and their associated SEAs is rooted in several key principles, notably the promotion of egalitarian dialogue and the embracing of the equality of differences. Egalitarian dialogue embodies the concept of valuing the power of argument and discourse, irrespective of the social or hierarchical status of individuals engaged in these dialogues. Simultaneously, the principle of the equality of differences underscores the imperative that all individuals should receive equal and respectful treatment, regardless of their diverse backgrounds or attributes. Rather than permitting differences to foment discrimination or inequality, these distinctions are to be acknowledged, celebrated, and leveraged as sources of strength within the educational landscape (Flecha, 2015).

Integral to this educational paradigm is a transformative approach that transcends the conventional practice of compelling students to conform to established societal norms and conditions. Instead, it aspires to engender substantial alterations or enhancements within the broader social and contextual factors that may impede or circumscribe students' opportunities, personal development, or overall well-being. This transformative philosophy advocates that education should not be limited to the task of accommodating students within the existing societal framework but should actively endeavour to reshape or enrich the educational environment, thereby better serving the holistic needs of both students and society at large (Flecha, 2015).

Among many, some of the success stories of using Learning Communities and SEAs include the implementation of the Comprehensive Plan for the Roma Community in Catalan, as reported by Espinel et al. (2019), which yielded noteworthy improvements in academic outcomes for Roma children within a primary school situated in the Albacete province. These improvements encompassed elevated average scores in standardised assessments, heightened rates of student enrolment, and a marked reduction in absenteeism. Furthermore, an evaluation of the impact of in-service teachers' participation in dialogic professional education initiatives in Valencia, as expounded upon by Roca-Campos et al. (2021), substantiated the positive transformation in pedagogical practices. This transformation, facilitated through teacher development, engendered demonstrable advancements in educational outcomes among learners enrolled in the 17 participating schools, as observed over the course of the evaluation period (at least one year). This progress was discerned through comparisons with schools of similar socio-economic backgrounds that did not partake in the aforementioned study.

A qualitative exploration conducted by the Junta de Andalucía and Consejería de Educación (2014) in Andalusia unveiled the academic benefits associated with the adoption of the learning-communities approach within educational institutions. The findings indicated that students exhibited enhanced performance levels in fundamental literacy and numeracy skills when enrolled in Learning Community schools. Additionally, these educational establishments, forming part of the Network, outperformed their counterparts in Andalusia with similar socio-economic profiles in various key indicators. These encompassed reduced rates of absenteeism and dropout, the cultivation of a favourable school climate, and the nurturing of a heightened sense of community within the learning environment.

The initiatives undertaken as part of the Learning Communities assume a dual orientation, prevention as well as intervention. They are fundamentally designed to pre-emptively engage students in meaningful learning experiences, heighten familial expectations and commitment to the educational process, and involve educators in dialogic professional development activities that enable them to seamlessly bridge their newfound knowledge with classroom practice. These practices align harmoniously with Fredericks et al.'s (2004) model of engagement, encompassing behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. For instance, activities such as interactive groups not only enable students of diverse abilities to participate in academically oriented activities imbued with a robust social component but also nurture behavioural engagement. The introduction of fascinating tasks that challenge students' intellectual capacities, coupled with the supportive framework of peer groups and adult volunteers, serves to stimulate students' intrinsic interest in learning and cultivates a sense of belongingness with the school community and better relationship with teachers and classmates. This cultivated sense of self-efficacy and the belief that they can successfully tackle assigned tasks instils in students a profound willingness to exert effort when confronted with more intricate academic challenges and tasks. Consequently, a higher degree of student engagement is intimately linked to enhanced academic attainment and a diminished likelihood of premature school dropout (Tarabini et al., 2019).

2.5. Gaps in the policy discourse or implementation

The comprehensive examination of national policy analysis reports has revealed the existence of several noteworthy disparities, and, correspondingly, a plethora of prospective remedies and recommendations. This section focuses on the salient cross-cutting gaps, which transgress national boundaries, thereby warranting in-depth examination. It is evident that the countries subjected to policy scrutiny have largely demonstrated a proactive stance in accordance with recommendations put forth by the European Commission. Their committed approach is notably reflected in the formulation of policies and the articulation of effective implementation

strategies tailored to their specific contexts. Nonetheless, discernible gaps manifest, either within the overarching policy discourse or in the actualisation of these initiatives, signifying areas that warrant critical scrutiny and concerted efforts towards redress.

A prevailing issue across most of the countries under scrutiny is the limited availability of publicly accessible information pertaining to the evaluation of educational policies and development plans designed to enhance the educational success for all. A conspicuous gap emerges when conducting an in-depth analysis and review of these policies and strategic measures, characterised by the absence of systematic evaluation and comprehensive assessment of the individual policies and their proposed measures, as well as the broader nationwide strategies that have been set into motion. While the cumulative results gathered provide a holistic view of the collective efforts and contributions of these measures over time, there remains a deficiency in data and literature concerning the discrete evaluation of individual measures and policies, their implementation processes, and their specific impacts. This insufficiency of detailed information inhibits the formulation of precise conclusions regarding the continual adaptation, promotion, or potential discontinuation of specific measures in response to their varying impacts. The prevalent absence of rigorous evaluation practices during the design and implementation phases of these measures further complicates the comprehensive examination of their overall impact and efficacy. As a result, there is a compelling need for more robust evaluation procedures to inform evidence-based policy refinement and enhance the understanding of the effectiveness and utility of these educational measures. The DEIS plan in Ireland stands as an exemplary programme that has been subject to multiple evaluations. These assessments have notably engaged a broad spectrum of stakeholders responsible for its implementation, including school principals, teachers, HSCL personnel, and SCP representatives, as well as those directly impacted by the programme, including parents and students. These evaluations have contributed to the programme's significant improvements in effectively extending its outreach to encompass the full spectrum of children and young individuals it endeavours to serve.

In the realm of policies and services, despite the pronounced focus on promoting interagency cooperation, the organised collaboration between schools and external agencies appears to be in a relatively nascent stage of development. The current state of affairs places substantial reliance on the independent initiatives of schools, as they take the lead in actively involving local communities in educational endeavours. This gap is particularly noticeable in the absence of a comprehensive whole-school approach within the prevailing educational contexts, organisational structures, and processes. While the importance of such an approach is underscored in numerous national and school-level documents, its integration into the day-to-day operation of educational settings remains more a matter of theory than practical implementation. This divergence between policy intent and practical execution highlights a need for a concerted effort to bridge this gap and transition from policy rhetoric to effective, integrated, and holistic practices within the education system. This transformation entails the seamless integration of policy objectives into the operational fabric of the education system, steering it toward a more coherent, comprehensive, and pragmatic course. Efforts to bridge the chasm between policy rhetoric and practical realities are multidimensional. They encompass a symphony of actions, involving not only refinement of policy content but also the fortification of the mechanisms by which these policies are implemented, monitored, and evaluated. At its core, this transformation seeks to create a harmonious synergy between policy aspirations and their manifestations in classrooms and institutions, thereby nurturing a learning environment that is not only cognizant of policy imperatives but also capable of bringing them to life. In this endeavour, educational stakeholders, including policymakers, administrators, educators, parents, and students play pivotal roles in orchestrating the transition from policy rhetoric to efficacious, seamless practice. A collective commitment to align policy objectives with actionable steps, combined with rigorous monitoring and evaluation, will be instrumental in achieving more equitable, effective, and holistic educational system. The ultimate goal is to ensure that the promise of educational policies is not left unfulfilled, but instead, is translated into tangible positive outcomes for all participants in the

educational journey. The Schools as Learning Community Programme (Spain) is a classic example of interagency collaboration managed and overseen by the regional educational authorities in partnership with schools.

The disconnect between policy and its practical implementation is not limited to the whole-school approach concept but also extends to support measures for the integration of immigrant and refugee students into mainstream educational systems (e.g., Greece, Portugal) and strategies for the inclusion of Roma minorities (e.g., Romania). Despite the presence of various programmes aimed at facilitating the integration of immigrants and minorities, alongside localised interventions, it is evident that concrete actions within the daily school environment often lack a deliberate focus on the inclusion of these demographic groups. The countries do conduct periodic policy reviews and generate recurrent recommendations for remedial actions, indicating consistent implementation challenges. The recurrence of these recommendations suggests that the implementation of policies may have encountered obstacles, and the gap is not solely confined to policy discourse but rather relates to the effective translation of policies into practice. This phenomenon highlights the need for comprehensive assessments of the policy-to-practice continuum to address these persistent challenges.

2.6. Recommendations

This section provides recommendations for the review of policies aimed at addressing underachievement and early school leaving (ESL), drawing from the policy analysis conducted in this comprehensive report as well as the national policy analysis reports and their respective recommendations.

- Recognising the significance of ECEC in preparing children for formal schooling and fostering their capacity for pre-primary and primary education, it is crucial to recommend the provision of high-quality pre-school programmes, a key policy suggestion in all the countries under review. This recommendation specifically emphasises the importance of ensuring access to pre-school programmes tailored for children aged up to three years old, as observed in countries such as England, Greece, Ireland, Malta, Poland, Romania, Spain, and Switzerland. Additionally, it is advisable to implement targeted policy measures that promote and extend the reach of ECEC programmes within low socio-economic and disadvantaged communities, facilitating the development of essential social and emotional skills among children.
- To ensure equitable access to quality education for all children and young people, including those residing in remote or rural areas and belonging to disadvantaged groups and communities, it is imperative to take special actions (Romania, Greece). In Greece, particular attention should be directed towards providing guaranteed access to education for asylum seekers and other children living on islands, in underprivileged areas, and in remote refugee camps. Similarly, in Malta, given the significant number of students with migration backgrounds, schools should develop integration strategies. Furthermore, it is essential to facilitate greater access to universities for asylum seekers (Malta).
- It is recommended to develop student databases and establish effective systems for collecting and sharing student-level data across departments for facilitating the monitoring and evaluation of policy measures taken to address underachievement and ESL (Greece, Malta).
- Quality assurance measures should be established, including teacher and school evaluations, to closely monitor and update teachers' training based on their schools' needs. These measures should also encompass training for educational staff to better prepare them for working with disadvantaged and Roma communities, with a focus on promoting high-quality teacher education for inclusiveness and support of vulnerable populations. Furthermore, these measures need to focus on enhancing teachers'

capacity to identify students' needs, manage diverse classrooms, improve communication between parents and teachers, and encourage greater parental involvement in their child's education (Greece, Poland, Romania, Spain, Switzerland).

- The availability of emotional counselling and therapists in schools must be assured, especially in schools with a high proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, as while instrumental support is often accessible, emotional support for students may not be adequately provided (Ireland, Malta, Poland).
- Enhanced, sophisticated monitoring and external evaluations of public policy measures are needed to accurately assess their true impact (Ireland, Spain).
- Educational policies should be integrated within broader frameworks, aligning them with social and economic support policies that target individuals at high risk, especially those from vulnerable communities. This should include measures to enhance academic achievement, ensure effective coordination among various policy domains (e.g., education, social, and economic), and maintain consistency and continuity in policy objectives and strategies over extended periods. Additionally, a robust governance structure should be established to foster and facilitate cross-sectoral cooperation to enable this integration (Ireland, Portugal, Romania).
- It is recommended to mitigate the clustering of disadvantaged students within specific schools, and implement ongoing and deliberate efforts to promote school desegregation and combat discrimination in educational settings consistently and comprehensively (Romania, Switzerland).
- Measures should promote active involvement of students and teachers in the co-creation of policies to ensure their preparedness for forthcoming changes. Conducive conditions within the educational institutions and broader society should be established to garner support from teachers and parents for challenging and transformative policies, increasing the likelihood of their success. Moreover, countries should persist in adopting evidence-informed policymaking practices while concurrently fostering the creation of inclusive spaces that facilitate the active participation of individuals from disadvantaged populations and minority communities (Poland, Spain, Portugal).
- In the context of VET, future policy efforts should prioritise the enhancement of outreach strategies, augmenting recruitment initiatives in rural areas, increasing cooperation from industries that may be reluctant to support ongoing education for employees, and establishing effective support mechanisms for those not in education employment or training and low-skilled workers to facilitate their participation in adult education programmes. Furthermore, it is crucial to strengthen the perception of VET as a valuable form of learning. This recommendation also entails the regular updating of curriculum contents to align with student needs and to foster trust between educational institutions and young learners. Additionally, policymakers should focus on diversifying accessible educational pathways, providing high-quality alternatives, and implementing guidance and support systems staffed by professionals to assist students, particularly those hailing from the most vulnerable backgrounds and communities, in their pursuit of further education (England, Greece, Ireland, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Switzerland).

2.7. Key takeaways from policy analysis

This comprehensive policy analysis has delved into the education policies of various nations, each demonstrating a shared commitment to enhancing the overall quality of education. Furthermore, most of these countries have taken concrete steps in response to the European Commission's recommendations to devise strategies that specifically target the prevention of underachievement and ESL among children and young people. These initiatives (as detailed

in Table 5 and the Appendices), signify a collective dedication to ensuring that students receive a high-quality education experience.

However, a notable and recurrent issue, as documented in academic 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. In contrast, other countries like Portugal, Greece, and Malta have specific programmes in place, such as Escolhas Programa, ZEP, and the MLU, respectively, 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 remains either optional or mandatory for only one year of pre-primary education. Notable exceptions include Greece and Switzerland, where ECEC is mandated for a period of two years. Additionally, countries employ varied approaches to ECEC, with some heavily relying on private providers, exemplified by Ireland, while others adopt a mixed model that encompasses both public and private provision, as observed in Malta and Greece.

Guidance and counselling services are universally recognised as crucial for helping students navigate their educational journeys. Across all jurisdictions, there is a strong emphasis on expanding access to these services. For instance, in Poland, guidance and counselling are available to children as young as five years old. Similarly, when we examine the success of the dual-track VET programme in Switzerland, we see that many countries are working to enhance their VET programmes by fostering closer collaboration between educational institutions and industry. This collaboration aims to develop curricula that align with labour market demands and increase apprenticeship opportunities, as seen in the case of Poland. Nevertheless, the general perception of the status of VET programmes requires further examination in most of the countries.

Successful policy measures, as discussed in Section 2.4 of the report, share several common attributes. They are **multifaceted, encompassing both preventive and intervention measures** (e.g., the DEIS Plan in Ireland and Schools as Learning Communities in Spain), **preventive and compensatory measures** (e.g., Swiss dual-track VET), or all three of these elements. Additionally, these policies are informed by scientific evidence and incorporate input from the stakeholders who will be affected by them. Furthermore, their design and refinement are influenced by an egalitarian debate, and transformative evaluation processes contribute significantly to their success. For example, Portugal's curriculum autonomy and flexibility initiative, while not supported by positive evaluation findings, is underpinned by substantial scientific evidence that suggests its potential to enhance equitable success for all student cohorts. This underscores the importance of monitoring and evaluation to gauge the transformative impact of educational development initiatives on the overall education system.

The review also underscores 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 be also equipped with a comprehensive network of support services, functioning as a one-stop shop, to eliminate the burden of schools seeking services independently.

Section 3. Co-creation of successful policies – a report on six national and one transnational dialogic seminars

3.1. Introduction

Although the proportion of ESL in the EU has declined significantly over the past decade, not all countries have witnessed similar declines. Similarly, ESL continues to disproportionately affect those who are socio-economically disadvantaged and of immigrant and Romani background (Hippe & Jakubowski, 2018). Within the academic literature, engagement has often been conceptualised as comprised of three components: a behavioural component (e.g., effort, participation), an emotional or affective component (e.g., sense of belonging, interest), and a cognitive component (e.g., learning goals, investment) (Appleton et al., 2008). ESL is thought to be the endpoint of a gradual process of academic disengagement (Rumberger, 2011).

In the extant literature, emphasis has been placed on understanding the individual factors contributing to ESL (Bademci et al., 2020). Much less has explored the social determinants of ESL, including the impacts of existing policies. To complement previous components of WP1 providing literature and policy reviews weighing the empirical evidence for different factors shaping ESL and analysing the relative effectiveness of recent policies in reducing ESL, the activities described herein sought to bring the perspectives of key stakeholders to the fore. These key stakeholders included policymakers, school administrators and teachers, community activists and service providers, and families and students from communities most impacted by ESL. Guided by the communicative methodology of research (Gómez et al.), which focuses on the co-creation of scientific knowledge through engagement with key stakeholders in open, egalitarian dialogue, dialogic seminars were conducted in six countries to solicit feedback on priority factors and areas for policy action.

3.2. Methods

For each country-level dialogic seminar, four groups were targeted for recruitment: students, teachers, parents, and policymakers. One of the primary goals of a dialogic seminar is to generate consensus through egalitarian dialogue between the group participants and the researcher. Unlike a traditional focus group, which is to obtain the diverse perspectives of the participants alone, a dialogic seminar aims to solicit a joint interpretation that can guide social transformation. This is achieved by having the researcher as facilitator. As facilitator, the researcher not only moderates but also participates in the dialogue to generate knowledge that is both responsive to the local realities of participants and conducive towards social change. How the research facilitates the dialogic seminar was guided firstly by general discussion points agreed upon and shared across the sites and secondly by learnings from the Task 1.2 policy mapping that are specific to the country setting. The proposed format of the dialogic seminar was thus to start broad with general questions surrounding, for example, what underachieving means to participants and what policy changes they envision/hope to see to better support and improve student performance and retention in schools.

Dialogic seminars were conducted in the local language. To facilitate exchange during the dialogic seminars, some teams incorporated a mix of visual, creative methods. The specific method was determined by the country-level

teams based on their familiarity and confidence with the methods, as well as the age of the students and cultural appropriateness for the specific sample.

After the conclusion of the national dialogic seminar, a transnational seminar was held with representatives from each country. During the transnational seminar, each representative had the opportunity to share key points/takeaways from their country-level seminar, including opportunities, challenges, and recommendations for addressing student ESL and underachievement. The MHPSS Collaborative facilitated these conversations to draw out which of these facilitators and barriers were transnationally shared and which were unique. The goal of this seminar was to foster cross-cultural collaboration, exchange of knowledge, and development of transnational recommendations for improving educational outcomes. The format of the transnational seminar is shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Skeleton structure of the transnational dialogic seminar

Activity	Time allocation
Welcome and introduction Welcome address by the host organisation, acknowledging the multicultural audience. Introduction of participants, highlighting their country of origin and respective organisation.	5 minutes
Panel discussion: Cross-country perspectives and success stories Panellists from different countries present their country-level experiences, highlighting the major takeaways from the dialogic seminars. Of particular interest will be the major factors identified in the discussion on the multilevel factors impacting students' engagement with schools and recommendations for policy change. Each country representative will have approximately 5–7 minutes to discuss highlights from their country seminar. Order of presentation: • UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE (UNEW) – United Kingdom • DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY (DCU)– Ireland • MINISTERIO DA EDUCACAO E CIENCIA (MEC/DGE) – Portugal • UNIVERSIDAD DE LA IGLESIA DE DEUSTO ENTIDAD RELIGIOSA (UDEUSTO)– Spain • KENTRO MERIMNAS OIKOGENEIAS KAI PAIDIOU – Greece • CENTRO STUDI E INIZIATIVE EUROPEO (CESIE) – Italy	30–40 minutes
Moderated conversation: Synthesis and comparative analysis Facilitated group conversation will focus on specific themes or topics derived from the country-level findings to identify commonalities, differences, shared challenges, and potential opportunities for collaboration. Orienting questions: • Of what other country partners had shared, what was the most surprising or different from the conversation unfolding in your own national dialogic seminar? • What was the most similar?	20–30 minutes

What are some of the lasting impacts of COVID-19 on prevention, intervention, and compensation measures in your country?	
Transnational recommendations and action planning Interactive session to collectively develop transnational recommendations and action plans based on the cross-country insights and findings. Orienting questions: - During the dialogic seminar, what were identified as priority policy areas for intervention? - Conversely, what was considered of lower priority by the groups?	10 minutes
Closing remarks and commitment to collaboration Closing remarks by the host organisation, emphasising the value of cross-cultural collaboration and expressing gratitude to participants for their contributions.	5 minutes
TOTAL TIME	1.5 hours

3.2.1. DATA ANALYSIS

Transcripts, notes, and images from the dialogic seminar were analysed in the local language by the country teams. All research teams worked collaboratively internally within their teams to identify themes using an inductive process. The teams then identified representative quotes (with attribution) for the themes they identified, and in their discussion of the results, draw out policy implications of findings.

3.3. Results

3.3.1. PARTICIPANTS

The sizes of the country-level seminars ranged from 5 to 33 participants. Attendance generally included school administrators, teachers, other school staff (e.g., psychologist), family members, policymakers, and past or current students with/without risk of dropout. Recruitment strategies for participants varied but commonly included a mix of reliance on existing local networks, word of mouth, and emails or phone calls to known organisations. Seminars ranged from one and a half to three and a half hours. The formats of the sessions were adapted based on cultural and age-related factors with some dialogic seminars incorporating visual or creative activities (e.g., Legos) and others being more discussion-based. Generally, all dialogic seminars included an informational session where the SCIEARLY project was introduced and policy learnings were shared with participants. This was then followed by group discussions around core questions regarding factors influencing students' engagement and performance in schools as well as prevention, intervention, and compensation measures needed to address existing barriers. Information on participants for each country seminar is provided in Table 7.

Table 7. Participant information across the country-level dialogic seminars

Country	Number of participants	Characteristics of participants	Recruitment strategy
United Kingdom	33	Educators Local validated self-evaluation (VSE) representatives Those with lived experience of exclusion/dropout themselves or of their children/grandchildren	A direct invitation from the Director of Education at Newcastle City Council

			An invitation to consortia members of the Newcastle West End Children's Community Other existing networks and contacts Word of mouth
Ireland	31	Teachers (8) Students and parents participants from two Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools establishments (13) Principals (4) Former director curriculum development unit (1) President of the Joint Managerial Board (1) Policymakers (4)	Unclear
Spain	13	Policymakers (2) Family members (2) Student (1) Civil society organisation (3) School administrator (1) Teaching staff (4)	Purposive sampling using the researchers' local networks
Portugal	30	Students (6) Parents (5) School assistants (2) School psychologists and school social workers (3) University of Porto researchers (2) Policymakers (5) Non-governmental organisation representatives (2)	Unclear
Greece	5	School administrators (3) School teacher (1) Social worker (1)	Email, telephone calls, researchers' existing networks
Italy	10	Schoolteachers from primary and secondary school Parents Guarantor for childhood and adolescence	Unclear

3.3.2. FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT/DISENGAGEMENT

Cultural sensitivity and appropriateness of classroom curriculum

One of the most frequently mentioned barriers to students' engagement was the existing curriculum, which was perceived of as either irrelevant to students' needs and concerns or was not sufficiently culturally sensitive to minority groups. In Greece, for instance, school administrators reported that the schoolbooks were frequently ill-fitting for minority communities attending Greek schools. In Spain, participants drew a connection between a culturally sensitive curriculum and increased engagement from minority students. One participant, for instance, explained how such a curriculum might increase trust and belonging among students:

It's about valuing diversity, you know. Because I think it's crucial for them to continue. I mean, for them to feel that it's a space for them. So, they don't feel like it has nothing to do with how I dress, what I like, or how I talk. So sometimes there are young people or teenagers, or well, even kids who go to places or environments where they think it's not for them, that they're not expected to be there. So that really creates a lot of distance. (Teaching staff, Spain)

Parents in Spain further argued that beyond cultural sensitivity, the curriculum could also be more practical and grounded in the needs of students. These needs could include professional and financial demands within their area, but it could also refer more generally to the learning needs of the students. A number of the participants argued that the way students learned had involved. They were now surrounded with information. Everything is fast paced and visual. One participant for instance contrasted the learning happening in and outside of schools:

Also, the contradiction in the society the kids move in, outside on the streets. Everything is very fast, everything is very information-heavy, everything is very visual, everything is very entertaining, everything is... And then in class, it's a complete drop, you listen to me, I talk to you, and 'calm down'. I mean, asking a kid who's used to constant interaction to stay calm. (Family member, Spain)

Teachers and parents in Spain also shared their frustration with the exam culture within schools, believing that it created boredom and extra frustration for students and school staff alike.

Me, being in class after 15 years – sometimes we see huge anachronisms in class – I don't understand many of the contents. Why? Why give these to those who don't...? Of course, I'm not a teacher, I can't evaluate it like a teacher, but I can evaluate it as a parent, as a person, and as in, 'Do you really want to know this in life, kid?' I mean, memorise it, then dump it in an exam, and then forget it? Really? All of this is an issue. For me, it's a huge anachronism in the education system. (Family member, Spain)

For me, the issue of evaluation is a big one. Like... in some way, how do you justify 'this student is competent'? And the new law emphasises this a lot. It lays it all out. The learning situation and so on. And then it tells you that you have to assess differently, you have to assess in terms of competencies. And to this day, none of us really know how to assess competencies well. And many times, you end up doing the same exam you did 20 years ago, even though the law is telling you that you have to assess differently. And maybe you're even using different content and activities, but when it comes down to it, you still assess the way you used to. (School administrator, Spain)

Some participants in the Ireland dialogic seminar stressed that the need to make the curriculum more engaging and pertinent to students' interests and longer-term career options was more pressing, as the ability to force students to attend schools is waning. Students are increasingly asserting their decision to choose.

The curriculum provision needs to be meaningful and relevant as students are increasingly exercising their right to choice with some choosing not to come to school. It was noted that other countries have more meaningful options open to their student body:

I mean that's a deeper argument,... It's not just plodding through some curriculum that's a terrible way... It has to have meaning to the students. And if it's not meaningful, it's not effective... we have a society where we effectively coerce students into school... but now that coercion element is nearly gone. They are making choices and what choices do they have access to. (Participant, Ireland)

In Italy, the conversation concentrated specifically on issues surrounding language and lack of resources. For students who did speak Italian fluently, engagement with the curriculum was perceived to be a major issue, as that is the only language schools can teach in. This is also compounded in areas like Sicily where locals also preferentially use the regional dialect. These language barriers can impede students' academic performance. So, too, several participants drew attention to the lack of financial resources that made it difficult to implement an engaging

curriculum. Because national educational policies dictate where funding is spent, a number of the teachers pointed to their classrooms being equipped with computers and interactive whiteboards while structures were falling apart and no money was available for sports, no paper for printers, or for other extracurricular activities. Students present expressed that they sometimes failed to see the relevancy of the subjects they were taught. Teachers similarly expressed that they wished they had the funding to implement more hands-on activity. There was thus a notable gap between where funding was allocated and what students needed.

Trust and belonging

Two related factors that were also salient across the dialogic seminars centred on trust and belonging. Some of the participants in the dialogic seminars shared that students sometimes felt disconnected from the mission of schools or were not aware of their school's mission. In particular, a number of attendees felt that the values schools espoused contrasted with those of minority students. One student attending the dialogic seminar in Portugal, for instance, shared that there was a clash between the academic culture in the country and her Roma culture, highlighting the need for initiatives that close the perceived distance between the two:

I left school at 15 and I'm studying in the evening school. I left school for family reasons and came back because I think it's important to have at least the 9th grade. (Student, Portugal)

Roma parents similarly voiced that they believed trust was what kept students in schools. It was critical to them and to their children that it was clear teachers cared. One parent (Portugal) gave an example of a teacher simply calling and inquiring when a student was absent – that made her feel as though the 'teachers don't leave them unattended'. School staff similarly voiced that they tried to provide students with individualised attention. In the UK, participants also expressed that motivation to learn required having a space where students felt safe, seen, and understood:

If you're in an environment where you feel valued and, in that space, you're much more likely to want to be there and want to learn. (Participant, UK)

If you're not known you can't be valued, making sure that things that you see you see yourself in... people as individuals being known and understood. (Participant, UK)

In Spain specifically, several student participants expressed that they felt devalued in traditional school settings and felt that it was only in schools for returning students that they finally felt seen. This increased their motivation to learn. This sentiment was also echoed in the Italy dialogic seminars. Students reported feeling motivated when they felt seen and acknowledged by both their teachers and peers:

Well, I needed someone to pay attention to me, to notice me. And for me, it's very clear, I need someone to pay a bit of attention to me, to make me feel like they know what's happening to me and what you all do. (Student, Spain)

In Ireland, students expressed that – in addition to individualised attention – it was pivotal to have staff at the school who were from the same areas as the students:

Some of the lads over there, they said they had a guidance counsellor that lives near them so they can actually relate to them. So, they're easier to talk to, they know the issues that are around the area, and so it's just better. (Student, Ireland)

COVID-19

COVID-19 emerged as a salient theme primarily in Ireland and to a lesser degree, in Spain and the UK. The pandemic was thought to have lasting impact on students' attitudes towards school attendance while driving rifts among teachers, parents, and students. Parents, for instance, talked about how school attendance was something previously emphasised. However, COVID-19 contributed to a shift in this conversation by introducing hybrid

cultures. Participants in both Ireland and the UK discussed how the pandemic had taught some students that learning could occur outside of schools:

And not just that but also the culture around school attendance changing. Whereas school attendance was seen as being hugely important and a lot of support and a lot of time and effort was put into making sure that it was presented in that way, the intervention of COVID and the translation and the broader way that we as a society look at what it means to be in places has also impacted the way in which being in school is talked about and thought about for some people. And that's been a challenge. (Parent, Ireland)

Teachers and school administrators suggested that this disengagement was exacerbated by changes in parents' attitudes and willingness to discipline their children. Some thought that parents were afraid to discipline their children and force them to attend schools, looking instead to schools to play that role. Others, however, thought that COVID-19 made parents appreciate having their children at home and, in some cases, helping to care for younger siblings. At the same time, because the relationship between schools and families had deteriorated, some participants in the UK felt as though it was harder for them to work in partnership to motivate children's school attendance:

Parents are ringing me saying, will you come up here and get him in, because he's not going to leave the house for me. What am I meant to do? Do you know, I go up and I talk and, you know. I can't get him out of bed, you come up and get him out of bed. He won't come on and get out of bed for me. I said, well, he won't get out of bed for you, he's not getting out of bed for me. But, you know, and you go up and you try and do what you can, and I can't go up into the child's bedroom and that type of stuff. And this has gone on and on and on and everyone just blames each other. (Teacher, Ireland)

So it's become a part of what to do, you know, it's no big deal missing time, spending time alone. And the parents, single parents like having them alone, collect the younger siblings... a huge education for the parents, I think. They're really struggling. (Teacher, Ireland)

So, too, others thought that with the democratisation of knowledge, students now have a better sense of what was required to graduate and what power schools had to mandate attendance. Many understood that they could miss a certain number of days without recourse and even in the event of recourse, the time to punishment may be sufficiently long for them to graduate beforehand.

The role of parents

Parents were thought to play a critical role in supporting their students' engagement in schools. Across the dialogic seminars, participants pointed out the ways in which parents' educational background and experiences can affect their interest in being involved in their children's education. Some participants felt that it was critical to ensure that parents felt seen and that they understood both the value of school and how a quality education can impact their children's future:

The involvement of the family is also important for motivation because I experience it in school, too. The more support you have from your family, I believe the more you have accomplished. Then, the other points that you all have mentioned, I also agree with them. But I believe that the family's role in motivating and engaging the kid – and also being a reference, as you mentioned – well, there are many times when if the family itself is a reference, I think it also helps. (School administrator, Spain)

The thing that kept me [going] was my family, my dad was really keen on education, and he wanted us, all his daughters to go to university which we all achieved. (Student, UK)

At the same time, as an earlier section (Section 3.2.3) highlighted, a number of participants in the dialogic seminars – specifically, in the UK and Ireland – acknowledged that a rift had formed between schools and parents due to the pandemic, and they were still working to mend that relationship.

Other factors

Other factors affecting engagement that were identified in the dialogic seminar included the importance of having had learning successes (UK), belief that there are opportunities for oneself (Portugal, Spain, UK), teachers who were available and well-qualified (Ireland, Spain), role models of similar backgrounds (Ireland, Spain), early detection and support of children who could be at higher risk (Greece, Spain), and exposure to community violence (Greece).

3.3.3. PREVENTION MEASURES

Prevention measures refer to those that anticipate and stop risk factors associated with ESL from developing. During the national dialogic seminars, the key prevention measures that were identified included:

1. Changing current practices in schools.
2. Promoting shared decision-making.
3. Targeting support particularly around the transition from primary to secondary school.
4. Strengthening early education and care.

Changing current practices in schools

All dialogic seminars elicited a number of recommendations on how school practices could be changed or enhanced to reduce risk of ESL. In Greece, participants recommended having smaller class sizes, adopting a teacher approach that better emphasised experiential learning, creating more integration classes, and limiting leniency in absences and grading. Some participants, for instance, believed that school authorities may be more lenient in excusing absences or providing students with a higher grade than warranted because they want to support students. However, this creates scenarios in which students are being allowed to advance in their education while not having the requisite skills. A number of these sentiments were echoed in the Portugal dialogic seminars. Participants emphasised the need for smaller classrooms, systematic support in learning the host language, stronger vocational pathways and closer links between education and work, and enhanced representation of the cultures of immigrant and Roma children in the curriculum.

In the UK, conversation focused on the narrow and outdated focus of the curriculum. Specifically, some participants perceived the curriculum as largely restricted towards the acquisition of basic skills and no longer valuing the arts and languages. At the same time, it was also more focused on ensuring students pass exams than it was on preparing them for the workforce or for recent technological and digital changes. In place of such a system, many participants called for changes that were more befitting of the time; focused on fostering interpersonal, intra-personal, and life skills; personalised to the needs and interests of the child; strengths-based and play-based; and less exam-focused. One participant described:

Perverse targets that we operate in this country around what we believe is the right thing to do and that's probably ultimately why we still struggle to talk about the difference between academic and vocational and we're still years down the line of really understanding that and saying 'if you're not academic then maybe you can do something vocational'... sadly the curriculum is designed around an academic, knowledge-based curriculum. (Participant, UK)

In Ireland, discussion turned towards enhancing vocational education and training and re-energising the apprenticeship model. Some felt that there needed to be increased opportunities for those interested in pursuing

apprenticeships in wider-ranging careers as well as changes in terms of how society saw those apprenticeships, that is, as something equal in value to other pathways:

And I think we do have a societal issue about the value of education, about what it actually is and what is valued or not. The electrician or the plumber that goes and does their two years, are they any less educated than someone... do we talk about trades and vocations and professions in the same level. Mindsets need to shift. (Participant, Ireland)

But we kind of focus on main courses, and not really like plumbing. There's many big courses, like you want to be a doctor, lawyer, we know the way we want to study, we have it all planned out. Whereas if somebody wants to be a plumber, wants to do something tiny, there's no courses for that and they leave out early. (Participant, Ireland)

Promoting shared decision-making

In Portugal, Spain, and the UK, one of the core prevention measures that emerged from the dialogic seminars centred on increasing shared decision-making in schools and enhancing communication among school staff, students, and family members. Participants in Spain pointed to the cycle of miscommunication that too easily happened between schools and families – one where family members disengage because they feel as though their concerns are not being heard or valued by school administration and staff, and teachers believe this disengagement is because family members do not care. Participants emphasised, in particular, the importance of supporting and guiding family members from vulnerable and minority backgrounds to participate in school decision-making. In some cases, they may lack the confidence or skill in doing so, and participants called for greater effort into integrating them into the conversation:

For families to participate, you have to allow them to participate. So, the family may want to participate, and the school closes the door. We know many students who have succeeded because they were pushed from home. (Teacher, Spain)

Cultural elements play an important role. Not because these families lack culture, but because the perception they have of being able to help their children is much lower than that of other families. Consequently, they provide less support mainly due to a belief. The reality is that they can provide the same amount of support, or even more than other families, as support involves accompanying the child through many processes. In this case, the school has a much greater role. I believe that their participation with or through the school and decision-making is much more critical at this level. (Family member, Spain)

So, too, participants in the UK thought that students should be more involved in educational decision-making, as that helped promote ownership over the curriculum and a sense of belonging within the school. These suggestions to promote family and student decision-making in education were similarly observed in the dialogic seminar in Portugal.

Targeting support particularly around the transition from primary to secondary school

In almost all the dialogic seminars, participants called for increased support during the transition from primary to secondary schools. In Ireland, participants discussed the importance of ensuring that all incoming students have a chance to meet with a guidance counsellor and others emphasised the need to also target those who might have special needs or who are coming from more vulnerable backgrounds. One participant suggested that rather than just focusing on a whole-school approach, schools should develop dynamic, individual plans for each student. Similarly, participants in Greece and Portugal called for greater coordination between teachers to facilitate students' transition from primary to secondary school.

Early childhood education

The positive impact of ECEC was recognised across the dialogic seminars. Some discussed the importance of engaging families and students in schools early. At the same time, participants in Ireland and Portugal drew particular attention to the need to enhance the quality and quantity of services particularly for Roma students. In Ireland, participants thought some of the primary barriers to improving ECE included the increasing move towards private – rather than public provision – of services and the limited power they had to influence private institutions. So, too, the low pay made it harder to retain quality staff in ECE:

The issue seems to be the staff there. It's expensive, but it's not the staff who were getting it in terms of retaining quality people, more than a bit will be here to primary and post-primary it must be all the more difficult to retain people in early childhood because if I was one of them, the obvious thing would be to try and progress into primary or secondary, rather than stay and have an engaged career in early childhood education. (Policymaker, Ireland)

3.3.4. INTERVENTION MEASURES

Intervention measures refer to those focused on addressing risk factors that have emerged to prevent ESL. During the national dialogic seminars, some of the primary intervention measures that were identified included:

1. Providing professional and mental health guidance to students.
2. Supporting integrated services in schools to address students' needs holistically.
3. Bolstering social support, particularly family support.
4. Providing extracurricular activities to students.

Providing professional and mental health guidance to students

In Ireland, several of the teachers called for greater attention and resources devoted to the mental health needs of students. Because of the population they worked with, some further argued for trauma-informed counselling. They argued that the availability of these services should extend throughout the educational system, rather than being concentrated in secondary schools, because of the pronounced need and impact of counselling on motivating students' achievement. These suggestions were similarly reflected in the Portugal dialogic seminar with attendees calling for student-focused strategies and support, including those focused on strengthening students' emotion regulation strategies. Finally, in the UK, conversations around mental health were framed in the wider need for schools to take a holistic approach that considers all aspects of well-being, including mental well-being:

DEIS schools should have proper access to psychologists and more guidance time according to the principals and teachers – with time to fully focus on the future planning as well as dealing with the constant need for therapeutic support and trauma therapy. These should not be in a constant state of vying for time – one taking time off the other – DEIS schools need better resourcing in this department rather than the tokenism of a little extra allocation as it is now, we have psychotherapist in our school funded by a charity – they are flat out – but why do people need to stand in the rain to collect money to have these in our school – our kids see things that no child should see. They live in a violent world of drugs and poverty and are often out all night on a bike, just wild – so many mothers got hooked on drugs over COVID – so they are wild – and in trauma as a result – we have to pick up the pieces so we have a queue for the therapy- (of) course we do and the guidance are to the pin of their collar. (Teacher, Ireland)

Children's well-being at the heart of education. (Participant, UK)

Students in the dialogic seminar similarly recognised the need for professional counsellors. They contrasted that to their experiences of having teachers who were often ill-equipped to provide the mental health and psychosocial support students' needed. Students argued that it was important the counsellors understood their background and were consistently available. One group additionally suggested the possibility of peer counsellors:

So have trained students, have them have training, and have them picked out by the teachers, and have them have training so that students can come to them because it's easier to go to someone your age that knows your problems and knows what you're going through rather than an older person because it's obviously different generations and it's a different time now. (Student, Ireland)

Supporting integrated services in schools to address students' needs holistically

The need for better coordination and integration of different services targeting students emerged as an important intervention measure in Ireland, the UK, and Portugal. In Ireland, participants identified a number of services (e.g., NEPS, Substance Abuse Service Specific to Youth, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) supporting students, but felt there was a need for those services to be more comprehensive and collaborative. Because of the referral time and the disconnect between services, some students end up graduating before they are able to benefit from those programmes. In the UK, participants similarly felt that many of the services that should be available either were not currently available or had never been available. For those that were still available, the waitlist was often too long. Because of budgetary cuts to public services in the UK, participants felt that increasingly pressure was placed on schools to fill this gap. This lack of services was most evident for those with special educational needs and disabilities:

They're out into the world with all these problems that no one even attempted to fix them... it's just shocking. Why can't we all just join up at the very outset?... there's no joined up thinking with it... everybody's just an island and everybody's just left to pick up the pieces and then society are left to pick up the pieces when they leave early. (Principal, Ireland)

The systems aren't working for children and young people, all the mental health support doesn't work because by the time you get to see somebody, you're in crisis. (Participant, UK)

In the UK specifically, participants discussed the ways in which current politics prevents sustainable collaboration and long-term evaluation of programme success. Specifically, some participants expressed belief that a number of the educational policies advanced were not evidence-based but were motivated by political ideas. There was thus notable 'churn and change', preventing both long-term sustainable change and evaluation of programme effectiveness. Organisations have risen to fill the void, but this has contributed to inconsistencies in the availability and quality of services:

An observation about these policies and where we sit in this country, we seem to lack any ability to stick with something that works... the typicality of it is that we start something in this country, and we get caught up in the politics changing it very rapidly... what we tend to do in this country is we start and then give up. (Participant, UK)

There's something about evidence-based practice. Because there's so many government policies that you think 'ok, where's your evidence for that? Is that just someone's bright idea?'... There is a lot of research in education, but not a lot of government policies reflect it. (Participant, UK)

Participants in the Portugal dialogic seminar suggested a need for more coordination between ministries to facilitate local programming; multidisciplinary teams in support offices at schools, including teachers, psychologists, social workers, and mediators; leadership at schools who are very aware of local resources; and mediators who are able to facilitate and maintain strong dialogue between the schools and families.

Bolstering social support, particularly family support

Emphasis was placed on bolstering social support, particularly family support, as an intervention measure in Ireland, Italy, and Portugal. In Ireland, emphasis was placed on bringing parents and students in supportive and mutual conversation as early as possible when concern is raised. Parents and school staff similarly perceived that

the experiences of parents with schools may colour how they perceive the interaction. Some, for instance, may perceive a meeting as their being in trouble. It was important then to have respectful, relationship-building dialogue:

To have those meetings before the student even enrolls in the school. And it is a key aspect of something that keeps not just the students by the way, but also the parents because an awful lot of school completion early school leaving is the expectation is the perception of school or schooling of the parents, but to keep those affable conversations or supportive conversations with students, with the parents that build the relationship. It's just really what we need. (School staff, Ireland)

These sentiments were largely echoed by colleagues in Italy, who expressed that parents often lacked the training to adequately support their children and in some cases, did not fully see the value of education. In the Portugal dialogic seminar, participants saw bolstering social support as a multipronged approach. Suggestions included motivating and empowering teachers, implementing support networks that were mediated by community members, providing training to parents, strengthening parents' involvement, and creating a multidisciplinary support office that can assist both students and families.

Providing extracurricular activities to students

The importance of having extracurricular and community-based activities available to students was mentioned in dialogic seminars unfolding in Portugal, Spain, Italy, and the UK. In the UK, for instance, participants discussed the importance of recognising that education and learning do not only unfold in formal educational settings but could also extend to other contexts. It was important to have high-quality options both within and outside of schools. This was considered particularly important for students with special educational needs and disabilities:

It goes back to the curriculum as well because you see young people being taken out of the classroom and really thriving doing cooking and gardening, well wouldn't it be better if everyone was doing that earlier on, before it gets to the point of crisis. (Participant, UK)

Similar sentiments were echoed in Portugal and in Italy. In Spain, the response was more mixed. Some thought that investments into extracurricular activities could contribute to further inequality and segregation due to unequal access to those opportunities. Others thought that extracurricular activities should focus on sports or other team-based activities. Some further thought that the implementation of those activities does not necessarily need to and should not fall on schools due to the limited time and resources teachers already have. Instead, more focus should be placed on youth programmes available through communities and neighbourhoods:

So, the school alone cannot do all of this; I'm absolutely certain of that. Not even the educational community within the school; it requires a broader community and services located in the neighbourhood or the area where the educational centre is, in order to collaborate and address these types of situations with families, fathers, and mothers who don't really engage with the school. (Teacher, Spain)

3.3.5. COMPENSATION MEASURES

Compensation measures are those focused on providing educational and training opportunities to individuals who have dropped out. Three main compensation measures were identified across the dialogic seminars, focusing on:

1. VET and other alternative pathways.
2. Integrated services.
3. Financial support.

Vocational education and training and other alternative pathways

The most frequently mentioned compensation measure centred on VET and alternative pathways to certification. In Ireland, for instance, participants stressed the importance of facilitating certification for those who are either in danger of or currently experiencing ESL, as well as for those who are interested in transitioning back into education. Two certification pathways that were of interest included the Leaving Certificate Applied and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme:

I think one of the welcome developments recently was taken, that's for everybody now, as opposed to those who met the narrow range subject groupings and again, I think xxx said, the expansion I just jotted down in my own school in the last 10 years we follow leaving cert subjects LCVP [Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme], ag science [agricultural sciences], politics and society, PE [physical education] and computer science. So, a youngster now can do a radically different leaving cert today than even less than a decade ago. (School staff, Ireland)

In Portugal, participants expressed particular interest in second chance schools and alternative courses, efforts to facilitate places for further training and re-entry into the education system, recognition and validation of career pathways, second chance schemes, and professional apprenticeships. While second chance schools were also considered a valuable pathway for adult learnings, particularly from the Roma community, at least one participant also thought that the term 'second chance schools' was stigmatising:

Okay. I don't like the name. Second chance, it doesn't appeal to me. With that name, you don't encourage me to sign up for anything. (Student, Spain)

In the UK, a recent policy change (the Apprenticeship Levy) to provide more educational opportunities for those past the compulsory school age was perceived of as being counterproductive and instead making it more challenging for those with fewer qualifications. One career adviser elaborated:

There are negative policies working, particularly for the post-16 sector... The apprenticeship levy is possibly the worst thing that ever happened as far as I'm concerned as a career's advisor, because it meant that the [National Health Service], who used to have entry-level jobs where you didn't need qualifications, turned them all into apprenticeships and you had to have a level 2 qualification, or be working towards a level 2 qualification to get an apprenticeship. So, youngsters who could have gone in, in an entry level job... now have to have an apprenticeship. Now that rules out anybody who's not going to get Maths and English [GCSE's]. (Career counsellor, UK)

Integrated services

The call for integrated compensation initiatives emerged in the Spain national seminar. Specifically, teachers participating in the seminar repeatedly stressed the need for comprehensive support systems and pedagogical practice. They argued that while some students needed psychological support, some may need help navigating alternative educational pathways, and others with different aspects of their lives. Schools needed to take a holistic approach:

It's true that we are a team, we are highly involved educators, very much focused on asking, 'What do you need?' Because sometimes, you have to start with figuring out where you'll sleep, what you'll eat, what's preventing you from learning. If you have a seemingly wonderful family with plenty of money and resources, why have you failed? Well, perhaps there has been drug use that they haven't informed anyone about, I don't know. So, it involves a lot of talking with them, a lot. (S., Teacher, Spain)

Financial support

Participants in the Ireland, Portugal, and UK seminars emphasised the importance of addressing the financial barriers students returning to education or training faced. Many of those students were simultaneously attending school and working. One student, for instance, said that they felt as though insufficient attention were afforded to the financial costs associated with education and the impact that had on participation:

I remember when I was coming up to exams in third year, I did like, pay 100 Euro in the form, and then you say that's all of it. But then there's add-ons like exam papers, books, like trips that are in the middle of your course, and they should learn to pay for it. (Student, UK)

Another teacher emphasised that these financial considerations were particularly important given the diversity of students seeking VET and other alternative pathways to certification:

If you like, if you know what, I mean, in further ed, the by far the biggest issue that causes people to not complete a course or to just discontinue attending is finance kind of origin, by far the biggest. But we would have people in homeless services we would have people who are ex-offenders. I mean people I put you, you name it, it comes in the door. (Teacher, UK)

In the UK, participants pointed to the way the English welfare system is set up as a barrier to education for those past the age of compulsory education:

The benefits system works against us a lot of the time. It isn't worth going to work or re-engaging in education because you will lose your benefits. (Community member, UK)

At the same time, participants in Greece and Italy also provided examples when financial incentivisation did not work. In Greece, low-income families could receive cash transfers conditional on their children's school attendance. However, this created scenarios in which students attended but did not engage in schools or asked teachers to change their attendance records after the fact. In Italy, school attendance was tied to social benefits; families where children were frequently truant could stand to lose their social benefits. Although a different approach, it created an unwanted outcome similar to that observed in Greece.

3.4. Conclusion

The dialogic seminars offered opportunities for key stakeholders – including students, teachers, family members, activists, and policy members – to reflect on and discuss the findings from the policy reviews. It highlighted the factors that were perceived as most salient and impactful from the standpoint of those often most directly impacted and offered opportunity for those present to envision the prevention, intervention, and compensation measures most critical from their vantage point. Largely, the factors and measures identified in the dialogic seminars aligned with the policy reviews. However, the dialogic seminars provided an experiential weight to the factors, emphasising some over others. Finances, trust and belonging, family support, and an experientially and culturally relevant curriculum emerged as particularly salient factors shaping engagement, for instance. At the same time, discussion also brought into sharp focus the unintentional effects of policy (e.g., Apprenticeship Levy, cash transfer programmes for school attendance) and lingering impacts of COVID-19. Although some of the factors identified were unique – that is, not reflected in the other countries' dialogic seminars – many were shared and cut across the six sites, highlighting opportunities for cross-cultural collaboration.

4.0 Conclusions and recommendations

4.1 Introduction

The first work package of this project contained three separate but related elements. In Section 1 the consortium undertook an extremely intensive analysis of both the literature on the causes of ESL and academic under-attainment and the policies and approaches which have been enacted to date to tackle this ongoing, persistent problem. This Section is notable both for the extent of the research and literature identified in this field and, promisingly, the extent to which these policies and interventions are yielding positive results as exemplified by the numbers of countries reaching and surpassing the targets posited by the EU. This point is made in the report by Table 4.

Table 4. Three categories of countries with their early school leaving (ESL) rate 2012–2021

Countries with consistently low ESL rates	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Poland	5.7	5.6	5.4	5.3	5.2	5	4.8	5.2	5.4	5.9
Switzerland	5.5	5.6	5.6	5.2	4.9	4.5	4.4	4.4	4	4.9
Croatia	5.1	4.5	2.8	2.8	2.8	3.1	3.3	3	2.2	2.4
Slovenia	4.4	3.9	4.4	5	4.9	4.3	4.2	4.6	4.1	3.1
Countries with significant improvement in ESL rates	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Spain	24.7	23.6	21.9	20	19	18.3	17.9	17.3	16	13.3
Portugal	20.5	18.9	17.4	13.7	14	12.6	11.8	10.6	8.9	5.9
Malta	18.1	17.1	17	16.3	15.6	14	14	13.9	12.6	10.7
Greece	11.3	10.1	9	7.9	6.2	6	4.7	4.1	3.8	3.2
Ireland	9.9	8.7	6.7	6.8	6	5	5	5.1	5	3.3
Countries struggling	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Romania	17.8	17.3	18.1	19.1	18.5	18.1	16.4	15.3	15.6	15.3
Italy	17.3	16.8	15	14.7	13.8	14	14.5	13.5	13.1	12.7
Norway	14.8	13.7	11.7	10.2	10.9	10.4	9.9	9.9	9.9	12.3
United Kingdom	13.4	12.4	11.8	10.8	11.2	10.6	10.7	10.9	-	-
Bulgaria	12.5	12.5	12.9	13.4	13.8	12.7	12.7	13.9	12.8	12.2
Hungary	11.8	11.9	11.4	11.6	12.4	12.5	12.5	11.8	12.1	12
Cyprus	11.4	9.1	6.8	5.2	7.6	8.5	7.8	9.2	11.5	10.2
Germany (until 1990 former)	10.5	9.8	9.5	10.1	10.3	10.1	10.3	10.3	10.1	11.8

territory of the Federal Republic of Germany)										

So, while a great deal of work remains to be done and there are some countries where little or no improvement is evident, in most progress is being made and in certain countries the positive outcomes have been remarkable.

Section 2, in line with the methodology and structure of the entire project, builds upon Section 1 by conducting an in-depth review and analysis of the very large number of initiatives across many countries which have impacted on influencing the positive gains reported in Section 1. In some cases, policies and interventions have been the work of individual countries and are unique to those countries, but this is rather rare. In fact, one sees very similar ideas and actions across most countries – some scaled at national level, some at regional and many at local-, including school-based level. This left the authors with a considerable problem in that it would be impossible to describe in detail all the initiatives being undertaken in every country. Therefore, in Section 2 every effort is made to list and briefly describe the initiatives in each country under study, but the biggest undertaking is to examine large-scale interventions which are to be found in many countries and seem to the present authors to represent the possibility of transformative change of a significant order.

Again, building on Sections 1 and 2, Section 3 goes further in a very innovative way. Taking the data and in particular the evidence of improvement and success emerging from the opening sections, Section 3 brings together stakeholders to discuss what we have done well and where we go from here to further build on the progress to date. This is done in the form of dialogic seminars each of which convenes a panel of stakeholders, importantly, including not just experts but also parents and students. These seminars allow not only ideas to be exchanged from many perspectives, national and international, but to dig down deeply into why certain policies and programmes have worked well and how they can be further developed to meet the challenges ahead.

Following a brief revisiting of the commitment to engage in an approach to research that is methodologically and conceptually transformative, we shall look in greater depth at the data and analysis emerging from each of the Sections. Finally, in concluding remarks an effort will be made to integrate the work of each, drawing out the key points and offering some recommendations regarding the way forward. Our aim is to give both a valuable guide to the work of the rest of the project and most importantly suggest the most transformative approaches emerging from the research to date.

THE TRANSFORMATIVE NATURE OF THIS RESEARCH PROJECT

One of the defining characteristics of this research is its commitment to focus on a transformative paradigm and a multidimensional methodological approach. This project aims to prioritise the voices of traditionally marginalised individuals, especially in the context of educational policy. It also aims to foreground policies and practices that align with this transformative standpoint.

As a result of this, the dialogic seminar (García-Carrión, et al., 2020; Flecha and Soler, 2013) is one of the strategies used for data collection. In essence this approach is inspired by the belief that coordinated national and local actions can positively impact the lives of marginalised individuals. The need to understand the impact of such policies and practices at both the systems level and the practical level remains central, but conceptually and practically this way of doing research can transform the manner in which the impact of each of these discrete elements is perceived.

Thus the work of Apple (2013, 1988), Sen (1997), and Beresford (2002), cited earlier not only guides the way in which we think about policy, it also guides the manner in which the policies under discussion are perceived, evaluated, and discussed. While not the only measure of success, the project's commitment to explicitly foreground the transformative nature and potential of this research has had an impact not only on what we presented here but, hopefully, on its ultimate impact.

4.2 Summary of the key points of the three sections

SECTION 1: SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF UNDERACHIEVEMENT AND ESL

The following were the main findings from the multidisciplinary systematic review and secondary data analysis conducted by the SCIREARLY team. The goal was to map the existing scientific evidence around the influence of social determinants on students' underachievement and ESL and identify the elements that have been shown to successfully counteract their effects. The key determinants identified were as follows:

- **Institutional:** schools, assessment, student-teacher ratio, lecturers' interest and commitment, school calendar stability, extent, teaching methodology, streaming, resources, single-sex schooling, students' peers, school facilities, teacher quality, school autonomy, decision-making level, education policies.
- **Socio-economic:** financial, social, cultural, human capital resources, family, household income, parents' occupation, parents' educational level, poverty, access to learning.
- **Cognitive:** individual ability, learning capacity, attention span, engagement in learning, neurocognitive skills.
- **Cultural:** society, groups, religion, family support, ethnicity, expectations, cultural deprivation.
- **Linguistic:** bilingualism, migrant, self-study habits, motivation, plurilingualism, textbooks, curricula.
- **Gender:** boys, girls, gender identity, segregation, discrimination, teacher labelling, subcultures, feminisation of teaching, stereotypes.
- **Psycho-emotional and well-being:** learning-related behaviour, relationship problems, mental health, defiance, impulsivity, disruptiveness, aggression, overactivity emotional problems, adolescence, anxiety.
- **ECEC:** quality in early childhood, ECEC, early years, child well-being, parent partnership, transitions in early childhood, professionalism, access, governance, pre-school, Kindergarten, toddlers, childcare, childcare, early years settings, babies, young children.

The above list and the literature around each item make it very clear, unsurprisingly, that none of the social determinants stand alone but interlock in a myriad of complex ways. This section proceeds to try to clarify the interplay between the social determinants identified and their relationship to ESL and underachievement.

An integrated overview of the relationship between the social determinants on underachievement

As in everything linked to human nature, interconnections are also found in the social determinants of underachievement and ESL. This section offers a synthesis of the four aspects that most prominently came up across the eight systematic reviews:

- a) Family involvement is key factor to prevent and reduce underachievement and ESL.
- b) Segregation-based practices undermine achievement and well-being.
- c) School engagement and motivation positively correlate with less underachievement and ESL.
- d) Teachers' expectations and curriculum design are influential in reducing or aggravating these issues.

Decades of research demonstrate the key role of **families'** organic **involvement** in school across different educational stages. Early numeracy and literacy programmes that include families' inputs have proven to enhance young children's vocabulary acquisition, phonological awareness, and letter identification while increasing pro-social behaviour (and reduced hyper-activity) among children (Evangelou et al., 2007; Högström et al., 2015). Particularly when the school context includes different cultures and ethnicities, the involvement of families in school does increase the cultural capital of the educational setting, alleviating the effects of poverty or marginalisation (Payne, 2018; Balenzano et al., 2019; Morris et al., 2016; Chevalier et al., 2013; Behtoui, 2017; Vryonides, 2007; Khattab & Modood, 2018; Hartas, 2016).

On the other hand, practices based on **segregation** are demonstrated from different levels of analysis (ECEC, institutional level, socio-economic perspective, and the linguistic sphere) to have devastating consequences both for academic achievement and well-being. For instance, tracking policies and practice have resulted in an increased achievement gap between students from different groups and intensified conflicts and social cohesion problems (Agirdag & Vanlaar, 2008; Freeney & O'Connell, 2012; Straková, 2007; Brannstrom, 2004; Frehill & Dunsmuir, 2015; Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015). In addition, tracking practices have been found to hamper students' self-esteem, self-confidence, motivation, and school engagement, which was another main dimension that came up transversally (not only when exploring well-being social determinant of underachievement and ESL but also when looking at linguistic social determinant, socio-economic, and ECEC) (Lasarte et al., 2020; Duffy & Elwood, 2013; Gadeyne et al., 2004; Zhang et al., 2016). Indeed, students' motivation and their engagement towards school and school-based activities have been demonstrated to prevent and even revert risk of underachievement, consequently minimising the rates of ESL (Khalifa et al., 2016; Schmitsek, 2022; Spiegler et al., 2018; Meletiou-Mavrotheris et al., 2020). It is noteworthy that teachers' way of communicating and interacting with students was found to be an asset to increase and enhance students' motivation and sense of belonging towards school – two important elements that are directly associated with less risk of underachievement and ESL (Warne et al., 2020). This has been identified in scientific literature as a particular element within the teacher quality dimension (Makarova & Herzog, 2013; Duffy & Elwood, 2013; De Castro & Pereira, 2019).

An element that emerged from institutional and cultural aspects from the systematic reviews is **curriculum design**. Results on this regard highlighted that fixed or mainstream curricula that are not sensitive to the cultures embedded in the school context are an institutional factor of underachievement and ESL in Europe (Cudworth, 2008; Lambrev, 2015; Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2014). In the case of Roma communities, Cudworth (2008) demonstrated that when the school curriculum fails to acknowledge Roma culture and its traditions, underachievement and ESL rates increase among Roma students. On the other hand, a curriculum design rooted in a critical pedagogical approach and clear and coherent rules and opportunities for out-of-school activities emerged as drivers to foster academic engagement and avert ESL among at-risk students (MacMaoilir & McGillicuddy, 2022; Pelin et al., 2022).

Key conclusions of Section 1

The most important findings of this section are as follows:

- Reproductionist approaches hinder the agency of students and communities.
- Individual elements that operate in an isolated fashion are of little value: holistic interpretations of underachievement and ESL offer better solutions.
- Early school detection and preventive measures are key to counteract underachievement.
- A transformative lens at all levels (individual, school, and community) is required to reverse and prevent ESL.

SECTION 2: MAPPING SUCCESSFUL POLICIES TO TACKLE UNDERACHIEVEMENT

Cross-countries policy analysis report

The key goal of this Section was to identify and assess the efficacy of extant policies in relation to the EU target of reducing ESL rates to 9% by the year 2030. The analytical process entails a meticulous examination of policies enacted at various levels, including the 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 2012 to 2021 for all member states of the EU (EU-27), is instrumental in the identification of the countries that are included in the policy review. The objectives of the analysis were as follows:

- Map successful and less successful policies targeting the achievement gap from a comparative perspective.
- Evaluate successful and less successful policies and practices based on scientific research and evidence.
- Evaluate orientation of policy discourse with reference to prevention, intervention and compensation measures.
- Examine policies and practices from a transformative approach and study their social impact.
- Propose transferable and scalable policy measures that have proven to reduce ESL and underachievement.

An in-depth examination of national and regional regulations, as well as policy measures, was undertaken. This was conducted employing the framework established by the European Commission with the primary aim of mitigating ESL and tackling underachievement – with a focus on prevention, intervention, and compensation. This work has unveiled a shared thread of commonality across a majority of the policy contexts. Nevertheless, it is imperative to acknowledge that the suitability, accessibility, and efficacy of these measures exhibit substantial variations.

The policy measures to address underachievement and ESL during the last ten years in the countries under review included:

1. Expanding provision and affordability of ECEC.
2. Enhancing relevance and flexibility of curriculum.
3. Ensuring provision of guidance and counselling across educational levels
4. Regulatory supports for school attendance, participation, and retention (prevention measures).
5. Support for socio-economically disadvantaged communities.
6. Roma inclusion strategies.
7. Teachers' professional development (intervention measures).
8. Good-quality VET and second chance educational pathways (compensatory measures).

Among the array of prevention strategies, a prominent area of emphasis is ECEC, as every country has taken great strides in this direction to make the service available for all the children of that age group. Concurrently, with respect to intervention measures, addressing underachievement among students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds emerges as recurrent and predominant policy component. All countries have made substantial efforts to ensure equitable education by addressing barriers that may hinder the access of children and young people to quality education. Notably, vocational education and training programmes emerge as vitally important.

Key conclusions of Section 2

Although as the authors note the array of initiatives and interventions across many countries is substantial and encouraging, those that have been conducted on the largest scale and appear to offer the most success in tackling ESL are described in great detail in the final part of Section 2. These include greatly developed ECEC, supports for socio-economically disadvantaged young people, and initiatives to enhance access pathways and routes into

education and vocational training. Although many other policies and interventions are identified, the above are those most deeply analysed.

SECTION 3: THE DIALOGIC SEMINARS

The following were the main findings of Section 3. To complement previous components of WP1 which provided literature and policy reviews weighing the empirical evidence for different factors shaping ESL and analysing the relative effectiveness of recent policies in reducing ESL, the activities of Section 3 sought to bring the perspectives of key stakeholders to the fore. These key stakeholders included policymakers, school administrators and teachers, community activists and service providers, and families and students from communities most impacted by ESL. Guided by the communicative methodology of research (Gómez et al., 2011) – which focuses on the co-creation of scientific knowledge through engagement with key stakeholders in open, egalitarian dialogue – dialogic seminars were conducted in six countries to solicit feedback on priority factors and areas for policy action.

The key points emerging from these seminars are very interesting. Many are very much in line with those emerging from the policy reviews in Sections 1 and 2 but there is also considerable difference of emphasis in certain areas. The following emerged from the dialogic seminars:

1. Factors contributing to students' engagement/disengagement.
2. Cultural sensitivity and appropriateness of classroom curriculum.
3. Trust and belonging.
4. The role of parents.
5. Prevention measures.
 - a. Changing current practices in schools.
 - b. Promoting shared decision-making.
 - c. Targeting support particularly around the transition from primary to secondary school.
 - d. Early childhood education.
6. Intervention measures.
 - e. Providing professional and mental health guidance to students.
 - f. Supporting integrated services in schools to address students' needs holistically.
 - g. Bolstering social support, particularly family support.
 - h. Providing extracurricular activities to students.
7. Compensation measures.
 - i. Vocational education and training and other alternative pathways.
 - j. Integrated services.
 - k. Financial support.

Key conclusions of Section 3

The dialogic seminars offered opportunities for key stakeholders – including students, teachers, family members, activists, and policy members – to reflect on and discuss the findings from the two policy reviews. It highlighted the factors that were perceived as most salient and impactful from the standpoint of those often most directly impacted and offered opportunity for those present to envision the prevention, intervention, and compensation measures most critical from their vantage point. Largely, the factors and measures identified in Section 1.3 aligned with those in the policy reviews.

However, the dialogic seminars provided an experiential weight to the factors, emphasising some over others. Finances, trust and belonging, family support, and an experientially and culturally relevant curriculum emerged as particularly salient factors shaping engagement, for instance. Although some of the factors identified were unique – that is, not reflected in the other countries’ dialogic seminars – many were shared and cut across the six sites, highlighting opportunities for cross-cultural collaboration.

4.3 Final Recommendations.

One might rather glibly argue, after this monumental piece of research, is that what it tells us is that we are on the right track and progressing well in the battle against ESL and educational underachievement. Realising the importance for Europe of the need for inclusive education and equality of opportunity to tackle ESL and underachievement and all the social and economic ills that accompany them, both at EU and national levels, there has been a concerted effort to introduce policies and interventions to improve the situation. The EU set a target of 9% for ESL by 2030, and although variable ESL rates persist across the Union solid progress has been made in many countries in reaching this goal.

However, although progress has been made there is some way to go. Our analysis of the social determinants of ESL and underachievement show that there are many such determinants and that they do not work in isolation. We are all aware that the major issues of poverty and disadvantage are vital in playing into this problem but rather less so that, as the dialogic seminars showed so clearly, factors such as trust, respect, communication with parents and communities, teacher attitudes, and school policies and practices are also of vital importance and need consideration both in policy but also in areas of practice such as teacher training and enhanced guidance and counselling.

This finding illustrates the extent to which the framework or model of actions – which was used as a conceptual framework for this report, and which contain all three of prevention, intervention and compensation – is so vital. This is because the educational experience of young people is a continuum, and intervention in one place will not usually be enough to solve the issues that appear across that continuum. Situations vary so greatly and yet in many cases overlap so hugely that measures drawn from all three approaches will usually be required to make a real impact on the needs of a young person across the entire course of schooling. For example, in most countries the importance of ECEC has come to be seen as the key one among many prevention measures; however, if the concepts of appropriate curricula, language support, guidance, and teacher preparation do not continue to be seen as vital components in subsequent schooling, much of the benefits of ECEC will be lost.

In this regard it became clear that in quite a number of countries there was a significant gap between policy discourse and implementation in ECEC, and it is a strong recommendation of this report that a major emphasis be placed by the EU and individual states on developing a quality system of ECEC available to all.

Similarly in terms of flexible curricula and alternative pathways through education and training – another factor which emerged from the policy reviews as a major theme – it is clear that this is a vital element of providing opportunity for all. However, again we see major disparities between policy rhetoric and reality with often rigid curricula usually dominated by an overly academic and unsuitable diet and vocational pathways not given the funding and status required. Again, to make further progress, this is a policy area that must be addressed.

The identified gap between policy discourse and implementation is one that encompasses a number of discrete areas that will be summarised below. The research would appear to argue that if we are to continue the trajectory towards addressing embedded patterns of ESL it is incumbent on us to deal with:

1. **Interagency cooperation and collaboration:** Despite policy goals focusing on promoting collaboration between schools and external agencies, this cooperation is still in the early stages of development. It suggests that schools often take the lead in involving local communities in educational initiatives independently.
2. **Whole-school approach:** The whole-school approach as identified across many national contexts is arguably among the most essential contextual factors. While reified in theory in a policy sense, its integration into the daily operations of educational settings is often lacking. The approach aims for a comprehensive and holistic educational environment, but its practical implementation remains theoretical.
3. **Policy rhetoric vs. practical implementation:** In almost every national context explored, there is a noticeable gap between the intent of educational policies and their execution in real-world educational settings. While policies stress the importance of certain practices, such as interagency collaboration or support for specific student groups (like immigrants and minorities), the practical implementation often falls short.
4. **Persistent implementation challenges:** Given the iterative, and at times tortuous, nature of policy development it is perhaps not surprising that despite periodic policy reviews and recommendations for corrective actions, the challenges in implementing these policies persist. This suggests that significant systemic and other obstacles are preventing the effective translation of policies into practice.
5. **Demographic groups:** The issue of the differential impact of ESL on demographic groups is one that stands out in the report. There are, for example, specific challenges related to the integration of immigrant and refugee students into mainstream education systems in countries like Greece and Portugal and the inclusion of Roma minorities in Romania. These, and other, examples underscore the need for more focused and deliberate actions to address the needs of these specific demographic groups.
6. **Successful programmes:** Despite the many challenges it is important to note that there are successful initiatives in most if not all national contexts. For example, the Schools as Learning Community Programme in Spain demonstrates successful interagency collaboration managed by regional educational authorities in partnership with schools. This example, and others outlined, serve as positive models for bridging the gap between policy and practice.

Ultimately the research underscores the need for a more concerted effort to bridge the gap between educational policy intent and practical implementation. It highlights the challenges and obstacles in achieving the goals set by policies, especially in areas like interagency collaboration, the whole-school approach, and the inclusion of specific demographic groups. To address these challenges, comprehensive assessments of the policy-to-practice continuum are suggested to help translate policies into effective, integrated, and holistic practices within the education system.

Finally, it is probably fair to argue that while significant progress has been made and research and experience have provided the tools to continue to make inroads into this complex but not insoluble problem, perhaps our biggest remaining challenge is to take the really key areas – ECEC, support for disadvantaged communities, guidance and counselling, and flexible curricula and pathways – and encourage all member states to reach the best possible standard in each area.

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3.4.2 APPENDIX 1

Social determinants of underachievement and school dropout

Systematic Review Reports



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1. Prisma Guidelines for systematic Review
2. Cognitive Factors – University of Porto
3. The Impact of Cultural Factors on Early School Leaving – Dublin City University
4. Early Childhood Education and Care – University of Malta
5. Gender as a social determinant – University Of Porto
6. Socio Economic Factors and Early School Leaving – Dublin City University
7. Institutional Factors – University of Deusto
8. Linguistic Factors – University of Newcastle
9. Psycho-emotional: engagement and well-being – University of Helsinki



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WP1 – Analysing causes and social determinants of underachievement.

Task 1.1 Social determinants of underachievement and school dropout (M1-M6)

Task leader: UNIVERSITY OF MALTA

Partners: UD, UPORTO, DCU, HELSINGIN YLIOPISTO, UNEW

Title of Systematic Review
Social Determinants and Root Causes of underachievement with reference to early school leavers (ESL): review of existing knowledge and evidence to address this challenge in the scientific literature.
Research Question to be answered by systematic review
What does literature say about the social determinants (Institutional, Socio-economic, Cognitive, Cultural, Linguistic, Gender, Psycho-emotional and Well-being and ECEC) and root causes of underachievement in relation with ESLs?
Rationale of Systematic review



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Early School Leaving (ESL hereinafter) has devastating consequences for both the individuals who do not complete their education and for society. ESL has been associated to reduced opportunities on the labour market, poverty, health problems and diminished participation in political, social, and cultural activities. With nine Member States not having yet reached EU targets set, and knowledge of higher rates of ESL among certain vulnerable groups such as pupils with immigrant background, and Roma community, there is need to understand better the role of social determinants on underachievement and consequently ESL.

SCIREARLY intends to move forward by starting with an in-depth analysis of the challenge of underachievement as a relevant factor that influences ESL, and which has so far been underexplored. A systematic review is thus needed to identify what is so far known about the social determinants of underachievement, an exercise which no recent study has so far systematized.

Underachievement is considered defined in many ways. Thorndyke (1963) defined it as ‘achievement falling below what would be forecast from our most informed and accurate prediction, based on a team of predictor variables’ (p.19).

The definition of underachievement in SCIREARLY and in this review will be based on that used by PISA.

Underachievers in PISA are those pupils who fail to reach proficiency Level 2, i.e. the minimum level necessary to participate successfully in society (Education and Training Monitor 2020). So we understand underachievement as a **performance level below measured indications of ability** (Siegle, McCoach, & Rubenstein, 2012).

Objectives

The multidisciplinary systematic review aims to analyse what literature reveals about the following social determinants (Institutional, Socio-economic, Cognitive, Cultural, Linguistic, Gender, Psycho-emotional and Well-being and ECEC, as well as any other social determinant) on underachievement with respect to ESL.

The specific objectives of the systematic review seek to

- focus on underachieving students between early years, primary level and secondary education levels.
- analyse the effect of each of the social determinants: Institutional, Socio-economic, Cognitive, Cultural, Linguistic, Gender, Psycho-emotional and Well-being and ECEC; on students and impact on underachievement and ESL.



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- Analyse the nature and degree of the impact of these social determinants on underachievement and ESL.
- Collate data about how these social determinants impact different countries, cultures, and vulnerable groups differently or similarly.
- Investigate which structures/determinants have the greatest impact on underachievement and ESL.
- Examine whether there are combinations of particular social determinants which are high among groups.
- Find out what key social determinants are common among vulnerable groups.
- those social determinants which, on the other hand, promote achievement;
- identify successful policy actions to combat underachievement.

Methods

Eligible Criteria

The multidisciplinary systematic review will use the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses) statement to analyse what literature reveals about the following social determinants on underachievement with respect to ESL: Institutional, Socio-economic, Cognitive, Cultural, Linguistic, Gender, Psycho-emotional and Well-being and ECEC, as well as any other social determinant.

Criteria for inclusion

- focus on students from early, primary, and secondary education.
- focus on social determinants: Institutional, Socio-economic, Cognitive, Cultural, Linguistic, Gender, Psycho-emotional and Well-being and ECEC, as well as any other social determinant.
- Focus on impact of social determinants on underachievement and/or ESL.
- Publications are high-quality papers published in peer-reviewed journals. relevant books; policy documents as well as research reports and other grey literature from relevant public and private institutions;
- Published in 2003 or later.
- Empirical studies conducted in the context of EU Member States.



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- Pertaining to relevant disciplines/ fields (education, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics etc...) to represent interdisciplinarity as an approach to the review.
- Literature reported in English.
- Literature search to take place **between 25 January and 3rd March 2023**.

Criteria for exclusion

- Low-quality or unpublished research/literature.
- Pertaining to studies conducted with students out of ECEC and compulsory schooling.
- Published prior to the year 2003.
- Tackling the social determinant in isolation without a link to the impact on underachievement and ESL.
- Studies conducted outside the context of EU countries.
- Publications with no empirical data.
- Publication is not in English.

Information Sources

- **Main scientific databases to be consulted include:** Web of Science; Psycinfo; and SCOPUS.
- **Date of publications:** Studies published in 2003 or later.
- **Type of publications included:**
 - High-quality papers published in peer-reviewed journals, relevant books.
 - Research reports and other grey literature from relevant public and private institutions will be included
- **Background of studies:** An interdisciplinary approach will be undertaken both in terms of the literature consulted (education, psychology, sociology, economy, linguistics, etc.) and the methods applied (Quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods) in the studies.



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Search Strategy

Keywords: Use keywords to search for literature using the database identified

General Keywords to use together with specific keywords (for each social determinant)

Underachievement 'and' [keyword specific to the social determinant]

ESL 'and' [keyword specific to the social determinant]

School dropout 'and' [keyword specific to the social determinant]

School disengagement 'and' [keyword specific to the social determinant]

Students 'and' underachievement 'and' [keyword specific to the social determinant]

Migrants 'and' underachievement 'and' [keyword specific to the social determinant]

vulnerable group 'and' underachievement 'and' [keyword specific to the social determinant]

policy 'and' underachievement 'and' [keyword specific to the social determinant]

Keywords for the specific social determinants

Institutional

schools, assessment, student-teacher-ratio, lecturers' interest and commitment, school calendar stability, extent, teaching methodology, streaming, resources, Single-Sex Schooling, student's peers, school facilities, teacher quality, school autonomy, decision-making level, education policies

Socio-economic

financial, social, cultural, human capital resources, family, household income, parents' occupation, parents' educational level, poverty, access to learning,

Cognitive



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Individual ability, learning capacity, attention span, engagement in learning, neurocognitive skills.

Cultural

society, groups, religion, family support, ethnicity, expectations, cultural deprivation

Linguistic

bilingualism, migrant, Self-study habits, motivation, plurilingual, textbooks, curricula

Gender

boys, girls, gender identity, segregation, discrimination, Teacher Labelling, Subcultures, Feminisation of teaching, stereotypes

Psycho-emotional and well-being:

learning-related behaviour, problems relationships, mental health, defiance, impulsivity, disruptiveness, aggression, over activity emotional problems, adolescence, anxiety

ECEC

quality in early childhood, early childhood education and care, early years, child well-being, parent partnership, transitions in early childhood, professionalism, access, governance

It is important that you keep note of the exact keywords which you used as this needs to be reported in the systematic review.

Selection process

The selection process is to take place in the following order (as is indicated in the PRISMA 2002 guidelines)

1. For each set of key words run a search on the databased used. Start searching 'by abstract', at least to begin with, (if we see we are having scarce results we can rethink to open it up). Take note of the number of publications obtained. (**Record the number in peach box in flow chart**). Remove any duplicates and take note of new number of remaining papers to be screened (**note this number in green box**)
2. Do a quick screen of the title to see which papers are to be sought for retrieval (and saved – using zetoro, endnote, or other tool you use) (**note number of remaining papers in yellow box**)
3. Repeat process for the other keyword combinations.



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-
- 4. Once all the keywords have been run – combine all the papers downloaded in one database.
-
- 5. Remove papers which are doubles. **(take note of papers removed)**
-
- 6. Now, for the papers which remain, include details of the papers in the excel sheet (up to the purple column in excel sheet). (note this number in the blue box in the flow chart)
- 7. The last purple column determines if the paper is included or excluded – this assessment of criteria needs to be checked by a second academic (as per PRISMA guidelines).
-
- 8. Then upload your excel sheet with the flow chart (indicated social determinant) on TEAMS (UM team would then need to combine all your databases to remove the double papers)
-
- 9. This would finalise the selection process of literature included.

The remaining columns (beyond purple) are a means of tracking what aspects of results are included in each paper. This is optional really – but recommended as it helps in mapping research findings in preparation for the write up.

Data Collection Process

1. Each partner is to be assigned particular social determinant(s) as indicated:

UM - ECEC

UD - Institutional

UPORTO - Gender & Cognitive

DCU - Socio-economic and Cultural

HELSINGIN YLIOPOSTO - Psycho-emotional and well-being

UNEW – Linguistic



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2. Each partner is to carry out the literature search as instructed in the sections above with each partner focusing on social determinant(s) assigned (even if descriptions included can refer to more than one determinant).
3. **It is important that these instructions are followed closely and consistently to ensure that the systematic review is carried out accurately and reflects high quality.**
4. **Deadline to have database completed: 3rd March 2023**



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Horizon Europe

A Systematic Literature Review of the Student Cognitive Related to School Underachieving and Early School Leaving.

Work Package		WP 1. Analysing causes and social determinants of underachievement
Identifier		
Task		Task 1.1 – Systematic Review on Social Determinants – Cognitive
Lead Beneficiary (for sub-report)		University of Porto
Authors		André Barros, Sofia C. Pais & Pedro Ferreira
Due Date		
Submission Date		15/5/2023
Dissemination Level		Internal at this stage

History of changes			
Version	Date	Created or modified by	Comments
v1	15/05/2023	André Barros and Pedro Ferreira	First draft for internal review



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A Systematic Review on Social Determinant Cognitive

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This Systematic Review of Literature (SRL) is part of the first work package (WP) of the Scirearly project - <https://scirearly.eu>. The project's final aim is to determine successful policy approaches and practices based on scientific evidence that reduce the underachievement in basic skills, including digital skills, while fostering psycho-emotional aspects and well-being, thus contributing to reducing early school leaving (ESL) in Europe.

As a first step, the team needs to gain a systematic understanding of how different determinants affect students' achievement. The consortium researchers agreed that the determinants to be studied would be: a) Early Childhood Education and Care, b) Cognitive, c) Institutional, d) Socioeconomic Status, e) Culture, f) Linguistics, g) Gender, and h) Psycho-emotional and well-being.

Cognition consists of mental representations and how they are involved in different mental processes and operations (Allan, 2013). To study cognition in a school context it is necessary to look at different aspects that are used in educational tasks and contexts, for example, cognitive aspects such as attention and memory (Roy, 2013a). Cognition in school also includes the functions required to process and use information (Roy, 2013b). Given the broad coverage of cognition in the school context, we have chosen a general definition for this systematic review of the literature, which we expect to broadly cover the work developed on this topic.

This systematic review of the literature aims to analyse what is known about cognition as a determinant that may influence achievement and early school leaving, and how it relates to other relevant determinants of school achievement and early school leaving.



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2.0 METHODOLOGY. A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF COGNITION RELATED TO UNDERACHIEVEMENT AND EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

When thinking about learning and school achievement or underachievement, cognitive aspects and factors can be understood as those referring to mental processes and abilities that influence the conditions for learning. They modulate performance and involve functions such as thinking, attention and memory. (Roy, 2013a).

This Systematic Review used the PRISMA protocol and started with the following keywords and search script: ("early school leaving" or underachievement or "school failure" or "dropout" and cognitive or thinking or attention and difficulties or skills or abilities or "school engagement" or "learning engagement" and "primary education" or "primary school" or "elementary education" or "elementary school" or "secondary education" or "secondary school" or "high school" or "early education" or school).

The filters were set to exclude any result not written in English and any work not from the Europe Union or the United Kingdom and retrieved only publications published between 2003 and 2023. The search was carried out in Web of Science, PscycINFO, and Scopus. All the data were retrieved from the database on February 2nd, 2023. The search yielded 666 results. After removing all the duplicates, 513 results remained.

For the subsequent steps, the inclusion criteria of results were:

1. Focus on students from early, primary, and secondary education.
2. Focus on the determinant cognition
3. Focus on the impact of the determinants cognition on underachievement and/or ESL.
4. Publications are high-quality papers published in peer-reviewed journals. Relevant books, policy documents as well as research reports and other grey literature from relevant public and private institutions.
5. Published in 2003 or later.
6. Empirical studies conducted in the context of EU Member States or the UK.
7. Pertaining to relevant disciplines/ fields (education, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics etc.) to represent interdisciplinarity as an approach to the review.
8. Literature reported in English.
9. Literature search to take place between January twenty-fifth and March third 2023.



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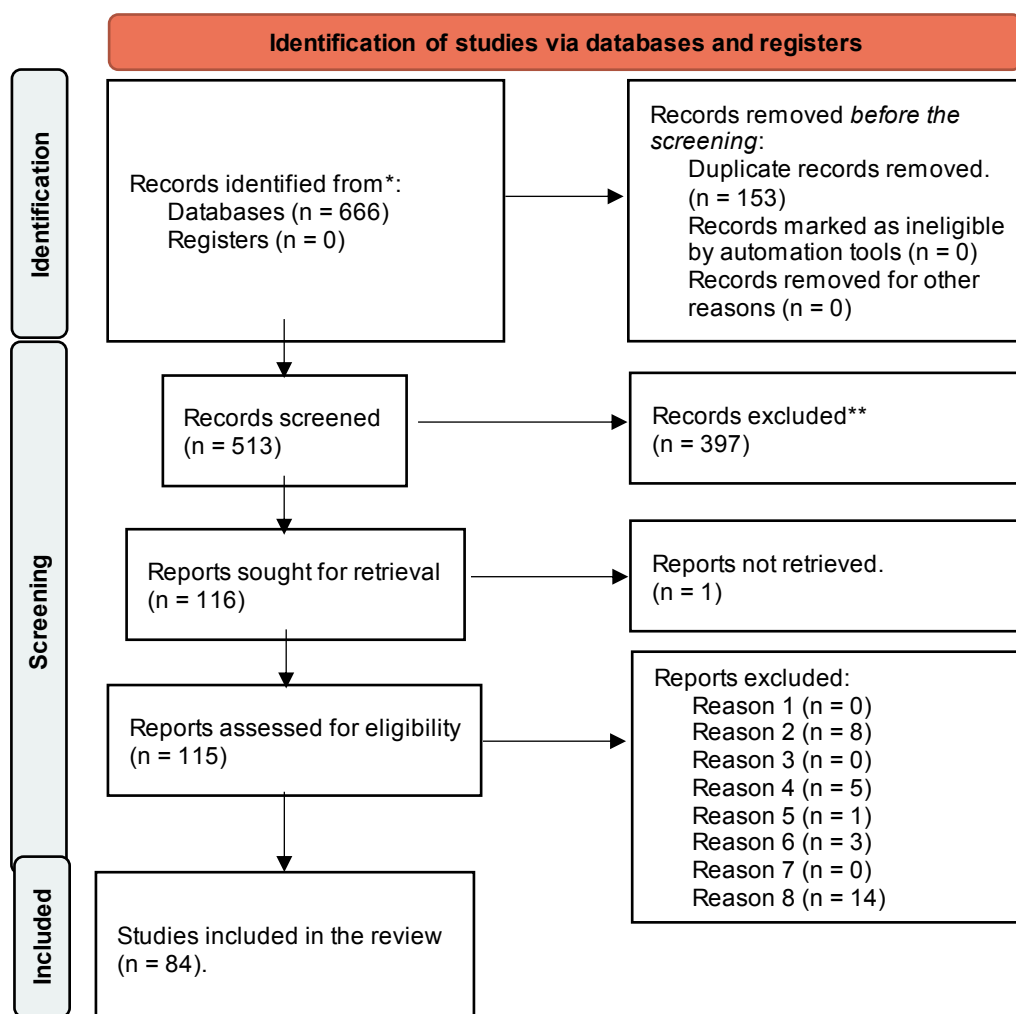
For the subsequent steps, the exclusion criteria of results were:

1. Low-quality or unpublished research/literature.
2. Pertaining to studies conducted with students out of ECEC and compulsory schooling.
3. Published prior to the year 2003.
4. Tackling the social determinant cognition in isolation, without a link to the impact on underachievement and ESL.
5. Studies conducted outside the context of EU countries.
6. Publications with no empirical data.
7. Publication not in English.
8. Publication not connected with the cognition determinant.



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Prisma 2020 Flow Chart



* The reasons elected in the Report excluded are in the exclusion criteria numbered 1 to 8.

1. Low-quality or unpublished research/literature.
2. Pertaining to studies conducted with students out of ECEC and compulsory schooling.
3. Published prior to the year 2003.
4. Tackling the social determinant cognition in isolation, without a link to the impact on underachievement and ESL.
5. Studies conducted outside the context of EU countries.
6. Publications with no empirical data.
7. Publication not in English.
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3.0 FINDINGS OF THE SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

3.1 Background to the type of literature included in the systematic review.

The tables below present data describing the 84 papers reviewed. It includes information on the types of empirical studies, the types of samples, the themes of the range of objectives, the country of data collection, sample size, and methods. Note that for some topics papers may have been included/counted in more than one category.

Types of empirical studies	#	Types of samples	#	Methods	#
Case study	3	Convenience	72	Mixed (quantitative and qualitative)	6
Cross-sectional	40	Representative	11	Qualitative	7
Experimental	2	Literature Review	1	Quantitative	71
Longitudinal	15				
Mixed Longitudinal and Cross-sectional	7				
Quasi-experimental	17				

Size of the sample ¹	#	Countries of Data Collection	#	Themes of the range of objectives	#
Not declared	1	Belgium	3	Culture	4
Up to 50	10	Czech Republic	1	ECEC	1
From 51 to 100	12	Denmark	1	Gender	11
From 101 to 200	7	Finland	8	Gifted pupils	4
From 201 to 400	8	France	7	Math to measure achievement	12
From 401 to 600	5	Germany	17	Language to measure achievement	14
From 601 to 800	4	Hungary	2	Memory	4
From 801 to 1000	11	Italy	7	Motivation	17
From 1001 to 2000	6	Netherlands	5	Self-Concept	18
From 2001 to 3000	3	Poland	2	Measures of Reasoning	35
From 3001 to 4000	3	Portugal	4	Health-related or medical conditions	31
From 4001 to 5000	2	Spain	16	Institutional	19
From 6001 to 7000	2	Sweden	5	Linguistic	1
From 7001 to 8000	1	United Kingdom	16	Psych-emotional and well-being	13
From 8001 to 9000	0			Socio-economic Status	14
From 10 001 to 20 000	4				
From 25 001 to 50 000	3				

¹ Sample size was only considered for studies using quantitative methods.



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From 100 001 to 200 000	1				
From 2 million to 2.5 million	1				

3.2 Themes emerging from the systematic review.

Out of a total of 84 papers, 53 directly addressed at least to one of the cognitive aspects included in this systematic review; 12 of them used math to measure school achievement or cognitive ability; 14 used language ability to measure school achievement or cognitive ability. The cognitive aspects were organised into three main groups: cognitive aspects related to school achievement, health-related or medical conditions affecting school achievement, and Early School Leaving.

3.2.1 Cognitive aspects related to school achievement.

As noted above, when thinking about learning and school achievement or underachievement, cognitive aspects and factors can be understood to refer to mental processes and abilities that influence learning or on the conditions for learning, and therefore include functions such as thinking, attention and memory (Roy, 2013a). This is a broad definition that opens up multiple perspectives and from which it can be studied. From the results of the SRL it is clear that most of the papers focus on IQ or other observations of intelligence and its relationship with school achievement. However, other aspects were found to have an impact on learning. Self-concept, motivation and memory were also frequently related to learning abilities.

Reasoning and Intelligence

Of the 84 included papers, 34 used IQ or some other measure of reasoning to assess or observe intelligence (Chaix et al., 2006; Dagnino et al., 2013; De Vries et al., 2003; Di Blasi et al., 2019; Dings & Spinath, 2021; Dumaret et al., 2010; Foulder-Hughes & Cooke, 2003; Gadeyne et al., 2004; Gilar-Corbi et al., 2019; Goetz et al., 2007; Gronostaj et al., 2016; Guez et al., 2018; Hakkarainen et al., 2015; Iniesta et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2009; Lavrijsen et al., 2021; Linnenbank et al., 2022; Meier et al., 2014; Nagy et al., 2019; Nießen et al., 2020; Pascual & Salas, 2021; Preckel & Brunner, 2015; Preckel et al., 2006; Reilly et al., 2014; Reilly et al., 2015; Roy & Rutter, 2006; Schnitzer et al., 2007; Stergiakouli et al., 2017; Stoeger et al., 2013; Strand, 2004; Tallberg et al., 2021; Tempelaar et al., 2017; Träff et al., 2020; van der Meulen et al., 2014; Zsoldos, 2003).

In this respect the literature is clear, all papers that have analysed the relationship between IQ or some intelligence test and school achievement have concluded that, in most scenarios, the higher the intelligence score of the children, the higher the probability that they will achieve better in school-related skills.



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Self-concept versus measures of Reasoning measure

Studies involving reasoning clearly show the direct relationship between intelligence and school grades (Dagnino et al., 2013; Di Blasi et al., 2019; Gilar-Corbi et al., 2019; Guez et al., 2018; Nießen et al., 2020; Strand, 2004; Zsoldos, 2003). Some studies point to the importance of taking self-concept into account when considering this. One particular study using life story methods found a strong direct relationship between intellectual self-concept and school achievement (Guerrero-Puerta and Guerrero, 2021) – this particular study did not include a measure of IQ. In support of the influence of self-concept on school achievement, despite the measured level of intelligence of the students, Bussu et al. (2022), Iniesta et al. (2017), Meier et al. (2014); van der Meulen et al. (2014) analysed both self-concept and intelligence. They found a strong direct relationship between intelligence and self-concept for most students. However, the studies also showed that low self-concept significantly increases the likelihood of underachievement. Statistically, the impact of cognitive (intellectual) ability in school achievement was smaller than that of self-concept (Iniesta et al., 2017). Gilar-Corbi et al. (2019) demonstrated that even among students with high IQ, low self-concept is associated school underachievement.

Self-concept

In addition to what has just been said about the impact of self-concept on school achievement when compared to the impact of intelligence, Gadeyne et al. (2004), Zhang et al. (2016) and Dings and Spinath (2021) found a direct relationship between low cognitive self-concept and low achievement. However, Dings and Spinath (2021) bring an important reflection to these findings: students may have low self-concept because they compare themselves to the high-achievers and think they should be able to do better. The authors also found that not believing in oneself is a common characteristic of underachievers. Guerrero-Puerta and Guerrero (2021) found a similar result with an underachieving student who described himself as "dumb and lazy", because he failed at school, and had his cognitive abilities negatively affected by his self-concept. In support of this influence of self-concept, Preckel and Brunner (2015) found that academic self-concept can improve student achievement and motivation over time. Vantieghem & Van Houtte (2018) analysed the influence of gender on self-perception. The work found that gender-typical boys had significantly lower self-perception than gender-typical girls, but atypical boys had even worse levels of self-perception. Gadeyne et al. (2004) also found that girls had higher self-concept scores than boys.

Intertwined with, and closely related to the concept of self-concept are self-efficacy and self-esteem. Guez et al. (2018) investigated whether self-efficacy is related to a high IQ and didn't find any statistical evidence for it. Santos Rego et al. (2018) found that self-efficacy significantly decreases when the student is underachieving and is retained. Toland and Boyle (2008) and Sánchez-Sansegundo et al. (2020) studied two different intervention programs with the same aim: to improve the self-esteem and motivation of children. Both were successful in improving the children's school achievement. Supporting these findings, McDougal et al. (2022) found that children's self-confidence facilitated their school achievement.



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Gifted underachievers

In order to understand what may lead students with high IQs to fail at school, some studies have looked at gifted underachievers. Gilar-Corbi et al. (2019) and Iniesta et al. (2017) found that gifted underachievers used fewer learning strategies and reported lower levels of orientation towards learning goals, had minor attitudes toward teachers, minor self-regulation, and low general self-concept. In both studies, lower perceptions of parental support also appear to be associated with underachievement in these groups. In Gilar-Corbi et al. (2019) study, gifted underachievers are also associated with poorer self-perception, and lower levels of motivation. Focusing on distinct variables, Stoeger et al. (2013) investigated the relationship between lower fine motor skills and gifted underachievement. The work found that students with lower motor skills have to spend more attention on motor issues and that translates in difficulties in solving the proposed tasks. In a similar study, Stoeger et al. (2008) found a link between difficulties in fine motor skills and concentration persistence.

Motivation

The influence of motivation in the learning process and success varies depending on the aspect of motivation studied, and how motivation is defined. Toland and Boyle (2008) tested an intervention program to change self-esteem and motivate students to learn. It improved the school achievement of children with and without learning difficulties. Guez et al. (2018) found that high-IQ students tend to be more motivated. Vantieghem and Van Houtte (2018) analysed the influence of gender on student motivation. They found that girls had significantly more autonomous motivation than boys. Non-typical-gender students were found to have less controlled motivation than typical-gender students. Pointing to another direction, Dings and Spinath (2021) studied a scenario where high-achieving children were separated from low-achieving children and didn't find statistical support that this was related to the students' chances of achievement.

The three most common understandings of motivation that came up in the SRL were Goals, Need for Cognition and School Engagement.

Goals:

Although the findings are not always consistent, there is evidence of a positive relationship between goals and academic achievement. Preckel and Brunner (2015) and Zhang et al. (2016) found a statistically significant positive relationship between mastery goals and academic achievement. Preckel and Brunner (2015) found no statistically significant influence on students' achievement or goal orientation. Zhang et al. (2016) found that students with mixed mastery-oriented and performance goals had the lowest achievement scores compared to students with predominantly mastery goals. Iniesta et al. (2017) and Gilar-Corbi et al. (2019) found a statistically significant relationship between learning goals and school achievement. The same study found no relationship between social reinforcement goals and school achievement. Meier et al. (2014) found no significant relationship between mastery goal orientation in Math and school achievement in gifted classes.



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Need for Cognition (NFC):

Preckel et al. (2006) found that low levels of NFC were associated with underachievement, and high levels facilitated anxiety and fear of failure. Lavrijsen et al. (2021) investigated the effects of using adequate challenges and their relationship with NFC. Their study found that adequate challenges were more effective for students with higher IQs. Meier et al. (2014) concluded that NFC was the most significant predictor of school achievement among different motivational constructs examined, including academic self-concept and goal orientations.

School Engagement:

There is evidence of a positive relationship between school engagement and school achievement. To that effect, Gadeyne et al. (2004) found a direct relationship between children's learning motivation and mathematical achievement. Task avoidance was associated with learning difficulties in kindergarten children, as Niemi et al. (2011) found. Suárez et al. (2019) studied students' engagement with homework and their school achievement. They found a statistically significant direct relationship between the two. In line with this, Nusser (2021) found that among students with special needs, during the Covid-19 pandemic, those with low achievement tended to be those who spent less time studying.

Adding a different angle to the research on school engagement, Mielityinen et al. (2021) studied adolescents who experienced maltreatment and found that the experience had a negative impact on school engagement, particularly on emotional and cognitive engagement. In some cases, the experience of maltreatment was positively associated with functional engagement, suggesting that some students may escape into school work and context. Estévez et al. (2021) and Liinamaa et al. (2022) found an association between maladaptive regulatory behaviour and conduct disorder symptoms and lack of school engagement, leading to school underachievement. Finally, Lavrijsen et al. (2021) found that cognitive ability was not related to school engagement.

Memory

The memory aspect, as related to school achievement, has only been found in a study in a non-clinical situation. As Owens et al. (2008) found, verbal working memory is strongly associated with school achievement. They also found that anxiety affects verbal working memory.

Passolunghi and Mammarella (2012) found that memory and attention are linked when working with children with memory impairment. The worse the memory, the more difficult it is for the children to complete school-related tasks. Chaix et al. (2006) studied children with epilepsy and linked semantic and verbal memory skills to school underachievement. Passolunghi and Mammarella (2012) found an association between spatial working memory impairments with mathematics learning disabilities and poor problem-solving skills.



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On the other hand, Badger et al. (2022) found that short-term memory limits school achievement only at younger ages. The authors suggest that it should be looked at as a developmental delay rather than a deficit.

Attention

Although most of the papers retrieved in this SRL that examined attention in relations to learning were related to ADHD or other attention impairing conditions, some studies also found attention was also found to be related to learning in non-clinical contexts some studies. Pagerols et al. (2022) and Gadeyne et al. (2004) found that lack of attention was associated with underachievement and behavioural problems such as anxiety or depression, suggesting that these aspects may be related.

3.2.2 Health-related and medical conditions affecting school achievement.

Attention-Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

ADHD is directly linked to school underachievement in all papers in this category. This is a consistent finding from a literature that focuses on the consequences of the condition and of it is dealt with (diagnose, treatment, strategies). One debate that was found to be still open was the relationship between ADHD and IQ and how underachievement is to be explained by low IQ or hyperactivity and attention deficit. As noted above, most of the papers in the SRL that focus on attention suggest that attention deficit disorder and hyperactivity play a major role in achievement difficulties of ADHD students.

Lecendreux et al. (2011); Stergiakouli et al. (2017), and Reynolds and Nicolson (2007) examined the polygenic aspect of ADHD. The papers explain that a group of genes may be involved in ADHD, and that the forms or expressions of ADHD vary according to the ADHD-related genes present in the student. Stergiakouli et al. (2017) concluded that this group of genes is associated with IQ. The study suggests that school underachievement in children with ADHD is explained more by lower IQ than by ADHD symptoms. Somewhat contradicting this study, Tallberg et al. (2021) analysed various cognitive aspects of children and adolescents undergoing clinical treatment for ADHD, excluding students with intellectual disabilities from the analysis. Their study found no differences in participants' IQ, but lower FSIQ (Full-Scale Intelligence Quotient), working memory and processing speed. The study also found that the participants had lower school achievement and more special education support from the schools. In a systematic review of the literature, Tempelaar et al. (2017) drew attention to the importance of diagnosing and treating students with ADHD. They found that undiagnosed ADHD students had lower graduation rates when compared to those with a diagnosis. The same study found a link between hyperactivity and attention problems and underachievement, regardless of the student's IQ.

Lecendreux et al. (2011) found that students with ADHD were ten times more likely to underachieve than neurotypical children. The study also compared the effects of gender on ADHD and found no differences between boys and girls in terms of their achievement difficulties. Reilly et al. (2014) studied children with active epilepsy and found that, in this group, the presence of ADHD led to a decrease



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in the student's school achievement. In the study developed by Caci et al. (2014), 48% of children and adolescents with ADHD received medication and/or behavioural intervention. These students were reported to be the worst school achievers in their classes. The work found that ADHD students had difficulty concentrating on schoolwork and were often frustrated at school. These findings are consistent with those of Re and Cornoldi (2010) who concluded that students with ADHD produce texts that are poor in structure and vocabulary. A qualitative study by McDougal et al. (2022) highlighted the possibility that although ADHD students may have difficulties in learning and engaging with school, they may also have strong artistic and sporting abilities. The study also discussed the challenges teachers face when working with these students and the strategies that help the learning process, such as the use of images, breaking down tasks, giving instructions in chunks and a routine that includes a visual timetable.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

The studies about autism spectrum disorders (ASD) talk about the need for support strategies that recognise the specificities of these students, and the difficulties they face in integrating in schools and with teachers who do not understand them and do not know how to deal with their differences.

The study by Moyse and Porter (2015) is an ethnographic study of three girls with ASD. It presents the difficulties in the school days of these girls and how they feel left out because of the school's hidden curriculum and the inability of the school context to effectively understand and deal with their different ways of perceiving the world. The author found that the diagnosis was not enough. Although all schools had access to ASD Advisory Teachers, not all teachers understood the girls' situations or how to lead the class with their presence.

Linnenbank et al. (2022) studied the relationship between ASD and the Processing Speed Index. The importance of this lies in how to handle ASD students in a way that they may use to the best of their capabilities. This study concluded that regardless of IQ, gender, age or the severity of their symptoms, all ASD participants had lower processing speed levels and therefore, as the authors recommend, all students with ASD, even those without intellectual disabilities, could benefit from special support in education.

The work of Leifler et al. (2022) analysed the effects of a school intervention focusing on social skills training for neurodivergent students, ASD and ADHD students. The school intervention program positively affected the integration of neurodivergent students. In general, these students got more socially visible, improving their school achievement and motivation. Difficulties in implementation were related to the complexity of the programs and the complexity and the increase in workload it represented to the workers of the school.

Borderline Personality Disorder

The two papers on borderline retrieved from this SLR discussed borderline in relation to intellectual functioning. Di Blasi et al. (2019) looked at the reading skills of children with borderline personality disorder and concluded that these children scored lower than typically developing children.



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Jankowska et al. (2014) followed 30 students diagnosed with borderline personality disorder and measured their intellectual ability using the WISC-R at three different ages, when they were 8, 10.8 and 13.6 years old. The study concluded that their global IQ did not change significantly over time. On the other hand, the Non-Verbal Scale IQ score increased, and the Verbal Scale IQ decreased significantly with age. According to the author, the results indicate that the development of linguistic abilities, vocabulary, and ability to express thoughts was delayed.

Epilepsy

Epilepsy is consistently associated with underachievement in all studies that were found (Brabcova et al., 2015; Chaix et al., 2006; Kaczmarek et al., 2016; Reilly et al., 2014; Reilly et al., 2015; Sabbagh et al., 2006). Some diverging results were found. Reilly et al. (2014) and Kaczmarek et al. (2016) suggest that the underachievement is mainly due to other co-occurring conditions such as dyslexia, spelling disorder and dyscalculia. Reilly et al. (2015), Sabbagh et al. (2006), and Sabbagh et al. (2006) associated underachievement with deficits in working memory, processing speed, and global intelligence and Chaix et al. (2006) also linked it to a possible effect on reading. Another inconsistency in the literature concerns the impact of seizure frequency in school achievement. Brabcova et al. (2015) and Sabbagh et al. (2006) found no association. However, Chaix et al. (2006) found an association between the frequency of seizures and cognitive difficulties, which may lead to different levels and types of school underachievement. Finally, the study by Sabbagh et al. (2006) found a solid correlation between the exclusion of students with epilepsy from mainstream education and common behavioural problems among these students.

Long-term Cancer

This SRL retrieved one study analysing the educational achievement of long-term cancer survivors in Germany (Dieluweit et al., 2011). Compared to the control group, the students had acquired the German University entrance qualification to higher rate and had higher levels of school achievement.

Being born premature

Some studies have addressed the high risk of cognitive deficits present for children born prematurely, very prematurely, or extremely prematurely, a risk that affects the children's school achievement (Foulder-Hughes & Cooke, 2003; Jaekel et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2009; Marlow et al., 2007; Nagy et al., 2019; Nusinovici et al., 2018; Perez-Roche et al., 2016).

The work of Perez-Roche et al. (2016) and Marlow et al. (2007) pointed to the association between prematurity and visual impairments, such as visual cognitive difficulties and visual memory. This characteristic is also responsible for lower school achievement in children.

Marlow et al. (2007) and Foulder-Hughes and Cooke (2003) found that difficulties in motor functioning were associated with premature children. Nagy et al. (2019) found an association between lower levels of processing in extremely premature children and a higher risk of adverse outcomes in children born under 1000 grams, which the author believes highlights the importance of following



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students with these conditions until late in their schooling. Looking at another aspect, Nusinovici et al. (2018) show that parental divorce has a more significant negative impact on the school achievement of preterm children.

No consistent gender effects were found. Nagy et al. (2019) did not find a gender effect in the impairments associated with children born preterm. However, Jaekel et al. (2016) found that attention regulation problems had less impact on girls than on boys.

Other syndromes

Perez-Vigil et al. (2018) investigated the association between Tourette syndrome and chronic disorders with school achievement. The participants experienced significant academic underachievement. Affected children were 65% less likely to complete secondary education, compared to children not living with these conditions.

Diez-Itza et al. (2018) studied an intervention using individualized narrative instruction to improve the school engagement for students affected by Williams syndrome, who often have linguistic difficulties that can lead to social isolation and contribute to school underachievement. The program was found to be effective, showing statistically significant improvements in morphosyntactic and lexical text measures.

Parental abuse of alcohol

Diez-Itza et al. (2018) found that alcohol consumption during pregnancy significantly reduced the IQ of children. The families studied were involved in an alcohol support group and received ongoing support. Tempelaar et al. (2014) also found a similar link between alcohol addiction and delayed school progression.

3.2.3 Early School Leaving

Many aspects influence the likelihood of students intending to drop out and actually doing so. This topic presents the findings on this influence as found in the papers analysed.

A five-year study following 595 students in Finland found a relationship between academic learning difficulties, school achievement and school dropout (Hakkarainen et al., 2015). In line with these findings, Korhonen et al. (2014) found a positive association between school underachievement and the risk of dropping out of school. However, they also found that some high achieving students were at high risk of dropping out due to low academic well-being, pointing to the need to consider other relevant dimensions that may be associated with early school leaving. Nießen et al. (2020) found that conscientiousness and agreeableness (as defined by the Big Five) were directly and negatively related to students' actual dropout. Tempelaar et al. (2017) found that early school leaving was associated with mental health problems in adolescents.

Although lack of cognitive engagement was found to be associated with a higher likelihood of dropping out (Tarabini et al., 2019), this finding is more robust for students with low socioeconomic and



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cultural status. Therefore, the paper highlights the importance of reinforcing attitudes to engage the students cognitively, to keep them interested, and reduce their intention to drop out. In line with this, Guerrero-Puerta and Guerrero (2021) propose gamification as a strategy to engage students and reduce early school leaving. The paper highlights the importance of the teacher in the process of integrating students with school engagement problems.

Studies using measures of intelligence show that higher levels of intelligence are directly associated with lower dropout rates (Guez et al., 2018; Nießen et al., 2020). Lower levels of intelligence levels may increase the likelihood of dropping out through low schooling achievement (Bussu et al., 2022).

Looking at early school leaving from another angle, Liinamaa et al. (2022) analysed the intentions to dropout of students in the vocational track and the academic track, in Finland. At the end of the first school year, adolescents in the vocational track reported higher dropout intentions and felt less satisfied than students in the academic track, which may indicate the importance of taking into account differences in educational environments and their influence on students' dropout intentions.

3.3 Interplay between cognition and other social determinants on underachievement.

Culture

The most common interplay between cognition and culture in this SLR concerns students of gipsy cultural background. In particular, they discuss how gipsy culture differs from the dominant culture in Portuguese schools and how people of gipsy culture understand education (Moreira et al., 2022; Rosario et al., 2014; Rosário et al., 2016).

Heers et al. (2015) looked for a relationship between culture and cognitive outcomes; no effects were found.

Early Childhood Education and Care

The interplay with ECEC was found in Träff et al. (2020). In a longitudinal study, high and low achievers in mathematics were examined in terms of early cognitive skills.

Gender

Only one retrieved paper focused on the relationship between gender and cognitive aspects (Vantieghem & Van Houtte, 2018), but gender information was also present, as a secondary finding, in some of the papers analysed. Vantieghem and Van Houtte (2018) investigated the influence of gender on students' motivation. They found that girls had significantly more autonomous motivation than boys. The study also highlights that non-atypical gender students tend to have less controlled motivation than typical gender students.



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Badger et al. (2022) explain that educational problems are more often present in boys. In line with these findings, Tempelaar et al. (2014) found a direct link between being male and higher likelihood of having a delay in school progression. Gadeyne et al. (2004) found that boys were more likely to have more severe behavioural and social problems, lower attention, and lower self-concept. Jaekel et al. (2016) found that young girls tended to have better control and attention regulation abilities. However, it is important to emphasize that van der Meulen et al. (2014) found evidence that there are no large differences in general IQ between males and females, although in intelligence test scores male students have a larger variances, i.e. more males score in either the lowest or highest score categories.

Pagerols et al. (2022) found that girls performed better in language and boys in mathematics. According to Bussu et al. (2022), boys are more likely to enter the job market immediately after high-school graduation. Focusing on school trajectories, Nießen et al. (2020) found a positive association between being male and studying in Vocational Education and a Training, while Hakkarainen et al. (2015) found a significantly higher probability of dropping out of the vocational track for female students in Finland.

Institutional

The institutional aspect appears as an interaction with the cognitive aspects in 26 of the 84 retrieved papers. Due to this extensive relationship between the two areas, the topic was divided into three subtopics: Intervention Programmes, Parental Involvement and School Structure.

Intervention programs:

Several papers (12) focused on intervention programs aimed at directly improving cognitive, emotional, or self-perception aspects in order to improve the quality of education. The discussion of the programs is grouped into three groups: School Activities, Use of Technology and Focus on Emotions.

In School Activities we included three papers that focused on intervention programs for students with learning difficulties: Staying on Track of Learning (Hakkarainen et al., 2015), the Philosophy for Children (P4C) program (Gorard et al., 2017), and an exercise-based intervention for children with reading difficulties (Reynolds & Nicolson, 2007). All three interventions are based on providing support to children, providing additional exercises, and discussions on school-related topics. Of the three interventions presented, the only one that shows a significant improvement is the exercise-based treatment for children with reading difficulties, an intervention that mobilises neuroscience and activities to intervene in dyslexia and related learning disabilities.

The Use of Technology includes two successful intervention programs for students with special education needs: TERENCE Adaptive Learning System (Cecilia & di Orio, 2016) and Oral Narrative intervention for students with Williams syndrome (Diez-Itza et al., 2018). The first used an app to improve students' motivation and computer skills. The second used a TV cartoon and explicit instructions to improve the text writing skills of students with Williams syndrome.



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The papers in the Focus on Emotions group include programs that focus on improving socio-emotional aspects such as self-concept or behavioural attitudes, with the aim of improving school attendance and achievement. All of the interventions were considered successful, one of them a partial success. These successful interventions were: Applying Cognitive Behavioural Methods to Retrain Children's Attributions to Success and Failure in Learning (Toland & Boyle, 2008), socio-educational program based on cooperative learning and family involvement (Santos Rego et al., 2018), R&R2 program (Sánchez-Sansegundo et al., 2020), SPIRALS (Antúnez et al., 2020), promoting gipsy engagement (Rosário et al., 2016), Social Skills Group Training for Students with Neurodevelopmental Disabilities (Leifler et al., 2022), and The Pullout Program Day a Week School for Gifted Children (van der Meulen et al., 2014). The program that was only partially successful was the Cognitive Intervention Programme for socio-emotional and behaviour problems in children with learning disabilities (Schnitzer et al., 2007).

Parent Involvement:

Regarding parental involvement and its association with school achievement, Iniesta et al. (2017), Gilar-Corbi et al. (2019), Moreira et al. (2022), and Roy and Rutter (2006) found a direct relationship between parental involvement in children's achievement. Santos Rego et al. (2018) found the same relationship, but only statistically significant for the involvement of mothers.

School Structure:

Heers et al. (2015) investigated the effects of community schools with extra school time and activities and found that care students and children from parents with lower levels of education did not perform better in community schools than their peers in regular schools.

Bussu et al. (2022) found that the presence of computers in schools did not affect student performance, despite the literature highlighting the positive impact of access to information on student achievement.

Linguistics

The only interplay between cognition and linguistics was the influence of foreign language in the learning process. The paper by Strand (2004) showed how familiarity with the language may influence the final score in reasoning tests.

Psycho-emotional and well-being

Findings suggesting that non-cognitive skills are significantly associated with or influence cognitive skills, and thus affect student's school achievement were present in the papers by Bussu et al. (2022) and Goetz et al. (2007). Consistent with these results, Moyse and Porter (2015), Owens et al. (2008), Pagerols et al. (2022), and Zhang et al. (2016) found that anxiety had a strong influence on school social interaction and school achievement. Pagerols et al. (2022) also found that depression had a relevant influence on school achievement. Finally, emotional stability, in general, affected cognitive skills and



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school achievement (Liinamaa et al., 2022; Nießen et al., 2020). It is important to stress that, as Gadeyne et al. (2004) found, children with learning disabilities tend to have more psychosocial problems than children with low achievement.

Drug use, involvement in illegal activities, and maltreatment are stressful events that were reported as events that can reduce psycho-emotional well-being and school achievement (Mielityinen et al., 2021; Pagerols et al., 2022).

Low levels of well-being may increase the risk of school dropout, regardless of the levels of school achievement (Korhonen et al., 2014; Liinamaa et al., 2022). In support of these findings, Tarabini et al. (2019) analysed five different schools and observed that in schools where teachers were perceived as accessible and attentive to students' needs beyond the academic function, the students had a higher sense of belonging to the school and felt cared for by the institution. They were proud to feel that everyone was included. The sense of belonging also extended to teachers and the administrative team. It also helped to reduce the early school leaving of these institutions. On the other hand, in schools where the students felt a weak sense of belonging, that they were not cared for, and that they were distant from teachers and the school, the motivation was low, and the students felt detached from the educational process.

It is important to highlight that the intervention programs focused on improving the psycho-emotional aspects and the well-being of the students had complete or partial success in bettering the school environment, student achievement, student motivation or in reducing the risk of students dropping out (Antúnez et al., 2020; Leifler et al., 2022; Rosário et al., 2016; Sánchez-Sansegundo et al., 2020; Santos Rego et al., 2018; Toland & Boyle, 2008; van der Meulen et al., 2014).

Socio-economic Status

Family structure has been found to have an important influence on student achievement. Bussu et al. (2022) found that larger families had fewer educational resources allocated to each child, which resulted in lower school achievement. Nusinovici et al. (2018) noted that parental divorce was associated with lower school performance for children experiencing difficulties at school. Finally, Roy and Rutter (2006) found that children living in institutional care were more likely to have severe difficulties in school achievement and higher rates of early school leaving.

Migration background increased the likelihood of underachievement in all studies which analysed this social component (Mielityinen et al.; Nießen et al., 2020; Strand, 2004; Tempelaar et al., 2014; Vandevelde et al., 2015), revealing a consistent pattern of influence.

Low educational level of parents was negatively associated with children's achievement and increased the risk of early school leaving, a finding that was consistent across the literature (Bussu et al., 2022; Hakkarainen et al., 2015; Nusser, 2021; Tarabini et al., 2019).



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Parents' low socioeconomic status was consistently associated with underachievement and high risk of early school leaving (Bussu et al., 2022; Heers et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2009; Nießen et al., 2020; Pagerols et al., 2022; Tarabini et al., 2019; Tempelaar et al., 2014; Vandeveldel et al., 2015). It is important to note that a lower socio-economic and socio-cultural background has relevant negative impacts on school engagement and increases the risk of dropping out, as shown by Tarabini et al. (2019).

3.4. Policies, gaps, and solutions

3.4.1 Policy approaches targeting cognition

The analysis of the profiles of students in the Vocational track and in the Academic track in Finland and its implications presented by Hakkarainen et al. (2015) showed a tendency for vulnerable groups to be in the Vocational track. It also demonstrated that these students had significantly more difficulties in mathematics and reading compared to students in the Academic track. It also showed that four times more students in the vocational track dropped out of school than students in the Academic track. In a more recent study, Liinamaa et al. (2022) concluded that students' intentions to drop out was higher in the Vocational track than in the Academic track. The paper also mentions an educational reform from 2017 that increased the pressure on students on the Academic track; their grades became a determining factor for placement in higher-level education. That was associated with high rates of student burnout and increased the importance of adolescents' track decisions.

The use of gamification in the Spanish Curricular Diversification Program, which was discontinued due to legislative changes, was perceived as a measure that opened up the curriculum and, being flexible, created opportunities for teachers to integrate areas and work together. It is reported as an excellent experience by the student whose life story was investigated (Guerrero-Puerta & Guerrero, 2021).

Heers et al. (2015) studied the effects of community schools, which provide extra school time and activities, in The Netherlands. The study focused on care students and children of parents with lower levels of education and found that community schools had a weak positive effect on underachievement. More relevant to policy, it found contrary results in the effects of the proposed care activities – they supported the results of care students, but not those of children of parents with a lower level of education (non-care pupils), drawing attention to the need of devising selective activities that take into account differences between the groups.

Looking at the effects of educational policies that allow grade skipping for some students, Gronostaj et al. (2016) concluded that grade skippers achieved as well as their older peers.

Inclusion of students with autistic spectrum disorder in the UK is supported by a local ASD Advisory Teacher. However, Moyse and Porter (2015) observed that for these students to be included, it is not enough to guarantee the qualification of the teachers and their correct attitudes when working with autism spectrum children.

Student retention policies should consider the study of Pagerols et al. (2022) showing that repeaters are approximately three times more likely to underachieve when compared to their peers.



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3.4.2 Gaps identified in existing research

Possible gaps in the found literature include the exploration of early childhood education and care in educational trajectories, the consideration of the effects of technologies (educational and other) on students' cognitive aspects and in school achievement, a deeper exploration of the influences of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds on cognitive aspects related to school achievement and school dropout, one that takes into account inequality and well-being, and finally, the absence of literature that challenges a clinical, and medicalized perspective and approach on health-related conditions and their educational consequences.

3.4.3 Potential Solutions for Reducing the Impact of Cognition on Underachievement

As potential solutions to reduce the impact of cognitive aspects in underachievement, there were several successful intervention programs were found in the SRL. It is important to note that most successful programs are related to changing the student's self-perception of efficacy, or success, or his self-concept or point to a specific biological impairment.

Exercise-based treatment for children with reading difficulties: the program uses neuroscience informed exercises and activities to intervene in dyslexia and related learning disabilities. The intervention was associated with cognitive improvements and school achievement-related skills. It differs from the other two mainly because (Reynolds & Nicolson, 2007).

TERENCE Adaptive Learning System: an app used to support the learning process of students with Special Educational Needs. Increased motivation and improved computer skills (Cecilia & di Orio, 2016).

Narrative intervention for students with Williams syndrome: the intervention is based on retelling a TV cartoon story after individual instruction to improve the children's ability to express ideas. It generated longer and more complex stories (Diez-Itza et al., 2018).

Applying Cognitive Behavioural Methods to Retrain Children's Attributions for Success and Failure in Learning: The project aimed to change the way students perceived themselves and the way they explained their underachievement. The results were positive in school achievement, self-esteem, and motivation (Toland & Boyle, 2008).

Socio-educational program based on cooperative learning and family involvement: Aimed at developing children's self-image and satisfaction with the school subject and increasing family involvement. The project had a significant impact on study habits and motivation (Santos Rego et al., 2018).

R&R2 program: aimed to improve personal and emotional skills. It improved children's self-esteem and skills related to school achievement (Sánchez-Sansegundo et al., 2020).

SPIRALS: implemented with Roma students, based on self-regulated learning, aimed to develop cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement. The intervention improved emotional engagement,



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academic self-concept, perception of supportive climate, reading comprehension and academic achievement (Antúñez et al., 2020).

Promoting gipsy students engagement: aimed to develop motivations, self-perceptions and learning strategies. The project improved behavioural and cognitive engagement (Rosário et al., 2016).

Social Skill Group Training for Students with Neurodevelopmental Disabilities (SSGT): SSGT encompasses many intervention programs to improve social skills and behaviour. One application was studied, and students improved their academic achievement and attendance (Leifler et al., 2022).

The Pullout Program Day a Week School for Gifted Children: Gifted children take one day of the week to work with other gifted children. Teachers go deeper into the subject and faster in the teaching process. Children slightly improved their academic self-concept, and teachers reported significant improvement in academic achievement and socio-emotional behavioural problems (van der Meulen et al., 2014).

4.0 KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

- a) From the results of the SRL it is clear that most of the papers focus on IQ or other observations of intelligence and its relationship with school achievement. In this respect the literature is clear, all papers that have analysed the relationship between IQ, or some intelligence test, and school achievement have concluded that, in most scenarios, the higher the intelligence score of the children, the higher the probability that they will achieve better in school-related skills.
- b) Self-concept and other self-perception aspects were demonstrated to play a significant role in school achievement, a role that should be accounted for even because of how it related to other aspects and determinants.
- c) Research consistently associated ADHD to school underachievement. Literature that focused on the consequences of the condition and on how it is dealt with (diagnose, treatment, strategies). Besides ADHD, several other health-related or medical conditions appear in the literature (e.g. ASD, being born premature, etc.). Cognitive aspects with an impact on school achievement have often been researched from a health/medical/clinical perspective.
- d) Although literature studying early school leaving is found, the literature reviewed for this determinant disproportionally focuses on school achievement.
- e) The SRL highlights the interplays between cognitive aspects and well-being, socio-emotional, and socio-economic aspects when it comes to understand the effects on school achievement and school drop out.



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Horizon Europe



The Impact of Cultural Factors on Early School Leaving

Work Package	WP1 - Analysing causes and social determinants of underachievement
Identifier	
Task	Task 1.1 – Systematic Review on Social Determinants – Cultural Factors
Lead Beneficiary (for sub report)	Dublin City University – Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection (EQI)
Authors	Sarah Gardezi, Gerry McNamara, Joe O’Hara, Martin Brown & Aideen Cassidy
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Systematic Review on Social Determinants – Cultural Factors



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1.0 Introduction

Early school leaving (ESL), or dropping out of school before completion, can have significant negative effects on individuals and society as a whole. Those who leave early often have limited job prospects and lower income potential, which can lead to long-term economic disadvantages. Additionally, individuals who do not complete their education may experience social exclusion, and have fewer opportunities for personal growth and development. In terms of societal impact, early school leaving has been linked to higher crime rates, poorer health outcomes, higher public and social costs and lower productivity and growth (Eurydice, 2014). Education is fundamental human right and serves as a crucial foundation for success in life. European countries have pledged to decrease the percentage of individuals leaving school early to under 9% by 2030 (European Council, 2021).

According to Eurostat (2021), the average percentage of 18 – 24-year-olds who left education and training early in the EU is 9.7%. However, the percentage varies widely across EU member states, ranging between 2.4% in Croatia and 15.3% in Romania. Ireland is among other few countries that have a percentage of early school leavers below 5%. In contrast, Spain and Italy are close behind Romania having a percentage around 13%. As of now, 16 EU member states have achieved the 2030 target of having a percentage of early school leavers below 9% still, the discrepancies between countries highlight the need for continued effort to reduce early school leaving.

A considerable body of research highlights the social and economic implications of early school leaving on individuals and community (Bembich, 2019; Borgna & Struffolino, 2017; de Castro & Pereira 2019; Drăghicescu et al., 2021; Fehérvári, 2020; Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2022; Traag & van der Velden, 2011). Several studies have attempted to investigate the patterns of ESL, factors promoting or reducing ESL and measures taken (Schmitsek, 2022; Brown et al., 2021; Bademci et al., 2020; Araújo et al., 2019, Doyle & Keane, 2019; Banks & Smyth, 2021). In this research, a substantial number of studies employed quantitative methods, utilising empirical or secondary data to disentangle and uncover the complex interplay of factors that cause underachievement and contribute to ESL (Bademci et al., 2020; Bayón-Calvo et al., 2021; Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2014; Borgna & Struffolino, 2017). Various studies have utilized qualitative methods to collect perspective from a range of stakeholders such as school principals, teachers, students, parents, marginalized, minority or immigrant students, and support workers). These studies include those by Alvarez-Roldan et al., 2018, Araújo et al., 2019, D'hondt et al., 2016, Fehérvári, 2020, García-Fernández et al., 2021, Guerra et al., 2019, Spiegler et al., 2018, and Van Den Berghe et al., 2022 to name a few (refer to table 1 for more details).

Several typologies are used to classify factors that play a role in early school leaving, with the two most frequently used being endogenous and exogenous factors, as well as family (socioeconomic status, single parent, education level of parents, parents' professional career, culture) school-level (school climate, school size, quality of teachers and the availability of learning resources), and individual (cognitive ability, language



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ability, age and gender) factors (Brown et al., 2021; Hamilton, 2013; Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2022; Tarabini et al., 2019). To simplify and merge these two classifications, we can use the taxonomy used in a Eurydice Report (2014) 'Tackling Early Leaving from Education and Training'. In the report, factors contributing to ESL are classified into two sets, family, gender, migration and socioeconomic factors and Education system related factors. We can say that exogenous factors (outside the education system) include all individual and family-level factors while endogenous factors include school (workshop, meetings, and programmes for family involvement, extra-curricular opportunities partnership between school and local businesses and organizations) and national level factors (policies and policy-measures to ensure equitable and inclusive education). These factors are inextricably interwoven and often studies deal with them collectively or at the most one-group of factors together.

This report is one of the outcomes of the Horizon Europe 'Project Policies and Practices based on Scientific Research for Reducing underachievement and Early School Leaving in Europe' (SCIREARLY), which is a consortium of eleven partners from Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain and the UK. Eurostat (2021) reports that the partners have varying rates of early school leaving and have implemented various measures to address the issue, which are ongoing. Nevertheless, there are higher rates of ESL among vulnerable groups such as pupils with an immigrant background and the Roma community, it is essential to understand the role of social determinants in underachievement and consequently, in ESL. The SCIREARLY project aims to address the issue of underachievement as a contributing factor to ESL, which has not been thoroughly studied yet. To achieve this goal, a systematic review is conducted to examine the social determinants of underachievement, including institutional, socioeconomic, cognitive, linguistic, gender, psycho-emotional, and well-being and produce a series of reports like this one dealing with one factor at a time. Such an analysis has not been systematically carried out in recent studies. This report exclusively focuses on the cultural factors that can cause underachievement and influence ESL. Using the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews) technique, the report presents an overview on cultural factors leading to ESL and focuses on answering the following research question.

What does literature say about the Cultural factors and root causes of underachievement in relation to ESL? The first part of the report provides the context and background to the study and the project followed by a section on the definition of the culture that guided the review, literature search and screening methodology. In the next section, the background to the literature included in the report is presented in a table. Section 3 presents the themes that emerged from the systematic literature review, a brief discussion on the interplay between cultural factors and other social determinants of underachievement and ESL and policies, gaps and solutions. Section 4 summarises the whole discussion and highlights the key takeaways from the systematic review. The last section has references to the literature used.

2.0 Methodology for the implementation of the social determinant



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2.1 Definition of culture that guided the search

Defining ‘culture’ can be complex, as it is a term with multiple interpretations. To establish boundaries for our review, we deliberated and agreed upon a specific definition of culture before commencing the review process. The resulting definition is a combination of several definitions.

Culture, as Frierson et al. (2010) define it, is a complex concept that encompasses a set of learned and shared behaviours, values, customs, and beliefs that are unique to a specific group or society (p. 75). Additionally, culture has a cognitive component that involves ways of knowing, which refers to how people approach learning, problem solving, and knowledge construction and transmission across generations (Fetterman, cited in Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008, p.3). This cognitive aspect of culture is relevant to how students think, learn, and make meaning in the classroom (Brown et al., 2018).

The term ‘culture’ includes the entire way of existence of a community or group. This involves their clothing, dietary habits, customs surrounding marriage and family, employment practices, religious observances, recreational activities, and artistic creations. It is also evident in their language, thoughts, and behaviours, as well as through physical objects like artwork, literature, landmarks, museums, and social interactions, including, decision-making, relationships, and shared experiences (Altrichter et al., 2021).

We carried out this review following the guidelines set forth by the preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews (PRISMA). These guidelines enhance the replicability, validity, transparency and adequacy of systematic reviews (Moher et al., 2009) therefore, the selection and extraction procedures closely followed PRISMA statement, which provides a set of well-defined stages that ensure accuracy of the research process. The consortium partners jointly created a review protocol with regard to the article selection criteria, search strategies and screening procedures. To ensure that our review meets the highest standards, we strictly adhered to the PRISMA guideline checklist. By following PRISMA, we aim to improve the replicability and quality assurance of our review process.

2.2 Databases and Search Strategies

For the purpose of this review, a systematic search was performed on three electronic databases – Web of Science, Scopus, and PsycINFO – covering the period from 2003 to 2023. These databases were selected due to their extensive data sources and user-friendly navigation system. The search terms were developed collaboratively and shared with the consortium partners for review. Several searches were carried out on these databases between January and February 2023 using the following terms: (Culture, cultural factors, cultural identity, ethnic disparities, cultural competence, cultural sensitivity) AND (Academic achievement, at-risk youth) AND (Early school dropout, early school leaving, early school departure, school retention, school disengagement). The specified search terms were combined using Boolean operators.



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2.3 Screening

Following the primary literature searches, each study's title and abstract were reviewed to determine its potential relevance. Subsequently, studies that passed the initial screening stage were further evaluated for eligibility. A comprehensive illustration of the screening and study selection process is presented in the PRISMA flow diagram (Fig. 1).

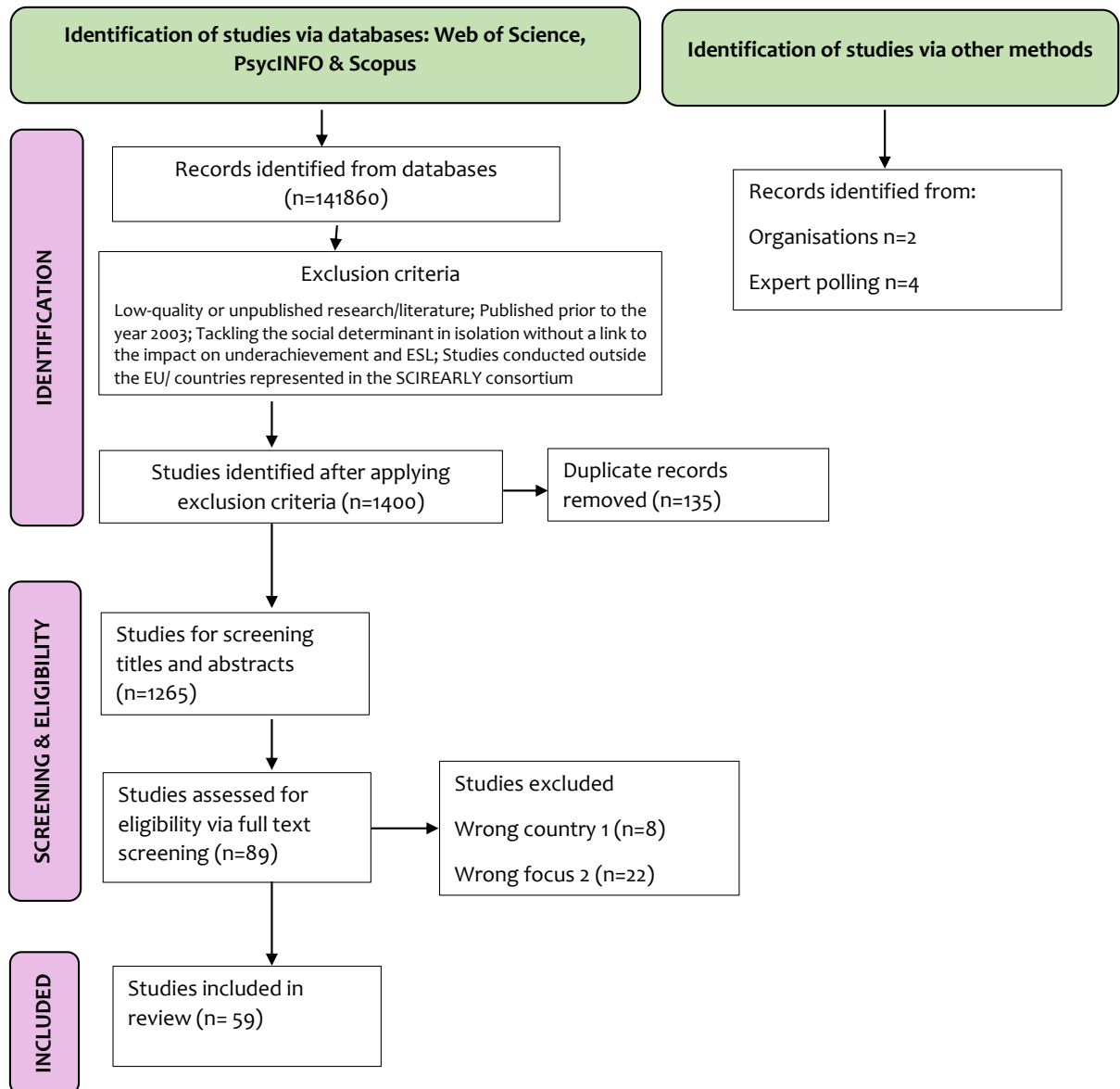
After applying the inclusion/exclusion criteria, a total 1400 studies were generated from three databases (Web of Science, n=744; Scopus, n=447, PsycINFO, n=209), out of these 135 studies were excluded due to duplication and lack of full text using Zotero. Screening of the titles and abstracts resulted in the exclusion of studies deemed unsuitable for the review. After this initial screening, altogether 89 studies were considered for the full text review, 8 studies were further excluded for comparing learning and achievement patterns or ESL reasons of European countries with countries outside Europe (wrong country) and 22 for focusing on use of IT resources, MOOC or Cyber-bullying or not focusing directly on ESL or achievement (wrong focus). Consequently, 59 studies were identified and included in the present review.

The review also included four papers that were selected through expert polling. Three papers were chosen for their strong relevance to culturally responsive assessment (see Brown et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2022; Young et al., 2018), while one paper was selected as a foundational work on culturally responsive school leadership (see Khalifa et al., 2016).



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Figure 1: The PRISMA flow diagram for searching articles about cultural factors determining Early School Leaving



3.0 Findings of the systematic review

3.1 Background to the type of literature included in the systematic review

	Study	Objectives	Place	Size of sample	Method used
1	Alvarez et al. (2021)	To highlight the benefits brought about by a learning-through-the-arts project aimed at creating links between the cultural heritage of students from diverse backgrounds and the fundamental aims of school instruction.	Spain	20 fourth-grade students (ten girls and ten boys aged 9–10) benefited from the experience under analysis	Observations and reflections as well as records of the process and end products of the activities carried out by the schoolchildren participating in the project. A socio-demographic questionnaire and a brief interview on cultural identity and school interests were administered to the children in order to get to know them better.
2	Alvarez-Roldan et al. (2018)	To explore the reasons why Gitano adolescents are disproportionately more likely to dropout of high school than their non-Gitano neighbours	Spain	63 students, teachers and parents. The participants' age ranged from 13 to 50 years.	Concept Mapping
3	Araújo et al. (2019)	To investigate possible relationships between how principals perceive both ESL and the measures to deal with it and the culture of the school as an identity of differentia specific (ethos).	Portugal	Four Principals	Semi-structured interviews of principals of upper secondary schools in Porto



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4	Bademci et al. (2020)	To present the findings of surveys- factors leading to early school leaving and to contribute to the development of a novel methodology that fosters equity, inclusivity and equality in education where marginalised children feel valued.	Bulgaria, Italy, Malta, Romania & Turkey	796 teachers and 900 students from Bulgaria, Italy, Malta, Romania and Turkey completed standard electronic surveys. The teachers' survey consisted of secondary school teachers from Bulgaria (N = 147), Italy (N = 105), Malta (N = 71), Romania (n = 261), and Turkey (N = 212). For the second survey, 250 secondary school students from Bulgaria, 109 from Italy, 67 from Malta and 401 students from Turkey took part in the study.	Two online surveys with teachers and students
5	Banks & Smyth (2021)	This paper explores how these approaches (school completion programme & Youth reach programme) can inform mainstream school culture by improving teacher-student relationships and addressing barriers to learning for students who experience marginalisation in school	Ireland	A postal survey of all SCP coordinators and chairpersons of the school clusters and all Youth reach coordinators and in-depth interviews of staff working in the School Completion Programme (ten clusters) and staff and young people participating in the National Youth reach Programme (ten clusters)	In-depth interviews and postal survey
6	Bayón-Calvo et al. (2021)	To analyse some endogenous factors (scholastic performance, educational attainment or holistic needs of students) behind ESL.	Spain	All regions	Quantitative analysis of secondary data (regional level data collected by the Ministry of Education)
7	Behtoui (2017)	To explore the determinants of the educational expectations of young people in disadvantaged urban areas	Sweden	2033 students in 50 schools in their final year of 'compulsory school' (ninth grade) and the first year of 'secondary school'	Survey (as a part of the RESL.eu project, Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe, in Sweden)
8	Bembich (2019)	To examine the theoretical implications associated with the study of the phenomenon of early school leaving amongst foreign-born students.	Italy	Review	Review



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9	Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir (2014)	To examine the contribution of parenting practices to students' completion of upper secondary school through their school engagement.	Iceland	N=835 Icelandic youth, 54% female	A longitudinal study with data collected at three stages. 1. Questionnaires 2. Standardized National Achievement Test
10	Borgna & Struffolino (2017)	To examine gender differences in early school leaving, assessing the role of previous scholastic performance, parental education, and differential employment opportunities.	Italy	N= 1508 & N = 5233	Quantitative analysis of secondary data sets: Early School Leaving Dynamics Survey (ESLD) Participation and Labour, Unemployment Survey (PLUS) conducted by the Italian national research institute for vocational training (ISFOL).
11	Broc (2018)	To transfer research on academic achievement in compulsory secondary education (CSE) students (12-18 years) from personal factors to others of a psychosocial or sociological type and to develop a brief measurement instrument to predict academic achievement	Spain	317 students of Secondary Education	A questionnaire (Family, psychosocial and contextual settings)
12	Brown et al. (2021)	To explore Early Leaving this paper applies a conceptual framework of five key categories (personal challenges, social relationships, family circumstances, institutional features of school/work, and structural factors) to consider the comparative contexts of risks to Early Leaving in Spain and the UK	UK & Spain	77 interviews and focus groups with 309 educational stakeholders across 21 settings involved in the European Commission funded project [Orienta4YEL]. The young people interviewed were aged between 12 and 18 years old	Interviews and focus groups
13	Casquilho-Martins & Matela (2021)	To analyse the intervention experiences of teams with immigrant children and young people at risk	Portugal	Five professionals working in multidisciplinary teams intervening with immigrant children and young people (age range 25 - 56 years)	Semi-structured interviews
14	Cunningham (2019)	To report on the extent to which teachers' discourses reveal power and control over children's language linguistic repertoires in school (how languages beyond English are dealt with in schools)	UK	Interviews from 31 participants	Interviews from a range of roles in schools: Head teachers, deputy head, teachers, class teachers, EAL coordinator, SEN coordinator, family liaison and students



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15	D'hondt et al. (2016)	To study the interplay of perceived ethnic discrimination by teachers, parents' ethnic socialization practices, and ethnic minority students' sense of academic futility.	Flanders (Belgium)	1181 ethnic minority students (50.6 % girls; mean age = 15.5) in 33 schools	a written questionnaire and academic results provided by the schools.
16	de Castro & Pereira (2019)	To evaluate the relationship between internal working models of students, their perceptions of the quality of their relationships with teachers, and their academic performance (relational dimension)	Portugal	A sample of 305 students from the 8th grade of regular education and the Alternative Curricular Course.	The study uses three measures: (i) the "Inventory of Attachment in Childhood and Adolescence" (IACA) measure, (ii) the "Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment" (IPPA) measure—concerning the attachment to teacher", and (iii) a socio-demographic questionnaire
17	Derrington (2007)	To identify and examine the range of variables associated with Gypsy Traveller students' engagement with secondary education.	England	A longitudinal study of 44 Gypsy Traveller students was conducted across several regions of England between 2000 and 2005.	Phenomenological design
18	Dollmann & Weißmann (2020)	To investigate how enrolment and completion rates change over time - from the end of lower secondary education until the end of upper secondary education—and how this affects ethnic inequalities in educational outcomes	Germany	The study draws on the German part of the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Survey in Four European Countries (CILS4EU-DE). 144 schools, 271 school classes, and 5,013 students in the first wave in Germany (2011). A total of 5,820 respondents participated in the sixth wave (2016).	Longitudinal Survey
19	Downes (2011)	The study focuses on school climate and emotional support issues to prevent early school leaving	Ireland	Interviews with senior government officials and secondary school management representatives across eight European countries	Qualitative interviews
20	Doyle & Keane (2019)	To examine early school leaving from the perspective of parents of early school leavers in an inner-city local authority housing estate in the Republic of Ireland living with the challenges of significant marginalisation.	Ireland	Nine parents of early school leavers	in-depth, semi structured interviews



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21	Drăghicescu et al. (2021)	To investigate teachers' perceptions and attitudes regarding ESL	Italy, Lithuania, Portugal & Romania	256 teachers from the four country (Italy, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania).	a questionnaire addressed to teachers and focusgroups with teachers.
22	Fehérvári (2020)	To explore the school (teaching) practices in the (sample) schools and identify risk factors that may increase or decrease the chances of leaving school early.	Hungary	83 primary schools in Budapest and the number of respondents (N= 1255) teachers	questionnaire-based survey
23	Fernández-Batanero (2014)	To identify effective practices in education in order to address the issue of failure amongst pupils in secondary schools. (strategies for inclusion in the face of social exclusion)	Spain	47 in-depth interviews with the management team, staff in the Guidance Department and teachers involved in the development of the various measures for differentiation were carried out and 12 classes were observed	Case study- Document analysis, interviews and classroom observation
24	Fredricks et al. (2016)	To examine relationship among context, student engagement, and adjustment.	Finland	Review	Review (a review cum foreword to a special issue of European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction, Earli)
25	García-Fernández et al. (2021)	To know the relationship between teachers' beliefs about immigrant students and their possible influence on academic achievements.	Spain	167 teachers of Early Childhood, Elementary and High School Education	Survey questionnaire
26	Gil-Flores et al. (2011)	To examine the influence of gender, educational attainment and family related variables on the academic aspirations of students.	Spain	3963 students and 3842 families	Academic Achievement Assessment in Andalusia and questionnaires
27	Guerra et al. (2019)	To examine the role of perceived discrimination and acculturation orientations on immigrant children's achievement and well-being in the school context.	Portugal	Immigrant (n = 229), immigrant descendant (n = 196), and native Portuguese children (n = 168) from 4th to 6th grade participated in the study.	Self-report questionnaire



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28	Hamilton (2013)	To examine (some of the) factors which may impact upon migrant children's social and emotional well-being, and thus their learning (whether migrant children have access to inclusive educational and social opportunities, are making successful transitions within their new school environments and their lives beyond the school setting)	UK (North Wales)	40 children (age of the children ranged from 3 to 11 years), 37 teachers, eight EAL teachers, nine Eastern European parents; and six community practitioners	Qualitative-interpretive paradigm - a blend of grounded theory, ethnography and case study. The methods included: interviews, questionnaires, documentary analysis and observation.
29	Hartas (2016)	To examine the contribution of young people's psychosocial and background factors and home environment to their educational aspirations in the UK.	UK	The sample included 5020 young people in Wave 2 and 5911 in Wave 3 with the final sample including children who participated in both waves (N = 4427).	Quantitative analysis of secondary data that came from Understanding Society, or the United Kingdom Household Longitudinal Study. Self-completion questionnaire a pencil-and-paper instrument for young people aged 10–15
30	Hiller (2014)	To explore dynamics between gender inequality and cultural norms along the process of development.	France	180 countries	Quantitative analysis of secondary data: Female Labour Force Participation and Economic Development data
31	Johansson & Strietholt (2019)	To explore the hypothesis of global convergence by addressing the issues of the globalisation of curricula and achievement.	Sweden & Germany	59 countries that participated in at least two cycles	Quantitative analysis of secondary data. The study uses secondary school data from five assessment cycles (1995 - 2011) of the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS).
32	Kaukko et al. (2022)	To investigate what students with a migrant background in Finnish comprehensive schools report as difficult, and how they succeed in overcoming these difficulties.	Finland	In total 347 student responses were given in 2016, and 291 in 2021. Age range 7 -16+ years	The data used for this article consists of two similar surveys collected in Finnish comprehensive schools: the first in a paper-and-pen survey in 2016 and the second in a combined online and paper-and-pen survey five years later, in 2021.
33	Khattab & Modood (2018)	To investigate educational attainment of Muslim boys and girls within the British educational system.	UK	8343 at KS2, KS3 and GCSE results and 3559 in the analysis of being at a university	Quantitative analysis of secondary data (longitudinal study of young people in England)



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34	Lamonica et al. (2020)	To investigate the effectiveness of a small experimental pilot(an intervention aimed at reducing early school leaving while supporting standard school curricula) addressed to foreign adolescents with low language skills and high dropout risk in lower secondary school in Turin, North-West Italy	Italy	Total 21 students with 14 years average age (11 have been included in the treated group and 10 in the control group by complete random assignment)	Experimental randomization approach (A pilot study part of a larger project, funded by the national AMIF (Asylum Migration and Integration Fund), aimed at preventing Early School Leaving among foreign adolescents in Italy).
35	Lavrentsova & Valkov (2019)	To reveal the risks that increase the propensity of Bulgarian students to ESL, with a particular focus on those SES influences and ethnic background which have the most important effect. And to identify the interventions and tools for prevention.	Bulgaria	152 students studying in 5th, 6th, and 7th grade (11-17 years old).	Questionnaire
36	Luu et al. (2019)	To present how Roma children in three Budapest tanodas, and their parents, cope with the adversity associated with being a stigmatized and discriminated group with low socioeconomic status.	Hungary	17 tanoda students between the ages of 11 and 17 (44.4% girls; 55.6% boys, mean age: 14.0) and 14 of their parents.	Interviews
37	Mäkelä & Kalalahti (2020)	To explore the agency of migrant background girls during the last year of comprehensive school and achieve insights into their bounded agency experienced during educational transitions.	Finland	34 15-year-old migrant background girls	Interviews
38	Mateos-Claros et al. (2019)	To analyse the differences in performance due to the different languages and cultures in the multicultural society	Spain	a sample of 501 students of the third year of Early Childhood Education was used	Questionnaire
39	McCulloch (2017)	To examine the trajectories followed by young people's educational aspirations in England over the age range from 13 to 16 years and their relationship to educational achievement.	England	15, 770 young people participated in the first wave of interviews of the original study and 8222 in the second wave	Quantitative analysis of secondary data (LSYPE Longitudinal Study)



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40	Mendez (2015)	To analyse whether country differences in the non-cognitive skills or qualities that children are encouraged to learn at home, i.e. differences in culture, account for country differences in student performance.	Spain	PISA scores of second generation immigrants using the 2003, 2006, 2009 and 2012 reports of the PISA, coordinated by the OECD,	Quantitative analysis of secondary data. Comparing PISA language, mathematics and science scores of second-generation immigrants of different origins living in Australia, Austria, Belgium, Finland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Switzerland.
41	Miulescu & Ruth (2021)	This paper explores the importance of different parameters influencing young people's Early Leaving of school or training (EL) in applying a five-category research framework, which includes: personal challenges, family circumstances, institutional risks, social relationships and structural risk factors.	Germany & Romania	43 interviews and focus groups with 111 teachers and 203 young people	Interview and focus groups
42	Montero-Sieburth & Turcatti (2022)	To identify the latest researched practices for preventing school disengagement resulting in Early School Leaving (ESL) within the European Union	UK	review	review
43	Nayir et al. (2019)	To explore culturally responsive assessment policies, professional development and practices that were administered to school principals in four European countries (Austria, Ireland, Norway and Turkey).	Austria, Ireland, Norway & Turkey	Austria (n = 100), Ireland (n = 120), Norway (n=29), and Turkey (n =120). School principals	Survey questionnaire
44	Nortvedt et al. (2020)	To investigate how migrant students are affected by assessment, both summative and formative, at the classroom level, with a focus on culturally responsive assessment	Austria, Ireland, Norway & Turkey	Review	Review
45	O'Connell & Freney (2011)	To explore early school-leaving in a sample of second-level schools by applying Theory of Planned Behaviour	Ireland	20 post-primary schools- 1131 boys (60.3%) and girls (39.7%) of mean age 14 years and 7 months	Survey questionnaire



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46	Oczlon et al. (2021)	To investigate the relation between four facets of cultural pluralism climate (learning about multicultural topics, learning about intercultural relations, interest shown by teachers, interest shown by non-immigrant students) and immigrant students' self-esteem, academic self-concept, achievement and perceived discrimination.	Austria	A sample of 700 immigrant students. Participants' age ranged from 10 to 16 years (Mage= 12.62 years; SD = 1.12; 45.4% female) from 87 Austrian secondary school classes	Data was collected through paper–pencil questionnaires
47	Piechurska-Kuciel (2013)	To analyse the relationship between adolescents' social support network and L2 achievement	Poland	Polish secondary grammar school students (N = 609), (384 girls and 225 boys) whose mean age was 17.50.	Questionnaire
48	Rodríguez-Izquierdo (2022)	To investigate teachers' (Primary Education teachers, Compulsory Secondary Education teachers, and Baccalaureate) perspectives of school dropout factors and the perceived inspiring practices to prevent ESL.	Spain	15 teachers age range 33–62 (M = 46).	Qualitative methods: included in-depth, open-ended 15 interviews with teachers and 3 focus groups.
49	Schmitsek (2022)	To explore educational experiences of dropouts in England, Denmark and Hungary, and compares the measures related to ESL.	England, Denmark & Hungary	28 interviews with students in three different country contexts	Empirical data were collected from observations and interviews
50	Schotte et al. (2018)	To investigate the association of cultural identity with several indicators of academic achievement and psychological adaptation in immigrant adolescents	Germany	N = 3894, 51% female, Mage= 16.24	Quantitative analysis of secondary data from the National Educational Panel Study (NEPS) a longitudinal study conducted in Germany. Student questionnaire data and test scores from the 2010/11 school year provide the basis of their analyses.
51	Spiegler et al. (2018)	To examine whether changes in ethnic and national identity predict school adjustment rather than vice versa.	Germany	(N = 146; MT1 = 10.42 years, 46.6% male)	Quantitative analysis of Questionnaire completed by children. Data were drawn from a study on resilience and positive development among Turkish immigrant-origin youth in Germany (SIMCUR project)



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52	Strand & Winston (2008)	To assess the nature and level of pupils' educational aspirations and to elucidate the factors that influence these aspirations.	England	Over 800 pupils, aged 12-14 completed a questionnaire assessing pupils' experience of home, school and their peers. A sub-sample of 48 pupils selected by teachers to reflect ethnicity and ability levels in individual schools also participated in detailed focus group interviews.	Questionnaire & Focus group
53	Suárez et al. (2016)	To compare homework involvement and academic achievement in a sample of native and immigrant students, as well as to study immigrant students' relationship between homework involvement and Math achievement.	Spain	1328 students, 10–16 years old from Spanish families (85.6%) or immigrant students or students of immigrant origin (14.4%) from South America, Europe, Africa, and Asia.	Homework Survey: One survey part is answered by students, other survey part by parents and the third one by teachers.
54	Tarabini et al. (2019)	To explore the impact of secondary schools in student (dis)engagement and subsequent opportunities to succeed in school	Spain	In-depth case studies in five secondary schools. Interviews with teaching staff (N 47) and students (N 54), focus groups of teachers (N 5) and students (N 6)	Case study (interviews & focus groups)
55	Traag & Van der Velden (2011)	To explain early school leaving in lower secondary education in the Netherlands, taking into account background characteristics, family resources and school composition factors at the same time.	Netherlands	19,254 students from a random sample of 108 schools	Quantitative analysis of secondary data of a representative longitudinal survey carried out in the Netherlands by Statistics Netherlands and academic researchers.
56	Van Caudenberg et al. (2020)	To contribute to a more nuanced understanding of school belonging by focusing on the experiences of young people with a first- or second-generation migration background in mainstream secondary education and alternative learning arenas	Belgium (Flanders)	34 young people	semi-structured in-depth interviews



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57	Van Den Berghe et al. (2022)	To explore the intersections of influencing factors on the process of school dropout among students with a migration background from a more holistic perspective (causes, important actors and support to stay in schools)	Belgium	15 support workers interviews	In-depth interviews
58	Vryonides (2007)	To investigate the effects of non-monetary forms of capital (social & cultural) to provide explanations for educational processes relating to post-secondary choice making.	Cyprus	450 students graduating from secondary schools (questionnaire) & 28 parents (in-depth interviews)	Mixed methods (questionnaire and in-depth interviews)
59	Wolfgramm et al. (2014)	To examine the relation between ethnically based rejection sensitivity and academic achievement	Germany & Switzerland	936 immigrant students of ninth grade	Quantitative study: Literacy test and comprehensive packet of questionnaires



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3.2 Themes emerging from the systematic review.

Cultural factors can have a significant impact on academic achievement and early school leaving. To some extent, we can link this discussion to Franz Boas's theory of cultural determinism that suggests that human behaviour is determined by culture and cultural influences. It posits that individuals are largely shaped by the cultural values, beliefs, and practices of the society or community in which they live, and that culture plays a dominant role in shaping their thoughts, emotions, behaviours and even identity. Cultural norms and expectations, in some cases, have the controlling tendency and can limit individual agency and freewill. Van Den Berghe et al. (2022), as a result of their study with support workers, ascribe cultural determinism as a reason for early school leaving. The support workers attributed ESL to individual conflicts between students based on ethnicity, religion, culturally inspired gender roles, a culturally coloured perspective about education, and parents' lower educational aspirations (p. 9). The systematic review of literature identified several cultural factors that can influence learning motivation, achievement patterns, and ultimately lead to early school leaving. These factors are grouped into the following five themes:

1. Cultural values, beliefs and behaviours (of both students and parents)
2. Culture and Social barriers
3. Culture and Academic barriers
4. Discrimination and prejudice
5. Cultural norms around gender and education

3.2.1 THEME 1. CULTURAL VALUES, BELIEFS AND BEHAVIOURS (OF STUDENTS AND PARENTS)

This section will explore the literature that examines the impact of cultural behaviours, values and beliefs on the complex relationship between parents and students and the role these play in patterns of early school leaving within Europe. It will examine the connected concepts of expectation and aspiration and seek to link these to issues of capacity, agency and capital in all of their various manifestations. Mindful of the expansive definition of culture outlined earlier in the report, while issues of migration, ethnicity, and inclusion will emerge organically from the literature this section explicitly does not conflate culture with any of these concepts. The section provides an overview of the theoretical landscape identified in the literature examining the discrete though connected areas of parental and student attitudes and expectations.

Background and theoretical framing

There is widespread recognition that parents play a significant, if not pivotal, role in the academic success of their children (Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2014; Hartas, 2016). While the fact of parental influence is broadly accepted, there is some debate about the mechanisms whereby parental actions, beliefs and values impact on achievement across the educational continuum (McCulloch, 2017). Drawing on the theoretical framing of Human Capital Theory a study by Traag and Van der Velden (2011, p. 47-48) exploring early school leaving in the Netherlands suggest that parental influence is inextricably linked with family resources and that these draw on four discrete types of 'capital' :

- Economic
- Human
- Cultural
- Social

In essence, they argue that parental capacity to navigate the educational system in a manner that is beneficial to their children depends not only on financial status but also educational background, integration, cultural agency and broader social and familial relationships. (ibid).

This analysis finds echoes in the work of Vryonides (2007), Khattab and Modood (2018), Hartas (2016) and Behtoui (2017) who suggest that the concept of capital, and in particular cultural and social capital, is central to the linked ideas of educational aspirations and expectations. Behtoui ((2017, citing Buchmann and Dalton, 2002, p. 101) argues that taking account of 'educational expectations – realistic goals – and aspirations – ideal ones' (p. 487)' is particularly important as,

'idealistic' aspirations and 'realistic' expectations 'are highly correlated and yield similar results', and explain a substantial portion of the variation in the future educational achievements of individuals (p. 486).

Parental Aspirations and Expectations

In a study exploring the impact of the educational ambitions of immigrant parents on the school experience of their children, Dollmann and Weißmann (2020) provide a useful, practical examination of the aspiration / expectation dynamic in German education. They state 'There is consistent evidence that many immigrant and ethnic minority groups have comparably high educational aspirations, a finding also known as the 'immigrant optimism hypothesis' (p. 34). This aspiration ultimately results in both significantly higher achievement at the top end of the scale (p. 43) and comparably higher dropout rates (p. 34). They suggest that one of the reasons for the latter are what they term 'information asymmetries' (ibid) which result in parents making choices based on incomplete systemic knowledge. Arguably, these asymmetries are an example of a deficit in cultural capital (Hartas, 2016) and impact on parental beliefs and behaviours in all communities, but perhaps more so in marginalised groups.

There is some evidence of this in a study conducted with the Roma community in Hungary (Luu, Boreczky & Gyori, 2019) which explores the manner in which parents seek to leverage the education system in order to enhance the life opportunities of their children. Traditionally excluded from social and educational structures, parents have high aspirations for their children but rely on incomplete knowledge in order to translate these aspirations into realistic expectations. To bridge this gap, they adopt strategies that focus on 'squeezing out' attention, assistance and resources (p.131) relying on engagement to access information and action. This proactive approach explicitly rejects

a ‘deficit’ framing of their approach to education (p. 121). In addition to this, they also seek to activate existing family and community networks and resources to whatever extent they can (p. 118).

The Roma experience has many commonalities with that of other communities reported in the literature. The reliance on family and other networks is highlighted in studies from Sweden (Behtoui, 2017) the UK (Khattab & Modood, 2018), Poland (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2013) and Iceland (Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2014). Behtoui (2017) specifically links the capacity to access resources, information and networks to Bourdieu’s (2001) concept of ‘social capital’ differentiating between ‘within family’ and ‘extra-familial’ (p. 489). Highlighting the role of ‘social stratification’ (ibid), this study provides concrete examples of how families from higher socioeconomic strata benefit from access to knowledge and resources that ensure better school outcomes. The availability of extra-familial parental networks, engaged school staff, positive peer groups and a wide range of supportive structures provides both support and information. In addition, the presence of high parental educational aspirations (Strand & Winston, 2008) combined with an active engagement and the resources to facilitate and challenge students was considered to be pivotal in aligning aspirations with expectations (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2013).

This alignment can also be seen in Khattab and Modood’s 2018 study exploring the educational attainment of British Muslims and Strand and Winston’s 2008 work examining educational aspiration in Inner City British schools. Focusing on the issues of gender and expectation the 2018 study suggests that parental and student expectations play a critically important role in enhancing outcomes suggesting that the interplay of both has an explicitly positive impact at age 13-14 resulting in enhanced attainment in English Key stage 3 assessments (p. 243). This carries on through the remainder of secondary schooling resulting in enhanced higher education access patterns for Muslim women, a fact that the authors ascribe to the realistic expectation of parents that their daughters will move to post-secondary education as well as the cultural reality of higher parental involvement and less social independence in this group. As we will see later in this section, the agency of Muslim women and their proactive choice in the area of study and attainment is also important as is the interplay of their and their parents’ expectations as opposed to aspirations. Strand and Winston’s (2008) study similarly emphasises the importance of idealised aspiration in the early years of secondary education to school completion. Exploring aspiration across ethnic groups, the study addresses the complex interplay of discrimination, exclusion, cultural and social capital when examining the outcomes of schooling suggesting that traditionally marginalised groups adopt an attitude that might be identified with a model of ‘pragmatic rationality’ (Strand & Winston, 2008, p. 23) acknowledging deep seated social constraints while at the same time allowing for personal and familial agency. This latter point, and in particular the role of family attitudes to education and its impact on incidences of early school leaving will be explored in the next section.

Parental attitudes towards education

As we have seen, there is broad agreement across a wide range of studies that parents play a pivotal role in student academic achievement (Gil-Flores et al., 2011). In addition to the conceptualisation of this in terms of aspiration and achievement, there is also a realisation of the centrality of parental attitude to educational attainment (Mendez, 2015; Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2014; Broc, 2018). Luu, Boreczky & Gyori’s 2019 study on the Roma experience in Hungary demonstrated, amongst other things, that a positive parental attitude towards education was central to the efforts of this community to move beyond a deficit model of education. The challenges that emerged were not attitudinal but in terms of capacity and capital.

Studies by Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir (2014), Piechurska-Kuciel (2013), Mendez (2015) and Suárez et al. (2016) all suggest that a positive parental attitude towards education is at the centre of a complex web of interactions that

support student attainment. It can be argued that each of these studies looked at proxy measurements of parental attitude which broadly speaking can be summarised as involving an investment in time, resources, emotional stability and interest. Mendez's (2015) investigation of intergenerational transmission of skills considered essential to academic success, defined in this study as cognitive and non-cognitive, explicitly states that these are 'jointly determined by parental investments and environments at different stages of childhood' (p. 78). The importance of this can be seen in the research into Dutch early school leaving published by Traag and van der Velden (2011) which suggests that while cognitive capacity had a significant impact on school completion, some of the negative impacts of lower scores in this area can be ameliorated by parental attitudes and engagement. Specifically, they pointed out that

'Pupils with very supportive parents are up to 50% less likely to drop out of school compared to pupils with totally unsupportive parents' (p. 55).

Perhaps a key question here relates to what is meant by supportive parents? Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir's (2014) study of early school leaving in Iceland suggests that the most successful approach to parenting was what they chose to define as 'authoritative' in style. By this, they mean an approach to parenting that is marked by 'high acceptance, supervision and psychological autonomy granting' (p. 778). This combination of support, challenge and freedom is considered critical to facilitating engagement with learning and schooling, a process that they argue is central to reducing early school leaving. The concept of engaged and challenging parenting finds echoes in the work of Piechurska-Kuciel (2013) who suggests that academic success in a Polish context is built on inputs by engaged teachers, supportive peers and demanding parents.

This attitudinal focus often finds expression in specific activities. A study by Suárez et al. (2016) examines parental involvement in homework, differentiating between native and immigrant groups. Arguably, the engagement with homework can be taken as a proxy measure for parental attitude given the investment of time and possibly financial resources in the successful completion of these tasks. Of course, the challenge for immigrant parents might be one of capacity, whether it be educational, financial or indeed linguistic, rather than attitude so this measure should be approached with caution (p. 2). Indeed, the work of Hartas supports this caution arguing that

Families' cultural capital was a better predictor of young people's aspirations than were more educationally driven parent-child interactions (i.e., homework support, participation in extra-curricular activities/tutoring, parental interest in school). (2016, p. 1158)

Finally, the general value placed on education underpins many of the general studies around culture, beliefs and behaviour. The previously mentioned studies examining Muslim female and inner-city educational experiences in Britain (Khatab & Modood, 2018; Strand & Winston, 2008) both identify value placed by parents on education as being a critical factor in educational attainment and school completion. While identified subgroups, for example migrants and defined ethnic minorities, tended have parental attitudes that placed a high value on education it is interesting to note that in Strand and Winston's 2008 study white working-class families placed less overall value on continued engagement with formal schooling. This may have been as a result of extended, familial employment traditions that prioritised vocational education and apprenticeships over and above more formal learning environments or it may have been as a result of a perception on the part of more marginalised communities of the potentially transformational role the educational qualifications can play. Indeed, the 2018 study by Khatab and

Modood specifically notes the importance of this latter factor to the educational decisions of young Muslim women and it is to this area, the expectations and aspirations of students that we will now turn.

Student Aspirations and Expectations

When exploring reasons for early school leaving, Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir (2014) argue that the Icelandic data identifies the importance of student disengagement to the eventual decision to leave. Arguing that dropout is a process rather than an event, this study suggests that to properly understand student agency in this area we need to move beyond the narrow linking of engagement to behaviour alone (p. 780). This conceptualisation finds support in the work of Fredricks et al. (2016, p. 2) who suggest that engagement is multi-modal and has 'behavioural, emotional/affective and cognitive' elements. Students who are in danger of dropping out therefore need to be supported in addressing each of these domains. Indeed, each of these elements will have an impact on the manner in which students engage and arguably aspire and set expectations.

The differentiation between the idealised aspiration and the more realistic expectation and the process of setting both is a key challenge for students (Behtoui, 2017). This process can be made even more complex by the involvement of other stakeholders in the process, in particular parents, peers and teachers. Khattab and Modood's (2018) study suggests that students with more realistic expectations were able to navigate schooling more successfully than others. The expectation gap between parents and students can be a source of tension, however it is also important to recognise that parental expectation is often based on an aspiration for advancement that draws heavily on their own educational and social capital. Part of the challenge can be a lack of 'navigational capacity' (Strand and Winston, 2008) on the part of parents which often results from a lack of systemic knowledge. Dollmann and Weißmann (2020) demonstrate this when examining migrant parents' educational choices in a German context. Specifically they suggest that a lack of understanding of the VET option in the highly stratified German system, which may be based on a lack of comparable structures in their own educational experience, results in a situation where parental aspiration does not correlate with expectation and can result in disengagement and ultimately dropout. Part of the problem here is the lack of systemic 'isomorphism' (Johansson & Strietholt, 2019, p. 536) and the inability to correlate personal experiences across systems.

In this reality of conflicting demands and aspirations, student intentionality is often central to engagement and academic success. Khattab and Modood's 2018 study demonstrates how a highly 'instrumental' (p. 245) approach to education on the part of Muslim young people sees them, and young women in particular, progress through secondary education into higher education in order to enhance their social and economic position rather than necessarily broaden their educational horizons. Indeed, this study suggests that they are the 'most employment minded' (p. 249) of all groups surveyed. This instrumental approach can also be seen in the experience of Roma children in Hungary who seek to enhance their capacity to survive what is often hostile educational context either through 'social creativity' – the building of alliances, the taking on of identifiable roles – class clown or class leader or disruptive disengagement designed to enhance their social standing but with the connected problem of reducing educational attainment (Luu, Boreczky & Gyori, 2019, p. 129). This latter example connects to Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir's (2014) process of disengagement which ultimately results in dropout and all of the social challenges associated with that.

One key group who impact on student commitment to school are peers. Piechurska-Kuciel (2013) suggests that while they are the least important of the three major relationship nodes in schooling – the other two being parents and teachers – they are central to the capacity of students to commit and engage and to generate 'pro-social values' (p. 135). The impact of the absence of these values can be seen in Strand and Winston's study which suggests that the presence of a peer group who undervalue and actively denigrate the process and aspirations associated with

schooling leads to a process of partial disengagement and ultimately to complete disengagement and dropout. This can be a culturally specific experience, in this study it is seen as being most prevalent in the 'Black-Caribbean' (p. 1) community, or it can be experienced across cultural boundaries.

Ultimately, students can be helped to develop the cognitive and non-cognitive skills that see them emerge as resilient and engaged participants in schooling. Mendez's (2015, p. 79) identification of the 'conscientiousness personality factor' along with Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir's suggestion of a parenting style that facilitates the enhancement of personal autonomy and engagement on the part of the student are critical to their ultimate success in a range of education systems and demonstrate how structures, personalities and systems can be engineered to facilitate school completion rather than early school leaving.

3.2.2 THEME 2 - CULTURE AND SOCIAL BARRIERS

This section of the report provides an analysis of the most salient cultural and social obstacles that have been identified in the literature to affect ESL, examining the understanding of culture and interlinked social barriers and how these obstacles can affect students' ability to meaningfully engage in education. Within this a description of empirically sound initiatives that have been put in place to curtail these obstacles are also described, followed by recommendations for future research that can have a genuine impact on reducing the effects of cultural and social barriers on ESL. First, however, there is a need to distinguish between the often at times reciprocal and yet subtle differences between the terms *cultural* and *social barriers* as their effects on ESL are not always interpreted in the same way in the ESL literature (Van Caudenberg et al., 2020).

While cultural barriers can have a profound impact on both teachers and students attitudes toward the educational environment in which they occupy (Tarabini et al., 2019), these barriers are often associated with refugees (Casquilho-Martins & Matela, 2021) and other cultural minorities such as the Roma (Montero-Sieburth & Turcatti, 2022) and the Irish Traveller community (OECD, 2020). However, regardless of a student's cultural affiliation, social barriers on the other hand, can also relate to social and economic factors that limit students' access to education, such as poverty and a lack of resources to meaningfully engage in education (Downes, 2011). This distinction is particularly relevant to analysing the effects of cultural and interlinked social barriers that affect ESL, as not all students from cultural minorities are affected by the manifestation of in the main, the multitude of externally derived social barriers that exist. Instead, a review of the literature suggests that they can also be affected by a manifestation of other barriers that exist at the school level, such as a teachers unconscious and at times conscious bias towards cultural minorities (Garcia Fernández et al., 2021) together with incongruent modes of teaching that do not always resound with cultural minorities (Lamonica et al., 2020). Nonetheless, the combined effects of cultural and at times, socially aligned barriers can have a profound effect on ESL (Bademci et al., 2020).

According to Lamonica et al. (2020), 'being a migrant is one of the most relevant predictors of school dropout, especially if associated with a low socioeconomical background' (p.3). The manifestation of these predictors of ESL into adulthood is profound and can result in this cohort of students 'more likely to be unemployed or have low-quality and low-paid employment, have poorer health and be involved in anti-social behaviour and crime' (Banks & Smyth, 2021, p.1). On this point, there is also a need to acknowledge the multifarious cultural and social barriers that can have an effect on the intractable and, at times, complex nature of ESL (Van Caudenberg et al., 2020). Furthermore,

there is a need for more finite studies on the effects that these barriers have on students within the confines of the school grounds (Miulescu & Ruth, 2021). On the one hand, while schools are frequently and at times, wrongly tasked with solving the macro problems of society, Tarabini *et al.* (2019) make the point that, 'school engagement, or more specifically disengagement, is one of the most useful concepts in capturing the gradual process through which students disconnect from school, and is, therefore, a sound indicator for predicting the risk of ESL'(p.227). It is this issue, that of the cultural and social barriers that affects student engagement at the school level that appears to be the dominant theme emerging in this review.

According to Bembich (2019) 'in approaching this multifaceted phenomenon [ESL], it is important to analyse the true nature of failure in learning settings, examining the complexity of risk and protective factors that can have an impact on foreign-born students' academic pathway' (p.55). More generally, at the school level, several dominant cultural and social barriers relating to the true nature of failure among cultural minorities have been identified in the literature. These barriers and associated strategies to curtail their effects on ESL relate to a sense of belonging; family and school relations and expectations together with a need to have in place curriculum and assessment strategies that are culturally sound (Bembich, 2019).

In terms of a sense of belonging, Van Caudenberg *et al.*'s (2020) study of migrant youth in Flemish secondary schools, revealed that 'experiences of exclusion and struggles to claim specific educational spaces as places where they 'belong' often resulted in feelings of being an outsider rather than a valued member of the school community. The journeys through secondary education are mostly recounted as trying to find a 'good school' where they could 'fit in' (p.428). On the other hand, the literature also reveals cultural and socially responsive strategies and initiatives that can be used to enhance students' belonging in schools (see for example Lamonica *et al.*, 2020; Miulescu & Ruth, 2021; Montero-Sieburth & Turcatti, 2022).

Firstly according to Lamonica *et al.* (2020), there is a need to provide small class sizes for migrants and pupils with 'poor socioeconomical backgrounds'(p.4). Secondly, having a more culturally diverse teacher workforce that is in alignment with the culturally diverse populations that exist in schools 'can develop students' self-confidence and increase their motivation'(See for example, Khalifa, Gooden and Davis, 2016). Finally, there is a need to consider ways and means in which citizenship and by association, culturally responsive education can improve a student's sense of belonging where according to Lamonica *et al.* (2020), among others, embedding citizenship education into the curricula has demonstrated that students can become more participative in school life, both in terms of individual and collective participation(p. 4). Miulescu and Ruth's (2021) study on migrant youth in Romania and Germany illustrates this point where in the students own words, the effects of unrelatable curricula translate into "uninteresting content' (Pupil 4, Germany), 'deadly boring teaching' (Pupil 2, Germany), and an 'overload of content' (Pupil 1, Germany) whose meaning was beyond the students' comprehension'. Finally, and possibly the most prescient issue relating to the multiple strategies and initiatives that can be used to reduce ESL, relates not so much to the multiples strategies and initiatives that can be used, but instead and as stated by Montero-Sieburth and Turcatti (2022), the need for 'pro-activity of schools, teachers, and parents in using these practices, so that teacher-student relationships fostered by trained and dedicated teachers can keep students engaged' (p. 139).

In conclusion, despite almost a decade of research into ESL, questions relating the effects of cultural and interlinked barriers at the school level, largely remain unanswered. In other words and in alignment with Fernández-Batanero *et al.* (2014) 'What educational practices help bring about a decrease in educational failure in underprivileged contexts? What is the role of teachers and the managerial staff in developing effective educational practices? To what extent

do internal practices (curricular, organisational, those related to relations with surroundings, etc.) developed by schools contribute to problems involving attendance and school leaving rates' (p. 416).

3.2.3 THEME 3- CULTURE AND ACADEMIC BARRIERS

This section deals with a review of one set of barriers – namely academic barriers- which are widely agreed to influence school failure, perhaps not as greatly as poverty and socioeconomic deprivation, or factors to do with familial issues and relationships, but nonetheless play a vital role in ESL and school failure (Schmitsek, 2022). There is a great deal of research in these wide vast and academic barriers to school success have been widely studied. There is some agreement among scholars that this issue might best be considered as two separate but interlocking components, namely, structural academic barriers and school based academic barriers (Brown et al., 2021).

These two features have drawn some differences in definition but are widely accepted in the broad sense. For example, Brown et al. (2021) describe them as institutional features and structural factors. They go on to define what these features are. Structural issues are defined as essentially national or regional policies and funding largely outside the control of schools or teachers and characterised by highly rigid structures, slowness to respond to diversity and heterogeneity, compulsory schooling/ compulsory subjects, unsuitable assessments, a lack of alternative pathways and programmes and over-representation of disadvantaged groups in certain schools (Brown et al., 2021, p. 750), and to these one might add poor language supports, large class sizes, poor levels of resourcing and poor provision of adequate teacher training and continuing professional education (CPE).

The 'institutional features' are defined largely as being school-based and include the following, organizational policies, institutional norms and expectations, relationships with principals, teachers and peers, lack of language support for migrants, and unsuitable curricula (p. 746).

Clearly this is a somewhat artificial division since the ability of schools to respond to some of these issues is predicated entirely on the policies and resources of the bodies that control them and the degree of freedom or otherwise which they are accorded. Nonetheless, it seems a fruitful way of approaching such a complex set of interactions and we propose to follow it. Therefore, we will begin with a look at structural issues and problems, which are identified in the literature as forming formidable barriers to school achievement among students at risk of failure and ESL. We will then proceed to examine school-based barriers. We will integrate into each section not only the myriads of problems and challenges as identified in the literature but also try to identify the potential solutions advanced by scholars.

Structural barriers to educational success among students at risk of school failure and ESL.

The difficulty and artificial nature of separating the structural from the institutional in accounting for ESL is well illustrated in the work of Drăghicescu et al. (2021). In this paper, it is noted, regarding teachers who were researched, that 'many think it is not the school and even if it is they do not have the power to help'. (p. 96). This is a good illustration of how these factors overlap and the authors go on to discuss the ways in which schools and teachers are caught in the trap of having responsibility but no power. In this research respondents highlight what they perceive as 'inefficient education policy' and argue that the mandated curriculum is 'not meeting student needs so we need to rethink the curriculum' (p.105). These teachers- sample 256 in four countries- go on to list a further array of structural policies which they regard as being essentially political and thus above and beyond what they can influence. Among these problems which are perceived to be structural are 'oversized classes of students' and 'promoting exclusively

cognitive curricula and ignoring moral and socio-emotional education’ (p. 104). Brown et al. (2021) suggest that structural centralised control bears down on schools, limiting resources, causing inequitable distribution of resources to schools, competition, testing and terminal examinations not suitable for young people at risk.

In somewhat similar vein Araújo et al. (2019) suggest that schools are held back by lack of resources but also, interestingly, that policy makers show no imagination in developing alternative pathways for those at risk such as, for example, specialised schools – ‘artistic schools respond better to pupil needs by offering work that appeals’ (p. 156). A similar point is made by Alvarez et al. (2021) who have researched the much wider use of arts in the curriculum and argue that they are ‘inclusive and do not depend on language proficiency’ (p. 3) but note that freedom to introduce curricular alternatives is very constrained.

Many of the scholars working in this field do suggest solutions, which can only really happen or at least be commenced at the structural level. For example, Hartas (2016) argues that the best way forward is the creation of ‘diversity in young peoples’ opportunities’ (p. 1161). Similarly, Schmitsek (2022) suggests that ‘rigid education systems need to adopt more flexible methods and adaptive learning pathways’ (p. 173). She goes on to suggest, as do many researchers in this area, a major expansion of ‘second chance provision that are tailored to support the acquisition of self-efficacy and career adaptability’ (p. 174). She proceeds to argue for a list of further remedial measures which are essentially structural in that they could not be introduced without a massive increase in spending – ‘easy to access, youth friendly career guidance services’, ‘multi-disciplinary teams focusing on students’ wellbeing, learning issues career education and guidance’ (p. 188). She also suggests smaller class sizes of maximum 15. Somewhat similarly, Brown et al. (2021) suggest that it very important to ‘raise the status of technical education’ (p. 745). Van Der Berghe et al. (2022) suggest that at both structural policy level and in schools ‘the goals, values, standards and expectations within education in the host country often vary widely compared to the country of origin’ and that this needs to be addressed.

There is broad agreement in the literature that the structural level, including both policy and funding is responsible for significant barriers to success in education for many young people. However, most of the solutions presented represent policy changes, which carry with them big increases in public spending and are thus unlikely to be adopted in the short to medium term. We now turn our attention to the school and teacher level, noting again, that many of the suggested changes are heavily dependent on both structure and policy at the structural level.

School-based barriers to educational success among students at risk of educational failure and ESL.

To say that there is a broad variety of school-based factors to ESL in the literature would be an understatement. Chief among these are unsuitable and inflexible programmes and curricula, the ethos of the school and the attitudes of teachers, assessment that lacks cultural responsiveness and issues around language proficiency and the particular needs of immigrant students. We will proceed to look at each of these, all the time noting that many are closely associated with outside of school problems such as lack of social and cultural capital and inability to adopt to the ethos and demands of schools. We will mention proposed solutions in each section.

Programmes and curricula.

A constant theme in the research in ESL is the extent to which rigid, inflexible and unsuitable curricula contribute to school alienation and failure. We have noted in the previous section that many scholars emphasise the lack of choice, limited alternative pathways, and curricular rigidity as a serious cause of ESL. Schmitsek (2022) suggests that such pathways must be ‘flexible, and customised to students’ individual needs and desires’ She adds, however, that these

will of limited value without teacher support that has ‘special regard to positive relationships such as adult-student and peer support and friendship as sources of motivation (p. 177). Kaukko et al. (2022) and a range of other researchers note that language is a key factor in curriculum and suggest that programme content changes should be aware that subjects which depend strongly on language such as science subjects, maths and languages are most problematic and that areas such as the arts and vocational and practical education should be prioritised for at risk students. Van Den Berghe et al. (2022) suggests that among all students and not only migrants, cultural pluralism in a formally taught sense can foster the valuing of difference and learning about different cultures. Brown et al. (2021) note that compulsory subjects and even compulsory schooling together with the over-representation of disadvantaged groups in particular schools means that ‘the system is general and the same for everyone but clearly not all neighbourhoods are the same’ (p. 755).

School ethos and teacher attitudes.

This factor has received very considerable consideration from researchers. With regard to school ethos it is widely suggested that in many cases schools have failed to adapt to meeting the needs of all the students. Kaukko et al. (2022) argue that schools must make the effort to be ‘places of belonging by creating conditions for belonging through explicit teaching of values and by developing a school culture of respect and reciprocity.’ Nayir et al. (2019) allege that schools have largely failed to deliver new policy at school level for working with students from migrant and other disadvantaged backgrounds.

Areas in which imaginative innovations and initiatives which, it is suggested, could be driven by schools are many and varied in the literature. For example, Drăghicescu et al. (2021) suggest that schools that are not meeting student needs, need to re-think the curriculum, optimise teacher competences and create a positive learning environment. Likewise, the importance of teacher attitudes and skills is widely stressed in the literature as being vital in keeping children at risk in school. de Castro and Pereira (2019) believe that interventions aimed at ESL ‘should have the promotion of the quality of student teacher relationships as its main goal, which in turn promotes a sense of security and facilitates the learning process’. The same authors go on to report that at risk students ‘feel less accepted by their teachers’ (p.13) and that teachers and schools predict these students to be less teachable and to fail. They suggest that as teachers’ support is vital for school performance initial teacher education and CPE must be greatly improved in these areas. A similar point is made by Cunningham (2019) who remarks that ‘teachers want to do the right thing but find it difficult because of not knowing what to do in positive terms in the classroom’ (p. 289).

Assessment that lacks cultural responsiveness

For several decades it has been recognised that certain forms of assessment present powerful obstacles to disadvantaged groups, including migrants and refugees but also to those not culturally or by temperament suited to terminal written high stakes assessment (Nortvedt et al., 2020). Nortvedt et al. (2020) go to suggest that assessment should be ‘culturally responsive’ which they define as being largely about classroom based assessment conducted by teachers ‘trained in cultural responsiveness’ (p. 5) who can deliver ‘teaching and assessment negotiated in the classroom and adjusted to account for students cultural ways of knowing’.

A very similar argument is made by Nayir et al. (2019). Nayir et al. note that what they describe as the supremacy of standardised testing and its unsuitability for disadvantaged and migrant students has been noted by many scholars – Brown et al. (2016), Brown et al. (2022) and Young et al. (2018). They note that in most OECD countries which make

use of the PISA tests there are constant achievement gaps between the socially deprived and others and between migrant and non-migrant children.

In mitigation Nayir et al. (2019) are strongly supportive of ‘culturally responsive assessment’, including modes of assessment such as ‘creativity assessment’, peer assessment’ and self -assessment’. However, they are rather pessimistic about progress in these areas arguing that by and large national assessment policy has not changed for those at most risk of early ESL and similarly that there is a lack of policy at school level.

Language proficiency and the particular needs of immigrant students.

It is widely accepted that lack of facility in the language of instruction is one of the key factors in limiting academic achievement at school and thus contributing to ESL (Kaukko, et al., 2022; Cunningham, 2019; Mateos- Claros et al., 2019). The latter clearly define the problem, ‘the problem of linguistic disadvantage distorts educational performance causing a decrease for those students whose mother tongue and culture does not match the official one’ (p. 44).

The point here, where culture is mentioned together with mother tongue, is one made by other scholars, (Cunningham, 2019) and is extremely important. It is that ‘native’ students may suffer from linguistic deprivation as much as those immigrating. That is to say, that cultural issues arising from poverty, such as lack of cultural capital arising from familial lack of interest in education, limited or no access to books or other forms of culture etc., can be as educationally debilitating as poor language skills in the language of instruction.

With regard to the problem of language skills as such, the solutions suggested, naturally, are primarily concerned with much greater language supports in the school and community. Interestingly, as well as the standard demands for such inputs on a large scale, Cunningham (2019) argues that ‘teachers’ attitudes towards children’s languages and cultures have been shown to be instrumental in the development of self- esteem and academic achievement’ (p. 283). She goes on to argue that as well as more help in the language of the school we need more intercultural education including reference to or opportunities to demonstrate different languages and cultures in the classroom. Summing up, academic barriers which contribute to ESL are many and varied and to date have largely proved to be intractable. The range of issues have changed little in decades and the bulk of the solutions and interventions suggested are either in use or far beyond the funding likely to be available.

3.2.4 THEME 4 - DISCRIMINATION AND PREJUDICE

The focus of the European research on the impact of discrimination and prejudice on education outcomes and early school leaving focuses on the manner in which an adolescent can integrate or not into the mainstream community in which they find themselves and search for their cultural identity and the impact on their success, or not, in school.

According to Schotte et al. (2018), cultural identity is often construed as a multidimensional construct that captures a variety of aspects, including self-categorization, commitment and feelings of attachment to relevant ethnic groups, identity exploration, as well as importance and salience of the perceived group membership (p.17). Adolescents from a disadvantaged or migrant background face particular challenges as they try to develop their identity within the mainstream context and culture which is so often at variance with their culture.

Doyle and Keane (2019) examined early school leaving from the perspective of parents of early school leavers in an inner-city local authority housing estate in Ireland living with the challenges of ‘very significant social and economic

marginalisation and exclusion' (p. 72). It is a very revealing examination of the perceptions of parents and their children of how the marginalised are treated by the education system. Three findings stand out '(1) feeling let down by school, and (2) being stigmatised being from a 'disadvantaged' area, and (3) dealing with life traumas. For the participants, these factors significantly constrained their child/ren in engaging with education' (p. 76). Parents agreed that family trauma and break up, substance abuse etc. was a reality along with early deaths in their families through violence or substance abuse and all had a significant impact on their children and their academic outcomes.

The participants' core message about their child/ren's early school leaving was that while they valued education and wanted to see their children progress according to Doyle and Keane (2019), they were significantly constrained by (a) what they perceived as an unsupportive and discriminatory education system, and (b) the human need to prioritise surviving everyday life in their challenging world (over education) (p.82). The parents felt 'let down' by an 'unsupportive' 'irrelevant' discriminatory education system' once their child/ren had finally left school early.

However, 'having to cope with frequent and significant life traumas, and fighting to survive everyday life in their lived realities, seriously constrained educational engagement.' (p. 82)

'The impact of life stressors and traumas on people is highly significant, not least on young people at delicate developmental stages who are simultaneously expected to engage with academic demands on a par with pupils who have very different, and supported, life experiences' (Doyle & Keane, 2019, p.82).

Most of the parents, according to Doyle and Keane (2019) were consumed with the task of 'getting by on a daily basis' and providing for their children, with educational progress taking a backseat. They acknowledged that sometimes the priorities of the home and school do not align.

This insight provides us with a visceral image of the impact of poverty on the lives of students and forms a backdrop to the research which documents how teachers need to become better educated about the impact of disadvantage and become more informed about the impact of cultural diversity in their classrooms which is focused on in Derrington's (2007) and García-Fernández's et al. (2021) research. The studies by Spiegler et al. (2018), Fehérvári (2020), Oczlon et al. (2021) and Rodríguez-Izquierdo (2022) also emphasise the impact of teacher attitudes and prejudices on early school dropout and call for pre and in career professional development.

D'hondt et al. (2016) link a feeling of discrimination in school to the fact that it is 'more difficult to manage others devaluing your cultural background if you have been taught to be proud of it at home'. So the prouder a student is of their culture, the more chance there is of them to be 'more vulnerable for the negative experience of ethnic teacher discrimination' (D'hondt et al., 2016, p. 1086).

Van Caudenberg et al. (2020) found that many students felt as outsiders in their school as a result of not being fully welcomed into the dominant white culture of some schools leading to academic failure while Wolfgramm et al. (2014) contests that this rejection sensitivity is more heightened if the student is from a strong home cultural context. However, the ones who stay in school, according to Derrington (2007) were also more likely to 'participate in extracurricular activities ... coupled with a firm sense of cultural identity of which the students were proud. This apparent sense of belonging to and being able to switch between two cultures, without compromising one's own sense of cultural and familial identity,' (Derrington, 2007, p.365) which all helps to 'cultivate bicultural adjustment'

and can 'help to minimise social isolation in school and lessen the effects and tensions of cultural dissonance'(Derrington, 2007, p.361).

Derrington's (2007) research draws on findings from a longitudinal study of Gypsy Traveller students attending English secondary schools. The analysis of over 400 interviews with 44 Gypsy Traveller students, their parents and teachers over a 5-year period identified several pull and push factors that impact on secondary school engagement and retention. Of these, 'cultural dissonance (a result of conflicting expectations between home and school) and social exclusion feature strongly'. Students reportedly relied on 'maladaptive coping strategies' (mainly fighting) to deal with psychosocial stress, according to Derrington (2007), associated with cultural dissonance and social exclusion, tended to drop out of school early. These maladaptive strategies are referred to here as 'fight (physical and verbal retaliation and non-compliance), flight (self-imposed exclusion) and playing white (passing identity by concealing or denying one's heritage)' (Derrington, 2007, p.357).

Derrington (2007) encourages teachers to be more aware of prejudice and racism and 'for schools to be more inclusive, teachers need to develop a greater understanding of the subtle and overt effects of cultural hegemony on the educational engagement of Gypsy Travellers' (Derrington, 2007, p. 356).

This finding is supported by Spiegler et al. (2018) who studied Turkish immigrants in Germany whose findings revealed 'distinct trajectories of identity development' (p.1022). They found a higher and stable ethnic identity to be positively linked to motivation and teacher support' (p.1022). According to Schotte et al. (2018) cultural identity and adaptation is moderated by specific characteristics of the immigrant groups, such as their immigration histories and levels of acceptance in the mainstream society as he found in Germany between the Turkish and former Soviet Union as the dominant culture was more accepting of the Soviet Union migrants (p.17).

García-Fernández et al. (2021) examined whether teachers' thinking is 'prophetic, that is, whether attitudes and actions permeate the students and condition their academic performance' (p. 1). To this end, they analysed the beliefs of 167 teachers in Spain. Their findings are stark as they conclude that firstly 'the teacher's cognitive architecture harbors the idea that foreign students achieve worse academic results and require more effort and pedagogical help' (p.7). Secondly, that 'teachers are not aware of the power exerted by their beliefs on their students' performance'. Thirdly, they find that 'foreign-origin students present lower performance than their Spanish peers' (p.7). They conclude that there is a need for teachers to implement an endless training spiral to 'permanently enrich their conscience with the largest possible number of fair, logical and ethical reasons' (García-Fernández et al., 2021, p.7).

Rodríguez-Izquierdo (2022) echoes the previous research mentioned where improvements to teacher education is called for as they also conclude that teacher perspectives and prejudice play a significant role in early school leaving. The study, which was a part of a larger project focusing on promoting inclusion to combat early school leaving in Europe. The majority of the teachers appeared to 'misrecognise latent relations between school dropout, school actions and teachers' practices/responsibilities', as teachers believe that ESL are primarily related to student characteristics and traits, family background, and lack of commitment' (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2022).

The school factors, according to Rodríguez-Izquierdo (2022), which have a significant influence on failure at school, disengagement from school, and school dropout were essentially disregarded by teachers (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2022, p. 134).

According to Rodríguez-Izquierdo (2022), 'to believe that the student is the cause of their difficulties (the student is the problem) is a misstep that can taint the teacher's perception of students and their needs. To this end, according to Rodríguez-Izquierdo (2022) pre-service and in-service teacher training should consider all the factors that can contribute to ESL to ensure that teachers have in-depth knowledge and skills to engage more profoundly with the complex processes associated with ESL and intercultural education during initial training but continue to be critically reflective on their 'latent attitudes and everyday teaching practices that might result from these attitudes' (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2022, p.134).

Fehérvári (2020) in this study looked deeper into the nature of schools and school climate with 2,555 teachers in schools with the highest dropout risk in their respective regions of Hungary. Fehérvári (2020) concluded that teachers' belief that 'they and their schools play an important role in preventing dropout' was significantly influenced by the school climate. 'In schools where the climate was seen as more positive, where teacher-student relations were good and the teaching staff shared common pedagogical values, the respondents felt that they had a great impact on fighting dropout' (Fehérvári, 2020, p.152).

Oczlon et al. (2021) also concludes that the teacher has a pivotal role to play in the classroom in Austria. This study involved 700 adolescents in Austria with an immigrant background from 10 to 16 years. They conclude 'students' perceptions of a classroom atmosphere characterized by a teachers' interest in and learning about diverse cultural backgrounds and relations translates into a higher academic self-concept of immigrant students and thus, indirectly, into higher academic achievement' (Oczlon et al., 2021, p. 71).

Wolfgramm et al. (2014) research adds to this where they examined the relation between ethnically based rejection sensitivity and academic achievement in a sample of 936 immigrant students in Germany and Switzerland and conclude that 'ethnically based rejection sensitivity is particularly detrimental to integration as it likely operates as a vicious circle: The activation of rejection expectation related to one's ethnic membership leads to vigilant scanning for possible rejection, which in turn heightens the readiness to perceive rejection in ambiguous situations (Wolfgramm et al., 2014, p.313).

Van Caudenberg et al. (2020) draws on data that were collected over a 2-year period (2015–2016) in the framework of the large-scale European research project 'Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe' (RESL.eu) in Flanders with a high number of inhabitants with a migration background. The findings reveal a recurring theme of the need to feel a sense of school belonging if 'migrant origin youths from lower income families will successfully stay in school' (Van Caudenberg et al., 2020, p 441).

3.2.5 THEME 5 - CULTURAL NORMS AROUND GENDER AND EDUCATION

Cultural norms around gender and education reflect broader beliefs about the traditional role of women and girls in society, such as the belief that women should focus on domestic responsibilities rather than education and careers. These beliefs can inhibit students from continuing their studies and completing their schooling. Several sub-themes

of this aspect of culture can be found in the literature, which are not very different from general perceptions of gender and education, such as culture and gender stereotypes (Khattab & Modood, 2018), availability of opportunities and access to education, discrimination (Lavrentsova & Valkov, 2019) and lack of role models in immediate and extended families or community (Bayón-Calvo et al., 2021; Mäkelä & Kalalahti, 2020). Hiller (2014) provides the historical perspective on gender stereotypes and argues that historical situations generate the cultural norms concerning genders and take very long to change. For instance, in the agrarian past, economic activities required physical strength therefore men and boys were considered more productive than women and girls. This norm of relying on men for economic development perpetuated on an assumption that 'Male education fosters economic development through the accumulation of human capital' (p. 457). Consequently, boys became first to receive education while parental investment in girls' education was delayed.

In some communities this practice can still be observed as Alvarez-Roldan et al. (2018) in their study about Spanish Roma students found that their strong cultural norms shape and influence the way families, genders, and marriage are viewed. Hence, unequal gender expectations result in older girls minding younger siblings when parents engage in seasonal work and early marriage, which hinder the educational aspirations of Roma girls during their adolescence, leading to disconnection from schooling. Lavrentsova and Valkov (2019) mention that where traditional gender roles limit Roma girls' access to education, their inconsistent attitude towards the value of education and their emotional connection to school are influenced by the social exclusion and stigmatization they face from others. Therefore, early school leaving cannot be solely attributed to their cultural norms, discrimination that they experience at schools has a significant role in this.

Moreover, Van Den Berghe et al. (2022) interviewed the support workers for migration and refugee background students to explore the reasons for the early dropout. Among a host of other factors, the support workers strongly emphasised the impact of 'culturally-inspired gender roles' on education trajectory and early school leaving. Several features that the support workers mentioned included culturally prioritising marriage and starting a family over education, especially in the case of girls. Also, the education choices that boys and girls make can have cultural influences. Girls and boys are expected to adopt certain careers that traditionally align with their gender roles. Such norms often restrict students from following their own interests and passions, leading to pressure on their academic pursuits. These differential family expectations perpetuate the unequal treatment of boys and girls in their education journey. Borgna and Struffolino (2017) also emphasise the crucial role gender plays in schooling decisions, educational expectations and eventually in the learning outcomes. As a result of their study about migrant girls, Mäkelä and Kalalahti (2020) had a similar finding that in certain cases, a girl's chosen career path was viewed as culturally improper and she had no option but to align her career goals according to her parental expectations.

On one hand, we have the case of migrant or minority background girls whose deeply ingrained cultural norms curtail their educational aspirations and opportunities. On the other hand is the case of boys regardless of their background who leave school early (Borgna & Struffolino, 2017; O'Connell & Freney, 2011). Drudy et al. (2005, quoted in O'Connell and Freney, 2011) maintain that among other economic and social reasons to leave school early, boys leave school due to the lack of role models to emulate because the Irish teaching workforce is predominantly female. By association, it can be assumed that since in some migrant and minority communities girls do not see women in their family who did well in education or are pursuing careers, they may feel less motivated to study and leave school. Khattab and Modood (2018) made an interesting observation that apparently goes contrary to the aforementioned trend. They found that Muslim girls in Britain, despite the general perceptions of their religio-cultural background, tend to outperform Muslim boys, as do the girls in the majority group. They seem to be assimilated into the UK's

educational cultural pattern. The researchers believe that this is primarily due to the second-generation migrant girls who are born and raised in the UK and have undergone a cultural transformation unlike their mothers. Alternatively, it is possible that these girls are more inclined to adopt a robust Islamic identity, which helps them overcome obstacles from their local and familial environment when making life choices and planning for the future (p. 256).

Cultural norms not just restrict the girls' academic aspirations but also pull the boys out of schools. Across Europe, the proportion of boys' ESL (11.4%) is higher than the girls' (7.9%) (Eurostat, 2021). Borgna and Struffolino (2017) suggest that the labour market culture in which boys have more formal and informal employment opportunities than girls leads to a higher likelihood of boys dropping out of school. In contrast, since young women face a tough competition from young men especially to access low-skilled jobs, they tend to pursue higher qualifications to access better employment prospects. O'Connell and Freeney (2011) also refer to 'the pull of the labour market' as being one of the reasons for leaving school among male students.

Girls, especially, from migration and minority backgrounds are more likely to face discrimination and harassment (Khattab & Modood, 2018) hence making the learning environments unsafe and hostile, which result in low academic achievement and ultimately lead to early school leaving (Wolfgang et al., 2014). Van Caudenberg et al. (2020) reiterate the same point that after resisting the school for some time as spaces where such students feel 'marginalized' and 'outsiders', their capacity to learn is adversely affected and eventually they leave school (p.441). Cultural norms may have a strong claim on early school leaving but there are several other pull and push factors that intersect with the norms and provoke disengagement with learning and ultimately early school leaving (Van Den Berghe et al., 2022).

3.3 Interplay between cultural factors and other social determinants on underachievement.

ESL is a hugely complicated and difficult subject. None of the literature pretends that there any simple answers or solutions. Van Den Berghe et al. (2022) argue that 'school dropout is increasingly seen as a complex, cumulative, long-term process of school disengagement that is influenced by a myriad of interconnected risk factors' (p. 3). In fact, more than forty years of research has neither solved the problem or even improved the overall situation (Van Den Berghe et al., 2022). However, one thing that is widely agreed upon is that ESL has a huge range of factors and that it is the interaction between these that informs the problem (Hartas, 2016). These factors are not mutually exclusive, and they can interact with each other in complex ways.

Several factors are identified for further investigation for the purpose of this project the absence or presence of which results in early school leaving include institutional, socioeconomic, cognitive, cultural, linguistic, gender, psycho-emotional and well-being and quality of Early Childhood Education and Care. Generally research studies classify them into three large groups: family resources, school related factors and individual factors (Doyle & Keane, 2019; Fehérvári, 2020; Traag & Van der Velden, 2011). Within these large classes, there are many sub-themes. For example, Brown et al. (2021) suggest that no single factor is predominant contributor to ESL; it is 'the cumulative result of negative experiences but low achievement is the most significant' (p. 745) which is a sub-theme to cognitive ability or institutional factors. While Van Caudenberg et al. (2020) argue social relationship and school belongingness as major factors, which can be sub-themes of institutional factors. Bademci et al. (2020) also emphasise the significance of student- teacher interactions and social relationships for school retention. Miulescu and Ruth (2021) contend that

‘personal challenges and family circumstances’ to be strong predictors of early leaving in Romanian culture (p.784). Mostly the research studies insist on taking account of all ESL risk factors to achieve an accurate evaluation of the issue (Miulescu & Ruth, 2021). For instance, a student from a low socioeconomic background who also faces discrimination due their cultural and linguistic background may be more likely to experience psycho-emotional challenges, which can contribute to lack of motivation, disengagement with school and early school leaving. Likewise, students’ cognitive and learning ability, gender expectations to follow certain education trajectories, institutional resources to support struggling students so that they can have better outcomes together can check student attrition. Each social determinant can contribute to early leaving on its own nevertheless, cannot be the sole determining cause of early school leaving. The combined effect of multiple determinants over a period of time can create a much stronger likelihood of underachievement and ESL. The following wheel diagram shows how the various determinants of ESL keep the wheel of academic achievement rolling up or down the hill (Fig. 2).

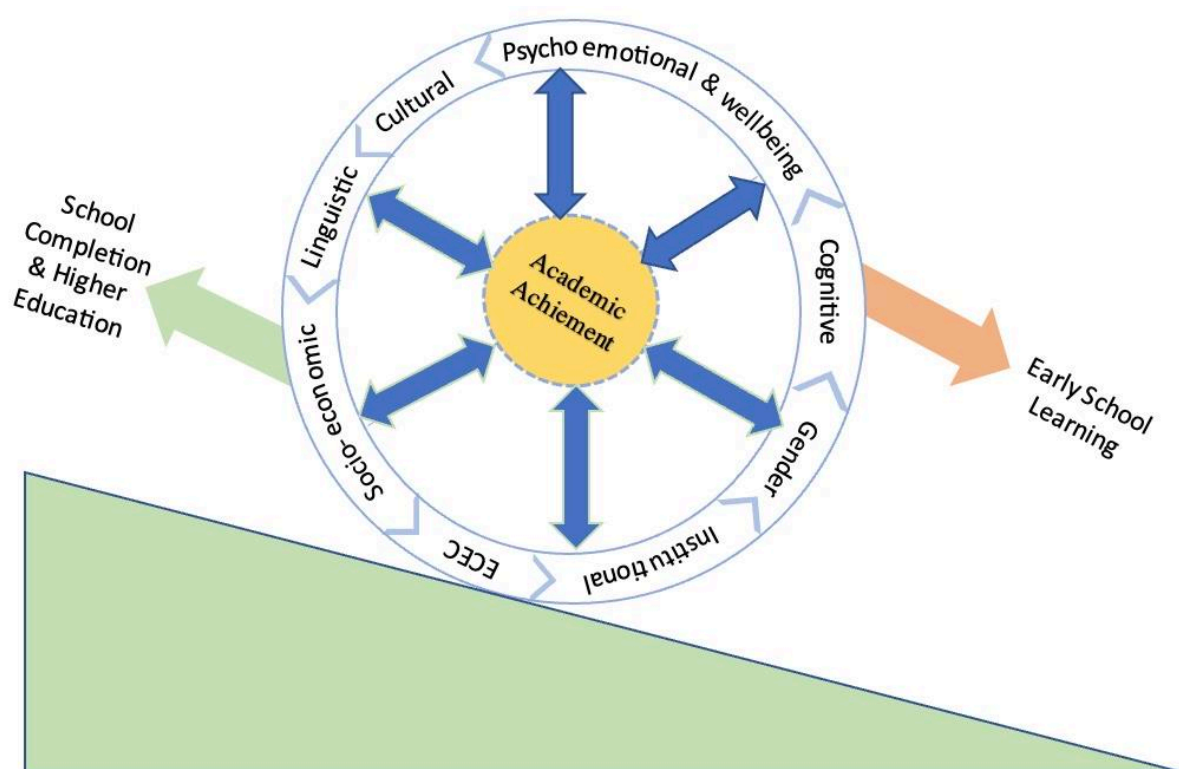


Fig. 2 Cultural factors, underachievement and ESL

The cultural factors that we have discussed in this report as causing or preventing ESL show a clear overlap between the two sets of factors explained in the Eurydice report (2014) - those relating to individual and family circumstances, as well as those relating to the education system. As evident from Section 3.2, these factors encompass all other social determinants whether they are structural, institutional, individual or familial. The literature frequently refers to cultural factors as the issues faced by migration background and minority students (Bembich, 2019; Wolfgramm, 2014). Several conceptual labels such as, social exclusion, adaptive strategies, parents and students aspirations, school adjustment, parental involvement, school and teachers expectations emerged during the review of literature. These conceptual labels are not just akin to minority, migration background or refugee students. They are equally

applicable to students coming from majority cultures. While Bembich (2019) in her Bioecological Framework of Early Leaving stresses the need to be cognizant of the cultural dimension for foreign-born students, it is equally important to be aware of the culture of majority students to avoid cultural dissonance (Derrington, 2007), ensure inclusion, and remove barriers to learning.

3.4 Policies, gaps and solutions

During the literature review, we encountered analyses of various policies or strategies aimed at addressing ESL in several countries including Ireland, Germany, Romania and Spain. The authors (Banks & Smyth, 2021; Bayón-Calvo et al. 2021, Miulescu & Ruth, 2021) have briefed about the measures planned or undertaken in the respective countries under the aegis of these policies. We used the Educational Council's recommendations of a three-pronged strategy as our guideline to review the effectiveness of these policies or strategies to address the cultural factors to combat ESL. The Educational Council suggests the following three steps in developing policies or strategies: The first step involves implementing 'prevention measures' to address the underlying causes that could potentially lead to ESL. The second step involves 'intervention measures,' which aim to address any difficulties that students may encounter by improving the quality of education and training and providing specific support. The third and final step involves 'compensation measures,' which provide alternative pathways for those who have already left education and training early to obtain qualifications (European Commission, 2014, p. 51).

3.4.1 POLICY APPROACHES TARGETING [INSERT YOUR SOCIAL DETERMINANT]

During the literature review, we came across a few references to policies meant to tackle early school leaving (Banks & Smyth, 2021; Bayón-Calvo et al. 2021, Miulescu & Ruth, 2021). The policies referred to in these studies are not exclusively meant to address the cultural factors leading to ESL, but focus on reducing school dropout rate, enhancing student engagement and/or providing new opportunities to achieve skills and qualifications to be a productive member of the labour force as recommended by the Education Council to all students who are potentially at risk of ESL. Banks and Smyth (2021) mention three programmes successfully running in Ireland encompassing all three aspects of preventing ESL. The School Completion Programme focuses on providing every support to children or young people to keep them engaged in full time education. The Youthreach Programme offers a range of opportunities to youth who dropped out of school early to re-engage them with education. Finally, the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme is designed to reduce the disparities in education participation and engagement by offering supplementary resources and support to schools serving socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. The DEIS programme enables these schools to have smaller class sizes in primary education, provides access to literacy and numeracy support, and offers additional assistance through designated staff in promoting parental involvement (p.3).

Ministry of Education and Scientific Research in Romania, in 2015, according to Miulescu and Ruth (2021), developed a multi-faceted strategy to reduce ESL. The strategy covered a wide range of aspects to deal with the issue including: revision of the national curriculum, training of education professionals (teachers, principals, counsellors, practice tutors, inspectors, etc.), research, financial aids for different categories (students and parents, teachers, school, etc.), tutorial actions and individualised student and parent support measures, and development of the educational infrastructure (p.769). Nevertheless, due to the inefficiency of the Romanian Integrated Education Information System to provide multi-purpose real-time data, the authors believe the decision-making at various governmental

levels is somewhat handicapped. That is also one of the reasons that ESL targets set for 2020 revealed that 2015 strategy despite being comprehensive could not achieve expected results.

In contrast, Miulescu and Ruth (2021) mentioned measures taken in almost all German states since the early 2000s to identify and take actions to prevent ESL. In this regard, they mentioned the establishment of 'ReBUZ centers' in the Bremen region. These centres have a team of professionals consisting of educational pedagogues, social pedagogues, psychologists, social workers, and other specialists like speech therapists. The centres provide service for the schools located in their local coverage area in close collaboration with school staff and through parental involvement (p.768).

Bayón-Calvo et al. (2021) state three important educational reforms that are focused on improving the quality of education and ESL in Spain: 'Organic Education Law' (LOE) in 2006, New organic Act for the Improvement of the Quality of Education' (LOMCE) in 2013, and Plan to Reduce Early School Leaving (PRESL) in 2008 that was later updated in 2015 to align with the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in the field of education and training. These reforms encompass various measures such as career guidance, education pathways flexibility, second-chance education, language support, and data collection and monitoring. The authors particularly applaud the Basic Vocation Training programme, launched under the LOMCE in 2013, as an alternative and second-chance opportunity for young people to undertake vocational education as early as 15 years. The authors asserted that the Spanish education system being decentralised leaves the responsibility of the implementation of the policy measures to regional education departments. They referred categorically to the Catalonia region for successfully implementing these measures.

The policy measures in these four countries are undoubtedly responsive to the Educational Council's recommendations for tackling ESL. In the cases of Spain, Germany, and Romania, the policy measures are meant to address the cultural factors of ESL to some extent through, for instance, language support, curriculum review, and psychosocial support for at risk students. However, the programmes implemented in Ireland do not directly address linguistic support for students whose home language differs from the language of instruction or whose language proficiency is affected by the lack of cultural capital at home. Similarly, no reference is made to adapting the curriculum to ascertain 'pedagogy for inclusive education' (Bademci, et al., 2020).

3.4.2 GAPS IDENTIFIED IN EXISTING RESEARCH

The previous research studies have not taken into account the entirety of the cultural factors that either contribute or prevent student attrition. The current report is a pioneering effort to provide a comprehensive perspective on cultural factors. Furthermore, previous research has predominantly concentrated on one vulnerable group such as Roma, travellers, migrants or refugees and explored the issues related to culture and ESL in their context. However, limited research has been conducted to evaluate the opportunities available to these groups within their societal context and how these opportunities compare to those of majority groups. Within these minority groups, there are several sub-groups who are to be studied for their coping mechanisms and resilience. Khattab and Modood (2018) conducted a study that focused on Muslims students from Pakistan, Bangladesh and India in England, while Spiegler et al. (2018) investigated Turks settled in Germany. Nevertheless, there are many other groups for example Africans, Arabs, Eastern Europeans whose push and pull factors need to be explored as highlighted by Traag and Van der

Velden (2011). The topic of interactions among the various minority groups, between minority and majority groups, and how interactions can potentially serve as a support system to prevent ESL, remains relatively unexplored in the literature.

3.4.3 POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS FOR REDUCING THE IMPACT OF [INSERT YOUR SOCIAL DETERMINANT] ON UNDERACHIEVEMENT

The research studies have not only identified the issues around culture that cause underachievement and ESL but have also offered solutions to mitigate their impact. Bembich (2019) stresses the importance of helping teachers ‘to develop specific professional competences to support students to overcome the difficulties they face’ with respect to ‘the challenge of adapting to their new social context, adopting different cultural patterns, and at the same time continuing to maintain those of shared by their family of origin’ (p.62). For developing culturally and socially responsive pedagogical practices, teachers should be trained to recognize and respect cultural differences and tailor their instruction to the needs of diverse students. Several studies (Drăghicescu et al., 2021; Kaukko et al., 2022; Miulescu & Ruth, 2021) have highlighted the need to revise and adapt curriculum to make them relevant to the needs of all cohorts of students to keep them motivated and engaged in learning.

Lemonica et al. (2020), Miulescu and Ruth (2021) and Montero-Sieburth and Turcatti (2022) all highlight the importance of fostering inclusive school environments that enhance school belongingness among students and eradicate the sense of othering. Bademci, et al. (2020) contend that facilitating teachers to contribute to an academic environment in which children at risk of school exclusion can be supported to achieve higher levels of educational attainment is crucial. Van Den Berghe et al. (2022) emphasise the need to inculcate cultural pluralism in schools that recognizes diversity as an asset, rather than a liability, and seeks to create an ethos that appreciates and values differences. Such an environment acknowledges and respects the differences among students, and encourages mutual understanding and cooperation between them, while also promoting equal opportunities for every student regardless of their cultural backgrounds.

Several studies (for example Dollmann & Weißmann (2020); Hartas, 2016; Luu, Boreczky & Gyori, 2019) acknowledge the role of parents, families and communities in increasing the student retention rates. Section 3.2.1 features the correlation between parents’ expectations and students’ aspirations, as well as the essentiality of parents’ values, beliefs and attitudes towards their children success or failure in education. Schools, by involving parents and communities in the education process, can bridge the gap between home and school expectations, and help students see the relevance of education to their lives.

Finally yet importantly, Hartas (2016) and Schmitsek (2022) underscore the importance and availability of alternative pathways and second chance provision for students to bring the early school leavers back to education and training stream.

4.0 Key takeaways from the systematic review

In terms of ESL, cultural factors exert a more comprehensive and enduring influence than individual, family and institutional factors, as they encompass all three and form the value system of all relevant stakeholders. The various aspects of culture presented in section 3.2 of the report cover almost all other social determinants including socioeconomic status, language, psycho emotional wellbeing, gender, institutional and cognitive viewed through the lens of culture. Cultural factors possess a more comprehensive and overarching influences than any other social determinant. Further, no social determinant of underachievement and ESL operates in isolation, in fact, the interplay between all these determinants ultimately culminates in ESL. In the context of schools, the term ‘culture’ does not solely refer to the culture of students with a minority or migration background, but encompasses the culture of all cohorts of students. As schools become more ethnically and culturally diverse, the concept of cultural pluralism becomes increasingly relevant. Schools need to acknowledge and promote respect for cultural diversity amongst their student body. Cultural dissonance, which can arise from differing expectations between home and school environment, can be one of the significant contributing factors to ESL (Derrington, 2007). ESL is a complex phenomenon and typically not an abrupt or unexpected occurrence, but instead is an outcome of interaction of a multitude of factors and actors and culmination of a long process of disengagement from school that can be traced back for the ‘early warning signs’ (Bayón-Calvo et al., 2021, Miulescu & Ruth, 2021, Tarabini et al., 2019). By recognizing and interpreting the warning signals at an early stage, it is possible to develop and implement suitable measures to prevent early school leaving (Miulescu & Ruth, 2021).

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Horizon Europe

Title

Work Package	WP 1. Analysing causes and social determinants of underachievement
Identifier	Social Determinants and Root Causes of underachievement with reference to early school leavers (ESL): review of existing knowledge and evidence to address this challenge in the scientific literature.
Task	Task 1.1 – Systematic Review on Social Determinants – Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)
Lead Beneficiary (for sub report)	University of Malta
Authors	Suzanne Gatt, Rosienne Camilleri, Charmaine Bonello
Due Date	April 2023
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v1	01/11/2022	Suzanne Gatt, Rosienne Camilleri, Charmaine Bonello, Graziella Scerri	First draft for internal review

Systematic Review on Social Determinant – ECEC

1.0 Introduction

Early School Leaving (ESL hereinafter) has devastating long-term consequences on people's lives (von Wachter, 2020). When individuals do not complete their education, they tend to have reduced opportunities in the labour market. They also tend to have a greater probability of experiencing poverty (McKinney et al., 2012) and health problems (Hammarström & Ahlgren, 2019) and are often less interested in participating in political, social, and cultural activities within their communities (De Witte et al., 2013). Eleven EU Member States had more than 9% early school leavers in 2021². This demonstrates that there is still work to be done to reach the EU 2030 target of 9% set for ESL (Council of the European Union, 2021). With higher rates of ESL among certain vulnerable groups (Jugović & Doolan, 2013), it is important to identify and better understand the role of social determinants on underachievement and ESL.

Children's growth between birth and eight years of age is very important in terms of their learning, well-being, and physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development. It is often identified as crucial for determining children's success in education later in life (Denboba et al., 2014). The early years offer a crucial window of opportunity for education, with OECD arguing that children who receive a high-quality education before they turn five enjoy significant medium- and long-term benefits (OECD, 2020).

This systematic review focuses on early childhood education and care (ECEC) and its significance as a social determinant of underachievement and early school leaving. It forms part of the SCIREARLY Horizon Europe project, which aims at analysing the social determinants: socioeconomic status, cognitive elements, cultural aspects, linguistic competences, gender, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), psycho-emotional factors and well-being and their influence on students' underachievement and ESL. The focus of this systematic review attempts to identify what we know from empirical studies about **early childhood education and care** as a determinant of children's underachievement later on at school, and particularly how different factors contribute to early school leaving. This systematic review was conducted by a team of four researchers from the University of Malta (UM).

2.0 Methodology of systematic review of ECEC in underachievement and early school leaving

This systematic review followed the Prisma (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses) statement methodology. It was implemented to identify what is so far known about ECEC on underachievement, an exercise which no recent study has so far systematized (Page et al., 2021; Rethlefsen et al., 2021). The systematic review aimed to identify the nature and degree of the impact of ECEC as a social determinant on underachievement and ESL by collating research results about how ECEC impacts different countries, cultures, and the vulnerable

² https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/edat_lfse_14/default/table?lang=en

groups most affected. It also investigated which structures in ECEC have the greatest impact and which successful policy actions in ECEC combat underachievement. The research question set was:

What does literature say about the social determinant ECEC and root causes of underachievement in relation with ESLs?

It is first important to define the concepts of underachievement and ECEC used in the exercise. Underachievement has been defined in many ways. Back in mid twentieth century, Thorndike (Thorndike, 1963) defined it as ‘achievement falling below what would be forecast from our most informed and accurate prediction, based on a team of predictor variables’ (p.19). The definition of underachievement used in SCIREARLY and in this review will be based on that used by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). According to PISA, **underachievers are those pupils who fail to reach proficiency Level 2 which refers to the minimum level necessary to participate successfully in society** (Education and Training Monitor 2020, n.d.) **So underachievement is understood to refer to performance level below measured indications of ability** (Rubenstein et al., 2012).

The social determinant ECEC within SCIREARLY, as a definition, refers to the provision of learning and educational experiences within a holistic approach to support children’s early cognitive, physical, social and emotional development and which introduces young children to **organised instruction outside the family context** (Unesco IIEP Learning Portal, n.d.). Quality ECEC provision aims to provide all children with the opportunity to develop the skills needed to actively participate in school and society as well as **achieve academic goals**. Within the framework of ISCED 2011, the definition of ECEC includes **early childhood education development and pre-primary education**. The former has educational content designed for young children (in the age range **0-2** years), whilst the latter is designed for children **from age 3 to the start of primary education**.

The systematic review was conducted using the main scientific databases: Web of Science, Psycinfo, and SCOPUS. The searches were conducted between January and February 2023. A list of keywords related to ECEC were identified and references to be included in the review were imported using Zetoro.

The list of keywords related to ECEC which were used to identify and import literature which resulted from the searches are included in Table 1.

Table 1: List of keywords used for identifying publications in the systematic review.

General Keywords		Specific Keywords – ECEC			
1	2	3			
1.1 Underachievement	2.1 Students	3.1 Quality in early childhood	3.5Kkindergarten	3.9 Early years	3.13 Child well-being
1.2 Early school leaving	2.2 Migrants	3.2 Parent partnership	3.6 Child-care	3.10 Professionalism	3.14 Preschool
1.3 School dropout	2.3 Vulnerable Group	3.3 Early childhood education and care	3.7 Early years settings	3.11 Childcare	3.15 Toddlers
1.4 School disengagement	2.4 Policy	3.4 Transitions in early childhood	3.8 Babies	3.12 Young children	3.16 Governance

The first step of the literature search involved the use of keyword combinations for the identification of relevant literature. This was done by first using one general keyword (underachievement, ESL, School drop-out, school disengagement) in combination with ECEC. Once this exercise was carried out, a combination of two keywords (as shown in the first two columns of Table 1) were used with the Specific keywords for ECEC. The search results were downloaded in .csv format and imported to Zetoro1, the software used by the UM team to systematise the screening process.

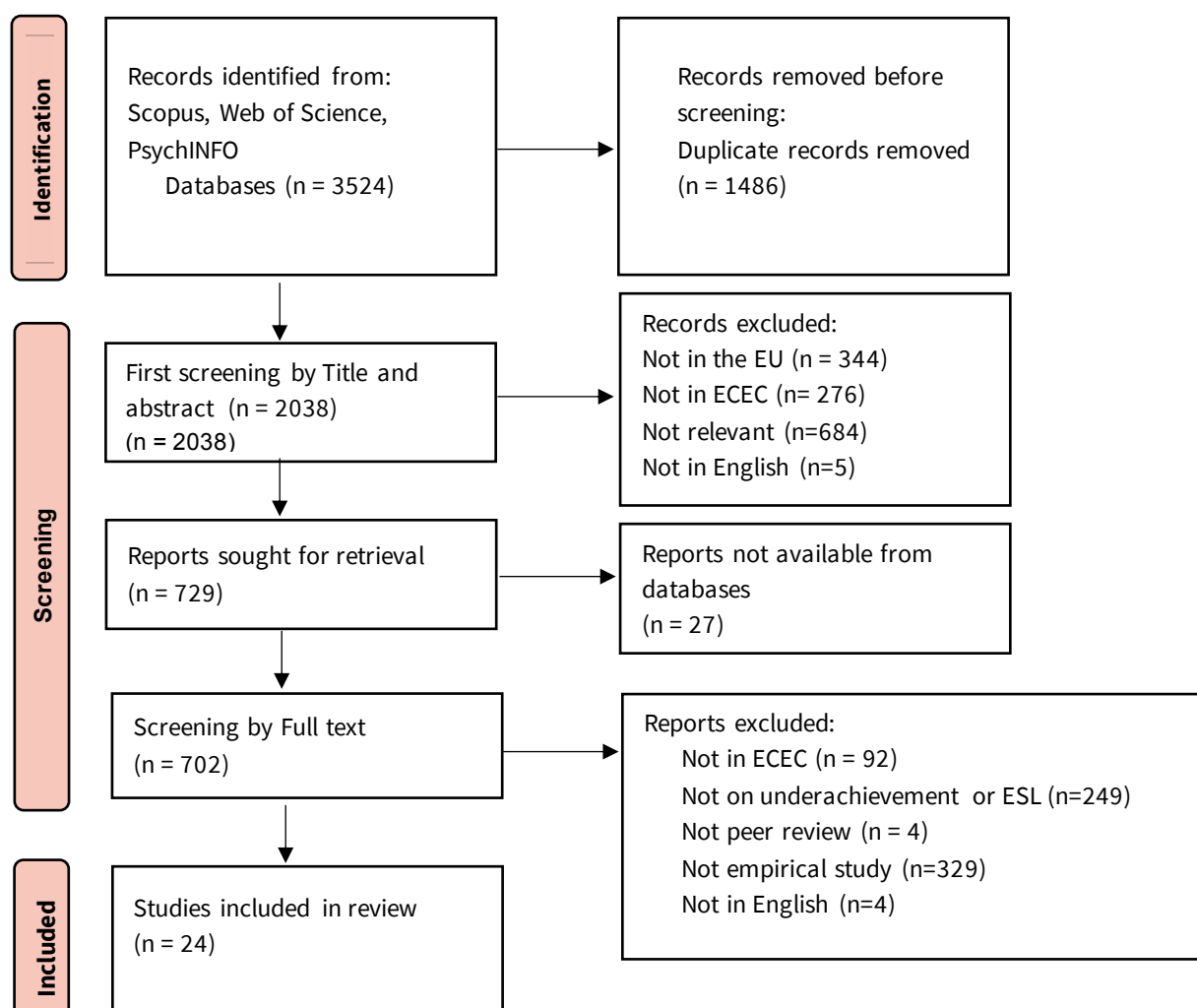
A total of 3524 entries were imported, after which duplicates were identified and removed (n=1486). As a result, 2038 papers went through the first round of screening, using the inclusion and exclusion criteria determined by the whole consortium (Table 2).

Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion criteria used for the selection of publications in the screening process

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Focus on students from early years education.	Pertaining to studies conducted with students out of ECEC.
Focus on social determinant ECEC	Not focused on ECEC
Focus on impact on underachievement and/or ESL.	Tackling the social determinant in isolation, without a link to the impact on underachievement and ESL.
Publications include papers in peer-reviewed journals, books, research reports and other grey literature	Low-quality or unpublished research/literature.
Published in 2003 or later.	Published before 2003
Empirical studies conducted in the EU	Studies conducted outside the context of EU countries. Publications with no empirical data.
Pertaining to relevant disciplines fields (education, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics etc...)	
Literature reported in English.	Publication not in English

Downloading of the resulting entries (n=729) was then sought. With 27 papers which could not be accessed, a total of 702 publications were exported. This was followed by a second round of screening which involved a thorough reading of full texts. A total of 675 papers were excluded. Overall, the results presented in this systematic review from a final total list of 24 articles, all of which met all the inclusion criteria listed in Table 2. Figure 1 summarises the whole process.

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram: ECEC



3.0 Findings of the systematic review

This section presents the findings from the analysed articles in the systematic review. The first subsection presents the number and types of studies included and where they were conducted. The themes which emerged from these articles are then discussed with respect to how different aspects of ECEC are related to underachievement and, eventually, ESL. The main themes pertaining to ECEC which were identified are (1) aspects related to cognitive development (2) early literacy and numeracy, and (3) social and emotional aspects within ECEC. In addition, educational policies that have appeared in the search are discussed, identifying gaps and presenting possible solutions and recommendations for educational policies across Europe are also discussed. Finally, the key takeaways from the systematic review are presented.

3.1 Background to the type of studies included in the systematic review

There were overall 24 papers included in the final list included in the systematic review. These studies originate from twelve different European countries (Belgium, Germany, Sweden, Malta, England, France, Spain, Hungary, the Netherlands, Romania, Finland and Norway) which reflects a good degree of geographical coverage across Europe.

The studies also reflect a range of studies from different areas of study, and which look at different issues related to underachievement and ECEC. It can be noted that a good number of the studies come from paediatric studies, and which focus on medical and cognitive conditions that children are either born with or which emerge at a very young age, and their influence on children's underachievement. Other studies consider practices within ECEC, focusing on role models provided to children and pedagogies used for early literacy and numeracy learning. Other studies looked at children's behavioural difficulties within ECEC and the possibility of being placed in special schools and the consequences of that. There were also other studies which looked at the influence of mental wellbeing and families' social-economic background.

Details about the individual studies included are presented in Table 3 overleaf.

Table 3: List of literature included in systematic review with details about studies conducted

Authors (Year)	Country	Participants	Research Design	Key findings
Arras et al. (2021)	Belgium	47 children with pre-lingual SSD with 34 having intact auditory nerve	Mixed methods	Untreated Single-Sided Deafness (SSD) in children is associated with academic underachievement. A cochlear implant can improve the results and it has become a standard care for children with pre-lingual SSD.
Asendorph et al. (2008)	Munich	230 children born in 1980 –1981 studied between first or second year in preschool until age 12	Mixed methods	Boys with an externalising personality profile were more prone to become educational and occupational underachievers and showed higher adult delinquency rates. There was no significant difference for inhibited boys and girls with regard to risks for educational underachievement, and in delays in establishing a first stable relationship and securing a full-time job.
Axberg et al. (2006)	Sweden	4–12-year-old children who displayed externalizing behaviour problems	Mixed methods	An intervention set up between home and school to prevent antisocial behaviour. A link in detecting anti-social behaviour risks to the early years and intervention to prevent later severe difficulties that can lead to several challenges.
(Bonello, 2022)	Malta	5–6-year-old boys and early literacy learning in three schools	Qualitative	The study presents qualitative findings from focus group interviews with five to six-year-old boys in three Maltese state schools. It showed how boys often experience boredom in class and are consequently reluctant to participate in highly-formalised reading and writing practices in ECEC.
Brownhill (2015)	England	174 men working/ training directly with children aged 0–8 in a variety of roles	Mixed methods	Identifies characteristic of the ‘male role model’ in terms of their acknowledged importance at Stage One alongside being ‘Reliable’ was being ‘Able to demonstrate positive attitudes towards learning’. The importance of male role models to combat boys' underachievement compared to girls is highlighted.
Derivois et al. (2015)	France	91 children and adolescents aged 4- to 17-years-old	Quantitative	The quality of care and support available to children on entering the institutionalised system may be significant as a determinant for later school dropout than cognitive abilities.
(Evangelou et al., 2007)	England	604 children for the intervention and control group	Quantitative	Investigate the effects of the PEEP programme on the community between 1998 and 2004 which focused on mothers and children from birth and shows the impact on children’s early literacy and numeracy skills.
Gonzalez-Motos & Sauri Saula (	Spain	Mother of children aged 1-3 years	Qualitative	The study focuses on barriers to access to childcare among families of different socio-economic levels. The study shows that women with low level and long hours jobs experience the greatest barriers.
Högström et. al. (2015)	Sweden	104 families of children aged 3-11 years	Quantitative	The study evaluated the impact of an Internet-based PMT program with parents on children’s behaviour and completion of homework. Decrease in child problems were observed, even after 18 months.
Jaekel et al. (2016)	Germany	558 children born at 26-41 weeks gestation	Quantitative	The lower a child’s gestational age, the lower the inhibitory control and the more likely that the child has poor attention regulation and low academic achievement. Findings provide new information about mechanisms linking preterm birth with long-term attention difficulties and academic underachievement.
Leigh et al. (2022)	England	10,791 children of 7 years from the Twin and Early Development Study	Quantitative	This study examines the association between internalising disorders and internalising symptoms with academic underachievement. Negative cognition and negative affect experienced between childhood and mid-adolescence were negatively associated at age 16.

(Nagy et al., 2019)	Hungary	54 preterm children and a matched group of 27 healthy full-term children, aged 9–10 years,	Quantitative	Preterm children displayed certain developmental lags, scoring significantly lower in the Full-Scale IQ and the Processing Speed, Perceptual Reasoning, and spatial–visual working memory compared to the non-risk comparison group. Perinatal complications and maternal education were related to the outcome.
(Nicolai et al., 2007)	Netherlands	28 children with possible Epilepsy	Mixed methods	The study focused on learning and behavioural difficulties in benign childhood epilepsy. It identified a correlation with educational impairments. Analysing EEG recording during wake and the first hour of sleep is sufficient to identify children with BCECTS.
(Nita et al., 2021)	Romania	363 adults living in households with at least one school-age child (6-16 years old)	Quantitative	The study tackles low class culture, poverty, family lacking education, geographical isolation, difficulties in traveling/transport, social poverty and poor living conditions. 70.8% of respondents cannot afford to send their children to school, mainly due to relatively large distance to school location.
(Punamaki et al., 2016)	Finland	7–8-year-old preterm and Normal born children	Qualitative	Preterm born boys showed lower levels of cognitive problems than the normal boys, whereas preterm girls showed higher levels of cognitive problems than normal girls.
(Quenzer-Alfred et al., 2021)	Germany	52 pre-schoolers	Quantitative	Nursery shutdown may have had a negative impact on pre-schoolers' educational skills which help to make transitions easier. The study stresses the important role of nurseries to support the transition to school.
Ristikari et al. (2018)	Finland	11,062 female and 11,537 male born in 1987 and followed until the age of 25	Mixed methods	The study concludes that early childhood is a period in which children acquire cognitive and social competencies that form the basis for future wellbeing. The study indicates that economic disadvantage in early childhood poses the most significant risk for later adjustment problems.
Ruppanner (2013)	Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Finland, France, Great Britain, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, United States	7,895 respondents at least 18 years old and currently working	Qualitative	Mothers of young children reduce their work hours upon the birth of a child in countries where long hours are valued report less work family conflict. Longer school scheduling provides mothers with a work-family conflict beyond reduction in work hours. The multi-level results demonstrate that more expansive family leave plays a central role in structuring work-family and family-work conflict for parents of young children.
(Sabbagh et al., 2006)	France	185 children aged between 3 and 16 years	Mixed methods	The earlier the onset of epilepsy, the higher the probability of the child being excluded from regular school. Children in special institutions had greater difficulty relating to peers than to adults. They also presented more often distractibility, overactivity, lack of self-confidence, and compulsions or repeated gestures.
(Schuermans et al., 2022)	Netherlands	1,577 children between 6 and 12 years of age	Quantitative	Mental health problems at age 6 were associated with IQ-achievement discrepancy at age 12, and academic underachievement. Mental health was only independently associated with the IQ-achievement discrepancy. Mental health problems during the transition from kindergarten to elementary school associate with academic underachievement at the end of elementary school.
Theunissen et al. (date)	Netherlands	529 youngsters, aged 18–23 years	Qualitative	Not participating in sports at the age of 4–8 years increases the odds of school dropout. Children who are frequently or persistently absent from school due to illness also tend to perform poorly in school and might therefore be at higher risk of school dropout.
Thimm et al. (date)	Germany	100 early treated PKU patients aged 0 to 18 years	Quantitative	Parents assume that their children (with phenylketonuria which needs dietary control) have a low regard in their scholastic ability and fear schooling problems in the first years of school, parents' fears about their children does not come true.

Toll and Van Luit (date)	Netherlands	884 children were screened halfway through the first year of kindergarten	Quantitative	Children with limited working memory skills experience difficulties in general early numeracy, and in development of specific early numeracy skills. There is a predictive relation between working memory and early numeracy. Children with limited working memory skills at risk of developing mathematical learning difficulties.
Van Waelvelde et al. (date)	Belgium	860 Flemish children (7–12 years).	Qualitative	The significant interaction between age group and type of education. Children in special school settings have delay with respect to handwriting skills. This demonstrates that the course of handwriting development is different for children with learning difficulties.

3.2 Themes emerging from the systematic review.

There were various factors related to underachievement and ECEC identified in the papers included in the systematic review. A number of these factors are related to cognitive development issues which are already manifested in ECEC and are found to be precursors to underachievement years later in the children's educational path. Other problems identified were related to two specific areas of learning, literacy and numeracy, in the early years. The impact of ECEC on mental health and well-being, and vice versa, often coupled with family background, socio-economic status, and being a member of vulnerable groups, also emerged. Details related to each of these three themes identified are covered in the following sub-sections.

3.2.1 ECEC AND PHYSICAL COGNITIVE ASPECTS

Different types of cognitive aspects which play a role in early years education and which are linked to underachievement were identified in the literature reviewed. The studies reviewed highlight how physical disabilities, impairments, or medical conditions children are born with interfere or disrupt the early years of development, well-being and learning, creating a ripple effect and undesirable impact on future learning journeys. Other studies focused on learning difficulties that hamper children's development of basic skills and competences, which are crucial for all children to succeed in education and life.

Physical impairments and later academic underachievement

Physical impairments may impact children's academic achievement and overall well-being from a very young age. Arras et al. (2021) conducted a study in Belgium with 61 children aged 2 to 5 years with Single-Sided Deafness (SSD) for 5 years. It was reported that physical impairments such as untreated paediatric SSD have been associated with developmental delays and academic underachievement. This research study concluded that when cochlear implantation is performed in the prelingual stages of SSD, it is more likely for children with SSD to perform in line with peers with normal hearing with regards to grammar but not necessarily outperform nonimplanted children with SSD or with normal hearing in other language tests such as vocabulary and receptive language scores. However, when considering the long-lasting language difficulties resulting from untreated SSD, and the existing evidence for the preservation of expressive language skills in children, the findings support early cochlear implantation as a 'standard of care' for children with prelingual SSD.

Other studies focused on Development Coordination Disorder (DCD) which involve difficulties related to coordination issues, and which some young children experience in completing motor tasks such as writing, catching a ball, or riding a bike. A study by Waelvelde (Van Waelvelde et al., 2012) carried out with 860 children (among them children in the early years in Belgium) showed that boys with DCD tend to develop skills required for handwriting later than normal boys. The difference was found to be greater among those children who attended special schools due to learning difficulties. This study showed how DCD could lead to higher risk of reading disorders further on. The findings also highlighted how attending special schools does not tend to support such children who need support with the development of their motor skills.



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Epilepsy was also linked to underachievement because of problems with learning and behaviour. Sabbah *et al.* (Sabbagh *et al.*, 2006) conducted a cross-sectional study among 85 children between ages 3-16 years suffering from non-occasional seizures. The study showed that the earlier the onset of epilepsy, the higher is the probability for children to be excluded from regular school. Children with generalized non-idiopathic epilepsy starting before the age of 4, taking multiple antiepileptic drugs, and experiencing behavioural problems ($n = 17$) were found to attend specialized institutions. To the contrary, children not meeting any of these four criteria ($n = 21$) were all found to attend regular schools. The results indicate that exclusion of the child from mainstream education was strongly correlated with early age onset of seizures, type of epileptic syndrome (particularly generalized nonidiopathic syndromes), treatment with multiple antiepileptic drugs, and presence of behavioural problems as reported by the physician. Although school placement was shown to be related to both epilepsy characteristics and behaviour problems, behaviour scores did not correlate with epilepsy variables. This lack of association was unexpected, suggesting that special institution placement was influencing parents' perception of their children's behaviour. The researchers also argued that modifications of the environment and the school situation played a role in revealing or aggravating behavioural problems. However, this potential link between behavioural changes during disease evolution and special school placement needs to be further researched. Findings from this study support the use of early behavioural assessment to identify children with epilepsy who may be at risk for academic achievement problems.

Another study by Nicolai *et al.* (Nicolai *et al.*, 2007) studied learning and behavioural difficulties in benign childhood epilepsy with centrottemporal spikes (BCECTS). The study was carried out among 28 children who had been diagnosed between the age ranges (4 yr 6 months –13 yr 8 months) in the Netherlands, together with their medical, school and psychological reports for retrospective assessment. The children were rated according to a 4-point scale for educational and behavioural impairment. Results show that spike activity during wakefulness does not correlate to the presence of educational or behavioural problems, whereas spike activity in sleep does. These results possibly implicate that electroencephalogram (EEG) correlate with educational impairments, and that analysing an EEG recording during wake and the first hour of sleep is sufficient to look adequately for those EEG criteria in children with BCECTS.

Other studies focused on children conceived through assisted reproductive techniques (ART) and their mental health and development. Punamaki *et al.* (Punamaki *et al.*, 2016) considered 255 children born from ART with 276 naturally conceived (NC) children over a period of 7-8 years and compared their mental health and social and cognitive development. While no problems with social and cognitive development problems were identified overall between ART and NC children, ART boys showed lower levels of cognitive problems than NC boys, while ART girls showed higher levels of cognitive problems than NC girls. However, this was only identified when the maternal report was included which reflects the influence of parental care.

Jaekel *et al.* (Jaekel *et al.*, 2016) focused on determining whether children born preterm in Germany suffered from lower inhibitory control and whether this affected their academic achievement. A longitudinal study with 588 children born at 26-41 weeks of gestation were assessed at 20 months and then again at 8 years on attention and academic abilities. Results from the study show that the lower the child's gestational age, the lower their inhibitory control and more likely for that child to have poor attention regulation and low academic achievement. Better levels of inhibitory control identified at month 20 were found to predict better attention regulation and academic



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achievement at age 8. These findings provide new information about the link between preterm birth and long-term attention difficulties which lead to low academic achievement. The researchers suggest that training in enhancing the self-control of children in the early years may help alleviate long-term achievement problems in view that it has been found possible to train children in self-control.

A similar study was conducted among preterm-born children in Hungary (Nagy et al., 2019). The aim was to evaluate the school-age outcomes of preterm children. 54 preterm children were compared to 27 healthy full-term children from birth to 9-10 years. Tests were carried out for level of intelligence (Wechsler Intelligence Scale), spatial-visual working memory, and cognitive flexibility. Perinatal and socioeconomic factors were also included. The study found that early preterm children born at less than 1000 grammes weight displayed certain shortcomings and developmental lags. The researchers argue that underachievement in many cases of preterm birth may still, at age 10, just reflect a delay in development rather than a deficit in learning. However, earlier born preterm are considered at risk, scoring significantly lower in IQ tests, processing speed, perceptual reasoning, and spatial-visual memory. These studies show that there are a number of physical impairments as well as medical issues, such as being born preterm and suffering from epilepsy and DCD, all of which create developmental issues among young children who are observed to struggle with their education from a young age. The studies imply that there is potential for additional educational intervention/training or support within ECEC to help reduce or even eliminate underachievement further among these children. A few of the studies have also shown that segregation in a special school may also be detrimental rather than beneficial to children with cognitive issues.

Learning difficulties and underachievement

Children experiencing learning difficulties need support as early as possible. A number of studies show how difficulties are evident during early childhood education and care. A study by Toll and Van Luit (Toll & Van Luit, 2013) focused on working memory, which refers to the ability to store and manipulate information simultaneously. Working memory is considered important for learning mathematics, particularly for problem-solving. The study involves 939 children with a mean age of 4.55 years attending kindergarten in 25 schools across the Netherlands. The children were screened for very low working memory scores at two points: halfway through the first year of kindergarten and at the end of the school year. The assessment was carried out for four memory tasks, two visual and two verbal, using the Automized Working Memory Assessment (AWMA). Children with limited working memory skills were found to experience difficulties in general early numeracy and were at risk of developing serious mathematical learning difficulties during primary school. The study implies that working memory is a useful measure to signal children at risk of developing math learning difficulties, or even disabilities. Results, nonetheless, show that there is still a significant effect for time in all analyses, with children improving on their total early numeracy ability and all sub-skills between the first and the second time point, one year later. Fortunately, the difference in performance level compared with typically achieving children does not grow over time. In this research children with limited working memory skills also scored worse in verbal early numeracy tasks than their peers with typical working memory. The study concludes that children with limited working memory merit special attention because they are at high risk of developing severe problems with numerical challenges. It is also important to note that more than half of the children identified with limited working memory in the first measure, were found to be normal by the second measure. This indicates that deficit in working memory skills in young children fluctuates, suggesting that deficits at this age are not yet stable. The researchers highlight that it is worth investigating whether all children, with or without limited working memory skills, profit equally from support (curriculum and instruction) throughout kindergarten education.



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Further research should focus on the stimulation of early numeracy skills of children with limited working memory skills with specific early numeracy training to explore whether it is possible to bridge the gap between children with normally developing working memory systems and atypically developing children. The study indicates that there is potential for intervention at ECEC to prevent children with limited working memory to catch up and decrease the probability of underachievement.

3.2.2 ECE, GENDER, NUMERACY, AND LITERACY LEARNING .

ECEC is often cited as key to ensuring early literacy and numeracy skills in preparation for formal education at primary level. The studies identified are related to practices within ECEC and how they may play a role that leads to underachievement in numeracy and literacy. The studies included here highlight gender differences in response to learning experiences of literacy in ECEC, with boys starting off at a disadvantage early in their educational path. It also highlights the value of family input to a child's achievement. Early identification of the need for support and social assistance, as well as affordability, were also considered crucial to ensuring the development of early literacy and numeracy.

Gender and literacy in ECEC

In a study by Bonello (Bonello, 2022), qualitative findings from focus group interviews with five to six-year-old boys in three Maltese state schools showed how boys often experience boredom in class and are consequently reluctant to participate in highly-formalised reading and writing practices. Such practices are rooted in an inherited legacy of formal education in a postcolonial context. Given the persistent global concern about boys' underachievement in literacy, the author argues that education systems must listen to young boys' opinions about highly-formalised literacy practices, as it impacts their learning. Bonello (2022) concludes that there is a need for more rights-based, socially just, and democratic early literacy pedagogies that take children's voices into consideration in the best interest of all children by embracing child participation in policy, research and practice from an early age.

From a gender perspective, the work of Brownhill (Brownhill, 2015) also reports selected findings from a mixed-methods research study focused on male role models in the early years as an attempt to narrow the gender gap in attainment. The article draws on the responses of men working in the early years sector for 0-8 years through questionnaires (48% of 174) and focus-group interviews (male members of senior management teams in primary schools) – the first two stages from three in this research study. Results indicate diverse individual characteristics presented by male role models, which are highly likely to be influenced by the children and other stakeholders' expectations, such as parents and staff. The author argues that there is tension between male role models' characteristics influenced by individual personality and beliefs and the ones that are imposed or foreseen by others. Hence, it is somewhat challenging for men to act as positive male role models. The research points out the importance of critical reflection for self-awareness of qualities or characteristics that male educators promote when educating and caring for young children. As previous studies show, same-sex role models may not be the solution to underachievement. The concept 'role model', however, needs to be rethought, and its impact in educational scenarios examined further.



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Family intervention, access to ECEC, and impact on language, literacy, mathematics

An article by Evangelou et al. (2007) reports on the results of the Birth to School Study (BTSS), a six-year evaluation of the UK early intervention Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP) (1998-2004). The primary objective of PEEP was to promote early literacy, numeracy, and self-esteem through family-focused intervention in view of addressing the risk of educational underachievement. Progress in families and children's language and early literacy skills were reported following the intervention, indicating. Parents who attended PEEP sessions regularly reported a significantly enhanced parent-child interaction when the children were one year old. At age two, they also rated significantly higher the quality of their caregiving environment. These parental outcomes emerged before any of the child outcomes related to progress in language and the foundations of literacy became apparent. The findings also showed that children from participating families made significantly greater progress over time in vocabulary, phonological awareness of rhyme and alliteration, letter identification, understanding of books, and print and writing. The researchers concluded that there is the potential for identifying mediating routes to help children, mainly those who are growing up in disadvantaged contexts, to access literacy skills and combat underachievement. The study also suggests that the quality of relationships between children and families needs to be supported as it is an effective strategy to promote meaningful early learning experiences.

Another study, conducted in Sweden, focused on family intervention by (Högström et al., 2015) sought to evaluate the retention of treatment gains generated through parent management training (PMT), operated through the Internet, with an 18-month follow-up. 58 parents of children aged between 3-11 years with conduct problems (who experienced a 10-week PMT programme, with minimal therapist support) participated in this study. Findings show that 55.2% of the parents who participated in the follow-up phase indicated that their children's conduct problems continued to diminish, yet their skills declined. The Internet-based PMT program was effective in reducing child conduct problems in the short term. Child hyperactivity was significantly reduced, and pro-social behaviours among children increased. Parents reported less use of harsh parenting practices and increased use of positive and praising parenting skills by the end of the PMT program. At the 18-month follow-up, conduct problems and other outcomes were retained or improved, except for praise and positive parenting. The study showed that Internet-based PMT and parental tacit acceptance of homework promoted a more positive experience for children with conduct problems at an early age.

Educational Inequalities, affordability, and access to ECEC

González-Motos and Saurí Saula (Gonzalez-Motos & Sauri Saula, n.d.) highlight the link between access to early childhood education services and addressing educational inequalities. In their study, they interviewed 34 mothers of under-three-year-olds attending both state and private childcare services in Barcelona to understand their decisions when choosing a setting. Findings show links between the socio-economic background and the needs of mothers, and the childcare provision chosen. For example, low-income mothers were able to access and afford state settings, and the quality attracted both the middle and upper class. Yet, working-class mothers' needs were not met in the state childcare provision and they could not afford to pay for high-cost private childcare offering more flexible services. The authors argue that the state school system for childcare services should be rethought to be more inclusive and flexible for all women. Such evidence reveals the important elements of access and affordability as part and parcel of quality ECEC, which, as other studies here show, will ultimately influence future academic achievement and well-being of young learners.



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A recent study in Germany (Quenzer-Alfred et al., 2021) centered around the notion that basic school skills during nursery are critical for future smooth transitions into primary school and success and achievement, particularly for low-performing learners. The authors report that the unprecedented event of COVID-19 terminated the access to face-to-face special educational support of children coming from a socially marginalised area during their last year in nursery. To this, the authors examined the development of 49 preschoolers' basic skills (language and mathematical skills) during this nursery lockdown period. The Intelligence and Development Scales 2 was administered prior to and post the closure of nurseries and interviews were conducted to increase the reliability and value of the data gathered. Key findings report a drop in language and mathematical skills, highlighting the essential role of early childhood education and care in the learning and development of young children. The authors argue that nurseries are essential for all children to experience smoother educational transitions and acquire the necessary basic skills to thrive in school and life. In conclusion, the study points to a need for developing a system of sustained and accessible educational support and equity for all children, also in the event of nursery closures.

Ristikari et al. (Ristikari et al., 2018) examined the link between the timing of parents' social assistance receipt and early adult outcomes through a longitudinal study. The work presented draws on the data from the 1987 nationwide Finnish Birth Cohort (FBC), which includes all children born in 1987 (N=59476). This group was followed up to the age of 25 (1987-2012). Findings report that the timing of social assistance receipt determined the increase of risk of several problems including early school leaving, criminality, teenage pregnancy, poverty, and mental disorders. A key finding was that economic disadvantage with under-tuos was associated with the highest risk. The study also reports that at any age in childhood, poverty had stronger connections with early school leaving rather than with criminality, teenage pregnancy, and mental health. Overall, conclusions from this longitudinal study reiterate that economic disadvantage in the first years of a child's life is the highest risk for future problems, including poverty, academic achievement, and overall well-being.

3.2.3 ECEC AND SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL ASPECTS

Early detection and intervention and collaborative efforts between different microsystems in which young children inhabit are deemed to be crucial in tackling psycho-emotional difficulties and overall wellbeing in the early years of children's lives and schooling, with significant impacts on later academic attainment or underachievement. The following sub-themes exemplify the way individual well-being and motivation to engage in educational contexts intersect with ECEC and/or early childhood development and learning.

Early intervention, personality traits, and significant life outcomes

The notion of early school leaving is regarded as a multidimensional, life-course phenomenon. Leigh et al., (2022) explored the links between internalising symptoms and educational achievement in twins born between 1994 and 1996 in the United Kingdom to understand the causes and correlates of individual differences in academic achievement, more specifically with regard to high levels of anxiety and depression. Participants were included in the study if they showed anxiety-related symptoms at 7, 9, 16, and 18. Results connect negative affect to be a possible marker for subsequent academic underachievement at all time points, from mid-childhood through to early adulthood. However, the link becomes insignificant when using MZ twin difference scores, which places the relationship onus on genetic and shared environmental influences.



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Early intervention is encouraged for psycho-emotional factors such as self-regulation, controlled temperament, and prevention of anti-social behaviours. For instance, Asendorph et al., (2008) expose the long-term risks of under controlled temperament, aggression as well as social inhibition. Assessments of high aggressiveness and high social inhibition at 4-6 years of age were linked to personality and significant life outcomes at 23 years of age. The Munich Longitudinal Study on the Genesis of Individual Differences (LOGIC) followed 230 children from their first or second year in preschool through to age 12. With an attrition rate of 29%, 147 longitudinal participants were followed up at age 23. Results pointed to three important conclusions – the accuracy of preschool teacher judgement in predicting significant developmental outcomes in adulthood for inhibited and aggressive preschool children, confirmation of the long-term effects of aggression in childhood, and delayed social transitions along the school years.

Axberg et al., (2006) also focus on anti-social behaviour in the early years and the risks for later severe difficulties in different spheres of life in a study aimed at developing and evaluating the effectiveness of an early detection and collaborative intervention programme with 34 4-to-12-year-old children with externalised behaviour problems at school. Although results yielded from the intervention programme were promising, with a significant decrease in symptoms connected to antisocial behaviour in both school and home, it was also noted that improving and increasing the home-school link would possibly lead to ‘new behaviours and the generalisations of effects between the different microsystems’ (p. 386). The link to ECEC is detecting anti-social behaviour risks early in life and intervening to prevent later severe difficulties that could lead to several psycho-social and emotional challenges.

Access to learning, engagement, and well-being in special populations

A study conducted by Nita et al., (2021) in Romania with 363 respondents aged 18 years or over and who were living in households with at least one school-aged child (6-16 years) confirmed previous results of other studies that one in two children living in rural Romanian communities are at risk of poverty and socio-economic marginalisation. One quarter (24.1%) state they live in families where at least one school-aged child does not attend school for several reasons, ranging from financial difficulties, distance to school, older siblings (especially girls) helping out with taking care of young children or of the household, low level of education of parents, and teacher discrimination against them amongst others. Of these 24.1%, 77.6% belong to the Roma minority. Deficiencies in educational infrastructure, intergenerational poverty and marginalisation, and low levels of education in parents lead children living in rural Romanian communities to find it difficult to engage and attend school regularly which ultimately leads to dropping out of school. Conversely, the results also point to greater family involvement in their children’s education in families who give a high value to education. Ultimately, poverty, and socio-economic marginalisation including the family profile are viewed as the main determinants of school dropouts.

Derivois et al., (2015) present the results of a pilot study conducted with 91 children aged between 4 and 17 years of age (45 of which were girls) who at the time of the study were under the care of the French child protection system. The aim was to identify effective ways to assess and prevent the likelihood of later school dropout in children in care. Age was a factor in attitudes towards their own problems and failures, including academic underachievement, with younger participants attributing their difficulties to the poor quality of the environment around them, whilst the older ones were more likely to place the blame on themselves rather than externally. Sadly, children and adolescents in care tend to view their placement in care as a constant reminder of the deficiencies of their family life and of their deprivation of family support. Thus, by ascribing their failure to their own problems rather than to teaching methods, participants fail to take advantage of the supportive systems offered by their placement. Results point to the problem



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of school dropouts in children and adolescents in care as not exclusively tied to cognitive difficulties but to the quality of the care and support available in familial, academic as well as institutional contexts. Self-esteem in children in care is said to be adversely affected by these environments, where they experience unfavourable social representations of their status as children in care. These factors compound to prevent them from engaging and accessing learning. Collaborative efforts between the different environments in which children in care operate are essential to prevent school dropout and to intervene early on in children's lives before their mindsets become fixed on their own 'self' as the source of their problems.

Self-regulation, behavioural outcomes, and academic achievement

The early years of schooling are seen as crucial for the development and practice of self-regulation in young children, a skill that is linked to later mental health benefits, academic achievement, and behavioural outcomes.

Thimm *et al.* (Thimm *et al.*, 2013) evaluated the health-related quality of life (HRQoL) and deviant behaviour in early-treated children. The study involved 100 children (among them in early years education) and adolescents and their parents. Results show that parents assume that their children (who suffer from phenylketonuria which needs dietary control) have low regard in their scholastic ability and fear schooling problems in all age periods. Especially in the first years of school (also preschool), parents are afraid that an as-yet undiagnosed intellectual impact might occur. Whereas parents may project their own fears concerning school problems onto their children, this presumption was not observed in the study. The study does highlight the need to support children in managing their educational process alongside their dietary requirements.

A recent study by Schuurmans *et al.* (Schuurmans *et al.*, 2022) investigated the association between child mental health problems and IQ-achievement discrepancy in emerging adolescence. A population-based group of 1,557 children was involved. Mothers and teachers assess child mental health problems at the age of six by making use of the Child Behaviour Checklist and the Teacher's Report Form. IQ was measured with the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Fifth Edition at around the age of 13. Also, academic attainment was measured with the national Dutch Cito test at age 12. Key findings report that there is a correlation between mental health at age 6 and IQ inconsistencies at age 12, indicating higher risks with academic underachievement. Interestingly, the study revealed that attention problems were the sole mental health issue to correlate with the discrepancy in IQ achievement. The discovered correlations were consistent with the boys and girls' participants in the study. The authors call for attention to the mental health problems during the transition from kindergarten to elementary schooling and how this influences academic underachievement – particularly, as mothers and teachers reported, when rooted in attention problems. Strategies for targeting attention problems in the early years are recommended as a hopeful avenue for improved future academic progress.

Collaboration, family policy measures, and the home-school link

Ruppanner (2013) identifies ECEC as one of four policy measures taken into consideration when exploring conflicts between work and family in ten countries including Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Finland, France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United States. With a sample of 7,895 respondents in the 2002 ISSP module, a multi-level data set that combined country-level policy data with individual-level data was analysed to assess the association between work-family and family-work conflict and family-friendly policies. Results indicate less work-family and family-work conflict in countries that embrace more expansive family leave and longer school schedules



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for parents of young children. The study also points to wider gains to the health and well-being in populations with less work-family conflict.

Improving and increasing home-school links through the building of two-way communication, information exchange and mutual trust are valued as possible pathways towards early detection and intervention of the development of anti-social behaviour in the early years as a way to prevent later psycho-social and emotional difficulties (Axberg et al., 2006). The significance of collaborative efforts between children's lifeworlds for the prevention of later academic underachievement is also seen as part of the solution in communities at risk of poverty and socio-economic marginalisation such as the Roma minority, where parents' low levels of education engender school absenteeism or school dropout for some or all of their offspring (Nita et al., 2021). The significant impact of genetic and shared environmental influences in a study conducted with twins on the association between internalising symptoms such as negative affect and educational achievement (Leigh et al., 2022) also points to the need to work collaboratively with families to help develop effective parenting skills that may ultimately influence a child's life course through the creation of possibilities for social and emotional learning (ESL).

3.2.4 CONCLUSION ABOUT ECEC AS A SOCIAL DETERMINANT OF UNDERACHIEVEMENT

This systematic review showed that there are few studies that focus on specific aspects and practices in ECEC, which may lead to underachievement among certain groups of children later on in their education. Research tends to reflect an overall strong conviction among early years researchers that ECEC is beneficial to children and has an overall positive impact on their success in education as they grow up. This may be mainly due to most research focusing on the positive impact of ECEC practices rather than on how practices, or lack of them, can result in some children underachieving.

The review has shown how a lack of intervention in the early years with children experiencing difficulties due to medical issues, physical impairment or cognitive development issues, often results in these children already underachieving at ECEC level. This happens mainly due to lack of expert early years educational advice and support, a qualified workforce, implementation of inclusive practices, early intervention, adult-child ratios, access and affordability, and parental engagement in young children's learning. If there is no additional help for these children to make up for their slower rate of development and overcome their learning barriers, they have a higher probability of falling behind and underachieving. This was evident, for example, in young children who were born preterm (Nagy et al., 2019), or suffer from deafness (Arras et al., 2021), epilepsy (Sabbagh et al., 2006) or short working memory (Toll & Van Luit, 2013). The impact was more significant in children who demonstrated behavioural problems who were found in a number of studies to end up in special schools, increasing learning barriers, with higher levels of underachievement (Van Waelvelde et al., 2012).

While there were few studies that highlighted underachievement as a result of educational practices within ECEC, some glimpses were obtained, particularly with reference to boys and men in ECEC. In view that there are more males than females who are early school leavers and so also underachievers, these aspects provide very important insights. Highly-formalised early literacy pedagogy was considered as not attractive to boys, who claimed at the age of five that they get bored, thus indicating how they start losing their motivation to learn very early in their educational path (Bonello, 2022). In this light, this review also shows how the concept of 'male role models' in ECEC is influenced by



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the expectations of other stakeholders, engendering a challenge for men to act as positive role models (Brownhill, 2015).

The studies also touch on family support and socio-economic background. They show how programmes that support parents in how to engage with and educate their young children lead to improvements. They also highlight how the lack of support for families with young children is often reflected in the children's underachievement (Nita et al., 2021). These findings show that when children experience difficulties with learning, whatever the cause of their struggles, if they go unnoticed and education provision does not cater to support children to overcome them, they will underachieve.

3.3 Interplay between ECEC and other social determinants on underachievement.

There are some insights from the review which show that ECEC on its own may have a role as a social determinant for underachievement. For example, this was found in a number of studies related to cognitive and medical studies (Punamaki et al., 2016; Sabbagh et al., 2006), where underachievement could be identified already in ECEC, but which at least, persisted, if not grown, as the children proceeded with their education. Socio-emotional well-being among children at a young age, particularly those who demonstrate behavioural problems also tend to suffer at ECEC level, often ending up in special schools, which, rather than help them catch up, exacerbates the children's learning capabilities as they are labelled as incompetent or too difficult to cope with at a young age and consequently fall behind even more (Van Waelvelde et al., 2012). Social-economic status was another determinant where, children from families of low socio-economic status, without support or intervention at ECEC, tend to underachieve and start falling behind their peers from early on in their education (Ristikari et al., 2018).

There is a good degree of intertwining between ECEC and other social determinants of underachievement. The studies reviewed highlight how underachievement due to other social determinants tends to emerge and start becoming noticeable in ECEC. While ECEC can be a social determinant of underachievement in itself, if the impact of the intertwined social determinants e.g. medical, cognitive, socio-economic and socio-emotional are not identified, and more so, if no intervention or action is taken to support those children who are unlucky to experience directly the impact of those social determinants of underachievement, they are doomed to become early school leavers. In all, this review surfaces an interplay between ECEC and other social determinants on underachievement and how this is influenced by the lack of provision of quality practices in the early years supported by a competent system (Urban et al., 2012).

3.4. Policies, gaps and solutions

3.4.1 POLICY APPROACHES TARGETING [INSERT YOUR SOCIAL DETERMINANT]

Policy recommendations for ECE with respect to underachievement include:

- Promoting a multisectoral approach in ECEC, that embraces greater collaboration with other professionals, including expert early years educational advisors, to ensure best support for all children attending ECEC.



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- Potentially develop an effective and supportive provision of early intervention to identify and address social determinants of underachievement at play for each child, enabling the ECEC workforce to develop sustainable intervention programmes which maximise support to all children and families in ECEC. Additional specialist assistance in ECEC settings would also help in reaching out to all children, including those with a disability.
- Policies promoting ECEC provision which supports meaningful and purposeful early literacy and numeracy learning experiences for all children and their families; using pedagogies that nurture these skills but not killing the will.
- Countries are to aim for a fully highly qualified workforce in ECEC. Professionalising the workforce through several pathways for career progression, including work-based training, is key towards quality right from the start.
- Policies that include family engagement and support, families as partners, in ECEC provision, also with the intention to support those children from low socio-economic backgrounds or other forms of deprivation not to fall behind with their learning.

Political priority for quality ECEC, the required policy infrastructure and strategic action planning, and the necessary funding is needed to transform the policy to practice if societies want to address future challenges related to academic achievement and overall well-being.

3.4.2 GAPS IDENTIFIED IN EXISTING RESEARCH STUDIES

This review of the literature has identified a number of gaps when it comes to studies on the correlation between underachievement and ECEC. These gaps can be categorised to involve the following aspects:

- There is need for established procedures and practices and expert intervention and support to enable ECEC educators to identify those children who are, or are at risk of underachieving.
- There is lack of focus of research on underachievement in the early years to identify across the board the groups of children who are at risk of underachieving.
- There is need to look closer at how ECEC educators can work with other professionals from the medical, psychosocial fields etc. to identify early in ECEC those children who are at risk to underachieve and find ways to support them with their learning and development.
- There can be more studies to identify the different factors in ECEC provision which, although overall beneficial to particular children, may be holding some children back as a result of type of, and lack of type of ECEC practices.
- There is need for more study on the ways in which ECEC is impacting on young children's well-being, learning, and development through child participation.



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There is the need for longitudinal research that includes children, educators, leaders and experts in the field to create new understandings of the link between ECEC, underachievement and ESL.

- There is also need for research on family aspects and underachievement, as well as on how support systems can help families with young children from low-socio-economic background, to reduce the probability of the children from underachieving.

More studies are needed to reduce the barriers to effective and quality provision in the early years and the urgent strategic action needed at this critical phase to mitigate the persistent challenges related to the future academic achievement and the well-being of citizens in Europe and societies at large. SCIREARLY aims to contribute to this gap in knowledge.

3.4.3 POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS FOR REDUCING THE IMPACT OF ECEC ON UNDERACHIEVEMENT

The studies in this systematic review have shown how the impact of particular social determinants lead to some children underachieving from a very early stage. The same studies, however, have also shown that ECEC practitioners have a window of opportunity to help children close the gap early. For example, in the case of limited working memory (Van Waelvelde et al., 2012), the researchers have argued that through the use of particular pedagogies, it is possible to help young children improve their working memory, and change a deficit into a simple delay which can be overcome. Interventions with families, as in the case of the study by Evangelou et al. (Evangelou et al., 2007), show that supporting families from low socio-economic background can lead to the necessary support which prevents children from such backgrounds to fall behind. It is thus clear that ECEC plays a crucial role in the identification of those social determinants for underachievement and in acting on them to at least reduce, if not eliminate, underachievement as early as possible so that many more children can succeed.

The literature repeatedly shows that early investment in the quality of ECEC begets future success in academic achievement and the overall well-being of individuals later in life.

4.0 Key takeaways from the systematic review

This systematic review has highlighted the limited studies that focus on ECEC as a social determinant of underachievement. None the less, it was still possible to deduce a number of key takeaways which can be identified to be:

1. ***The lack of quality early intervention and expert early years advice and support to cater to the special learning and development needs*** of young children due to various medical, physical, and cognitive problems leads to underachievement needs to be urgently addressed.



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2. **The participation of young boys in research confirms that highly-formalised early literacy pedagogies decrease their** motivation to learn. This cannot be overlooked given the global context of concern on the gender gap, favouring girls, in literacy attainment.
3. **Children with behavioural issues at a young age tend to be tracked to special schools early in their educational path**, raising the probability of these children underachieving more than children with similar problems but with less behavioural issues.
4. **Children born in families from lower socio-economic backgrounds** and who possess less capabilities to support their children with their early education can lead to their underachievement.
5. **With the right monitoring, support and interventions embedded within the provision of quality ECEC there is the potential to help many children, if not to catch up**, to at least reduce the gap and not fall too much behind. Political priority to quality ECEC is a must because top-down quick solutions will never address the foundations gaps to reduce ESL to 9% by 2030 (Bonello, 2021).

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Horizon Europe

A Systematic Literature Review of the Determinant Gender Associated to School Underachieving and Early School Leaving.



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Systematic Review on Social Determinant Gender



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1.0 Introduction GENDER, UNDERACHIEVEMENT AND Early School Leaving

This Systematic Review of Literature (SRL) is part of the first work package (WP) of the Scirearly project - <https://scirearly.eu>. The project's final aim is to determine successful policy approaches and practices based on scientific evidence that reduce the underachievement in basic skills, including digital skills, while fostering psycho-emotional aspects and well-being, thus contributing to reducing early school leaving (ESL) in Europe.

As a first step, the team needs to gain a systematic understanding of how different determinants affect students' achievement. The consortium researchers agreed that the determinants to be studied would be: a) Early Childhood Education and Care, b) Cognitive, c) Institutional, d) Socioeconomic Status, e) Culture, f) Linguistics, g) Gender, and h) Psycho-emotional and well-being.

Gender refers to socially constructed characteristics and attributes of men, women, boys, girls, trans and non-binary people that relate to specific norms, roles, and relationships that vary from society to society and that can change over time. Although people may have some possibilities of negotiating them contextually, these norms, roles, and relationships are learnt and reproduced via socialization, create expectations regarding what is appropriate to people from different genders, and produce patterns of inequality and domination between people.

This systematic review of the literature aims to analyse what is known about cognition as a determinant that may influence achievement and early school leaving, and how it relates to other relevant determinants of school achievement and early school leaving.



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2.0 Methodology. a systematic review of Gender as Determinant of Underachievement and Early School Leaving

When thinking about learning and school achievement or underachievement, issues of gender will look at how people identifying with different genders - men, women, boys, girls, trans and non-binary people – deal with and construct specific norms, roles, and relationships, that contextually and historically, influence and affect the lives, opportunities, and experiences of people in educational contexts, and their impact in the well-being, success, and permanence in education.

This Systematic Review used the PRISMA protocol and started with the following keywords and search script: (("early school leaving" OR underachievement OR "school failure" OR "dropout") AND (boys OR girls OR male OR female OR trans OR non-binary OR gender) AND (inequality OR segregation OR discrimination OR stereotype OR norms OR expectations OR roles) AND (primary OR elementary OR secondary OR school OR "early education"))

The filters were set to exclude any result not written in English and any work not from the Europe Union or the United Kingdom and retrieved only publications published between 2003 and 2023. The search was carried out in Web of Science, PsycINFO, and Scopus. All the data were retrieved from the database on February 2nd, 2023. The search yielded 666 results. After removing all the duplicates, 513 results remained.

For the subsequent steps, the inclusion criteria of results were:

10. Focus on students from early, primary, and secondary education.
11. Focus on gender as a determinant.
12. Focus on the impact of the determinant gender on underachievement and/or ESL.
13. Publications are high-quality papers published in peer-reviewed journals. Relevant books, policy documents as well as research reports, and other grey literature from relevant public and private institutions.



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14. Published in 2003 or later.
15. Empirical studies conducted in the context of EU Member States or the UK.
16. Pertaining to relevant disciplines/ fields (education, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics etc.) to represent interdisciplinarity as an approach to the review.
17. Literature reported in English.
18. Literature search to take place between January twenty-fifth and March third 2023.

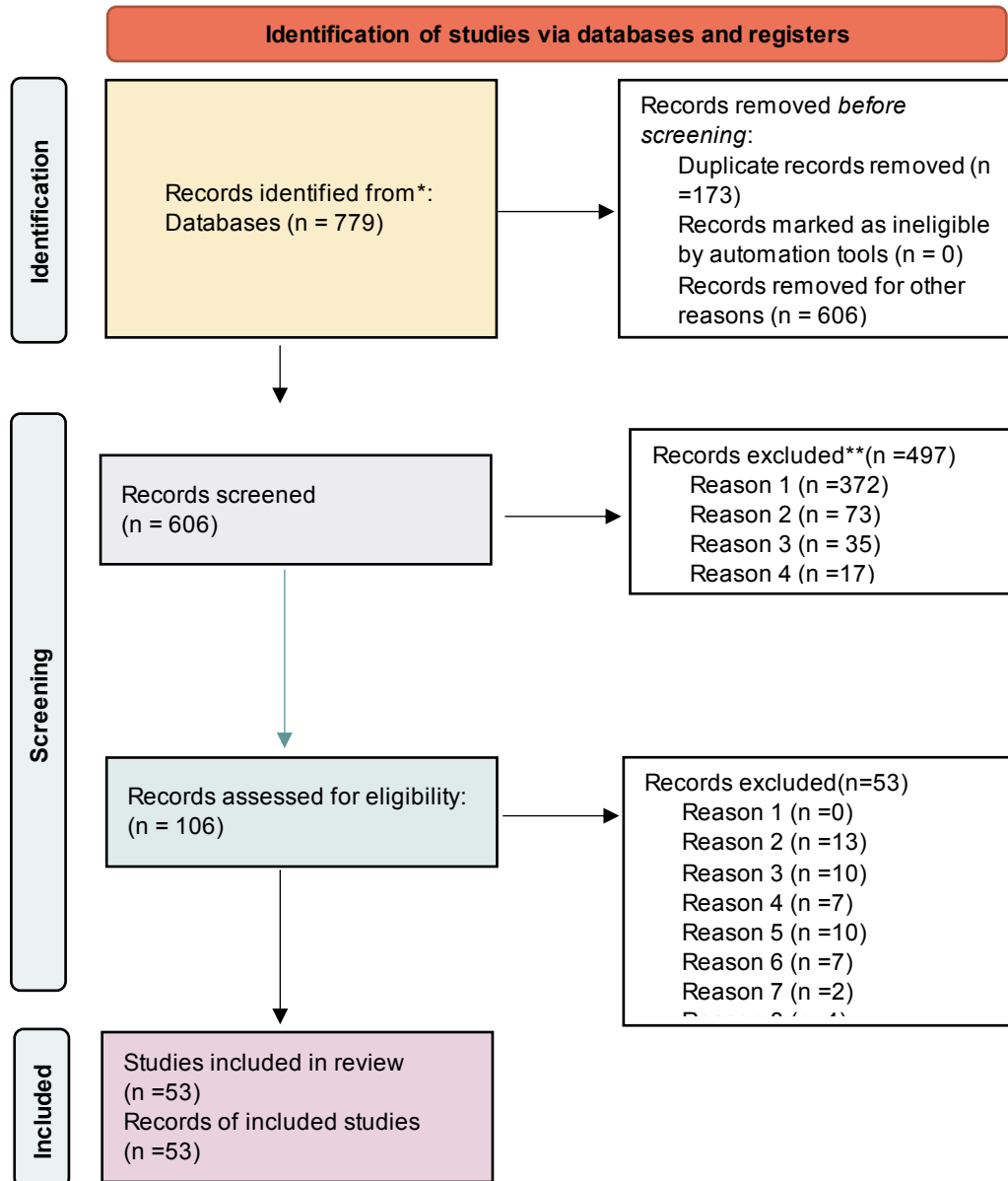
For the subsequent steps, the exclusion criteria of results were:

9. Low-quality or unpublished research/literature.
10. Pertaining to studies conducted with students out of ECEC and compulsory schooling.
11. Published prior to the year 2003.
12. Tackling the social determinant gender in isolation, without a link to the impact on underachievement and ESL.
13. Studies conducted outside the context of EU countries.
14. Publications with no empirical data.
15. Publication not in English.
16. Publication not connected with the determinant (gender).



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Systematic Review of Social Determinant Gender. Prisma 2020 Flow Chart



Reason 1- Other themes unrelated to underachievement or dropout

Reason 2- Outside the EU

Reason 3- Other determinants (not gender)

Reason 4- Outside ECEC or compulsory education

Reason 5 – Without impact on underachievement and ESL

Reason 6 – Publications without empirical study

Reason 7- Articles not in English



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Reason 8 – Not codifiable

3.0 Findings of the systematic review

3.1 Background to the type of literature included in the systematic review

Types of empirical studies	Quantitative n=35	Qualitative n=11	Mixed methods n=6	Ethnography n=1
Place/Location	England or UK- n=15	Various countries- n=3	Denmark-n=2	Romania-n=1
	Spain-n= 8	Belgium-n=3	Italy-n=2	Sweden-n=1
	Netherlands-n=5	Finland-n=3	Portugal-n=2	Ireland-n=1
	Germany-n=5		France-n=2	
Size of samples	Up to 2000 subjects n=20	2000 to 10000 n=10	10000 to 50000 n=3	Above 100000 n=2
Types of objectives	✓ Male teachers' absence from educational system and the feminization of teaching (Gender match, role models, teacher gender's impact) ✓ Gender differences in students (Achievement and ESL gaps, Mental Health, Misconduct, Engagement and Expectations) ✓ Boys' underachievement and ESL higher rates ✓ Girls' underachievement (Cultural limitations, anxiety at subjects)			

3.2 Themes emerging from the systematic review.

In this systematic review on gender as a determinant of underachievement and/or early school leaving, the findings shed light on a variety of issues, namely the underachievement of boys, the shortage of male teachers (and the feminisation of teaching), particularly in pre-school education and primary schools, and the effects that increasing the presence of male educators could have on the school achievement of boys. Another issue that is often present is the perceived gender stereotyping of students' performance, whether by teachers or by the children and youngsters themselves.

3.2.1 GENDER DIFFERENCES IN PERFORMANCE AND DROPOUT RATES



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a) Boys have lower school performance and/or higher dropout rates than girls.

Underachievement has been a widely researched topic for its social, economic, and political implications. In this Systematic Review of Literature (SRL), the included research continues to show a persistent trend of significantly lower achievement and higher dropout rates among boys, compared to girls. This can be observed in various educational settings and regions throughout Europe (Bayon-Calvo et al., 2021; Bastos et al.; 2009; Cavaco, 2021; Cavaglia, 2021).

Both variables appear closely connected, of course, with underachievement being a strong predictor of dropout, making boys more likely to leave school early (Borgna & Struffolino, 2017). Furthermore, the school achievement of boys is even worse when there are many girls in the classroom (Briole, 2021).

This underachievement gap is, as it might be expected, interwoven with other variables and presents many nuances. In terms of core subjects, Cavaglia et al. (2020) have examined this gap over the course of schooling, with data covering a span of 20 years. By the age of seven, girls outperform boys in all core subjects (reading, writing and mathematics). The gap remains at the secondary level, except for mathematics, where the difference is almost imperceptible.

b) Negative effects of schooling and underachievement on girls

In a large number of countries, female students have shown greater anxiety about mathematical tasks than their male counterparts. This is also associated with less self-confidence and less motivation for mathematical tasks in girls. (Coronado-Hijon, 2017). In fact, in many OECD countries, Pisa results show that girls perform less well in mathematics than boys.

Girls also experience more school-related burnout than boys, which in turn can lead to "psychological distress, exhaustion, cynicism and reduced school-related achievement" (Salmela-Aro et al., 2008, p.22).



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3.2.2 Theme 2 – Perceptions of gendered differential achievement

Students' perceptions of gendered differential achievement

Children and young people's perceptions of inequalities in achievement pertain to a traditional view of gender roles: boys are seen as both behaving and performing worse at school, and this stereotypical view is shared by both genders, although it is stronger in the girls' group. Eventually, this expectation of differential achievement and potential can become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Hartley & Sutton, 2013). When these achievement beliefs are experimentally controlled, and they were given prior information about gender equality in performance, the boys' group achieved better results. Girls were not affected by the expectations.

Following this line of reasoning, when another behaviour strongly associated with underachievement and dropout, misbehaviour at school, is considered from a gender perspective, the data confirm that misbehaviour is more common among boys and increases more rapidly over time (Heyder et al., 2021). This can be explained by the fact that male adolescents who reported feeling more pressure to conform to gender norms showed a greater increase in misbehaviour compared to other male adolescents who did not feel the same pressure to conform to gender stereotypical norms. The results show a very high correlation between pressure for gender conformity and school misbehaviour among male adolescents only.

In terms of students' attitudes towards reading, boys did not support each other in reading activities, which were considered less masculine and were subject to derogatory comments. The topics and materials in boys' and girls' reading experiences are also seen as different, with boys preferring less fiction and more newspaper articles rather than books with stories (Atkinson, 2009).

TEACHER'S PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS' GENDERED DIFFERENTIAL ACHIEVEMENT.

In some cases, teachers' attribution of the difference in results and behavior in the classroom seems highly dependent on an apparently biological causal explanation of traditional gender characteristics – boys are described as less responsible, more immature, less able to focus, whereas girls are seen as more interested and invested in tasks, more responsible and focused (Cavaco et al., 2021). In the same vein, reading abilities, motivation, and interest were also perceived by adults as highly gendered activities for students. When confronted with the existing gender gap in educational achievement, most teachers in Cavaco's et al. (2020) interviews did not recognize such a difference. After being confronted with the official data, of higher failure and school dropout rates among boys, many teachers still sustained that it was not a situation they were aware of in their own schools. Students' failure was considered as resulting from individual and family characteristics.

Finally, an interpretation was put forward on how the feminization of teaching and the lack of preparation and adaptation of teaching and evaluation strategies to students' gender could result in girls performing better.



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Moreover, teacher preconceptions about the abilities of boys and girls can have an influence on gender achievement gap. The curricula and subjects' themes might also be more adequate and interesting for girls.

Focusing on the gender role attitudes of preschool teachers and their impact on the development of boys' and girls' reading skills, Wolter et al. (2015) found that the stronger the traditional gender role attitudes of the teacher, the less boys showed interest in learning to read and their reading skills in primary school were also reduced. The same effect was not observed for girls.

3.2.3 Theme 3 – Teachers' gender: can it affect the achievement of students?

Some governments have argued that the lack of male teachers may have a negative effect on the achievement of male students, with weak scientific evidence to support this idea. Some policies have, since, been implemented, with the aim of equalizing the representation of both genders in teaching, especially in preschool and primary schools.

From the perspective of the school community, there is no consensus on this statement and positions vary. Francis et al. (2008) questioned both primary school teachers and students to understand their views on the lack of male teachers, and the results show that they generally do not support the notion that the gender of the teacher has a real impact on achievement. Instead, individual characteristics are emphasized. Male and female teachers were not perceived as different because of their gender, especially by students.

Those students who thought that teachers did indeed have specific gendered methods, skills and attitudes, offered a traditional, stereotypical perspective, in the sense that they thought male teachers were better at maintaining discipline in the classroom, or that female teachers were friendlier. In other cases, the children's attributions were exactly the opposite, describing male teachers as kinder or female teachers as more "shouting". In terms of achievement, the same perspective emerged, with most students stating that it would make no difference whether the teacher was male or female, in terms of how difficult or accessible learning would be. However, 30% thought that it might be worse to have a teacher of the opposite sex.

If we focus on the perspectives of teachers, there is again little support arises for the theory that attracting more male teachers would reduce the underachievement of male students: "Some female teachers expressed



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disquiet at the policy drive for other reasons. A few were clearly angry and/or defensive at the discursive ‘unsaid’ of the policy (see Foucault 1980), that women teachers are inadequate to engage boys. (...). Others observed how male teachers already tend to be promoted more quickly and/or to be disproportionately represented in positions of power within primary education. (Francis et al., 2008; p.30).

Meanwhile, some male teachers held a different perspective, supporting the notion that a male model might have a positive effect on boys from single-mother families. There could be, in their opinion, a stronger bond, with shared interests, such as football.

Despite this view, when asked if they made any adjustments to suit the gender of the students, about half the men and about a third of the female teachers replied positively. As an example, many male teachers admitted to adopting a different attitude toward girls, being gentler, and harsher with the boys. Only one of the interviewees emphasized the dangers of stereotyping the interests of boys and girls, reminding that many female students have a real interest in football, as well as many male students engage in activities like skipping rope (Francis et al., 2008).

A similar qualitative study carried out in primary schools, collected perspectives on male recruitment and gender-matching policies (Carrington & McPhee, 2008). The collected data could be grouped into two main categories. First, there was a general consensus among teachers that it would be positive to have more male teachers in schools, in order to reduce current gender stereotypes. Secondly, other participants validated the same measure, of attracting male teachers, but as a means of having more “male role models” available for boys, or in other words, to fill the lack of masculinity traits that they identify as a problem in the school context. There was a widespread argument that the presence of more men could increase the achievement of boys and their motivation, as well as improve their behavior. This claim was felt more strongly by male teachers. Furthermore, in their own personal experience, some male teachers referred to the isolation they felt, sometimes being the only man in a world of women, as a setback to some of them continuing in teaching or attracting other male teachers.

De Salis et al. (2019) interviewed both teachers and trainee teachers, focusing on the potential impact of male primary teachers on boys. Most participants believed that all boys would benefit from having male role models, particularly those growing up without a father figure. However, in terms of school achievement, only 18% of participants believed that having male teachers would help boys to improve their results (with the majority of male



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respondents supporting this idea). While many expressed a belief in the notion that the abilities of people from different genders were different, with male teachers being portrayed as more authoritarian and athletic, and female teachers as more maternal and supportive, others did not support this notion at all. In conclusion, de Salis et al. (2019) emphasize the urgent need to prevent future teachers from upholding gender stereotypes. As prospective educators, they share a responsibility to recognize and combat limitations created by gender bias, and should develop equality in the classroom. According to the authors, it is essential to include the history and basic concepts of gender in training.

Teacher gender and student engagement

Using an ethnographic lens Grønborg (2013) noted that students showed strikingly different attitudes towards male and female teachers (this was a VET mechanics training class where all students were male). They behaved and engaged better with the male adults and acted with contempt towards the female teacher. The subject taught by this female teacher was considered by most of the students to be too theoretical and not worth investing in, in contrast to the practical, mechanics training classes, taught by the male teachers. The disengagement was a consequence of belonging to the ‘boys’ culture, thus replicating stereotypical gender attributions about this kind of manual work.

Furthermore, in the field of school satisfaction, more specifically in the subject of mathematics (Mora, 2012) the results have clearly showed a higher satisfaction with female teachers. This effect of the gender of the teacher was stronger for girl students, but it was also noticeable in boys. To this fact, it may contribute that male teachers in the study expressed more negative views about their own ability to change students’ interest and motivation to learn mathematics.

Lack of male teachers and educators- causes and effects

In an attempt to understand why so few men choose primary teaching as a profession and why so many give up during their training, Geerdink et al. (2010) interviewed male and female trainees. In terms of their attitudes towards training, male students were more concerned with their own development and interests, reported low motivation for the profession, and seemed less interested in



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the subjects and tasks. Male student teachers also disliked pedagogy and education sciences, and preferred more concrete subjects, when compared to their female counterparts. Another relevant finding was that the more stereotypically masculine traits the student displayed, the higher the dropout rate throughout the teacher training program.

The presence of male educators in In early childhood education also emerged as a topic (Bhana et al., 2022). When interviewed, these male professionals described the presence of men in ECEC as being seen as unorthodox by the school community. There is a clear social constraint in what is traditionally seen as a non-masculine field, as the prevailing stigma surrounding men's ability to be caring and nurturing is deeply rooted, and popular fears of possible abuse or violence towards children are an insidious expectation. Men revealed feelings of not fitting in, of being criticized for not choosing more masculine careers. Male educators felt their identity was being challenged: “The normative constructions of gender based on nappy changing as women’s work continues to place stress upon men and masculinity as they confront a broader system of gender power relations through which their identities are assaulted as not ‘real’ men and emasculated.” (Bhana et al. 2022; p.551).

3.3 Interplay between gender and other social determinants on underachievement.

As might be expected, gender performativity in schools is often intertwined with other aspects. One of the most striking interplays found in the literature has been how cultural conditions intersect with gender variables.

3.3.1. Gender and cultural determinants

It has been reported that Roma children have high rates of early school leaving (Alvarez-Roldan et al., 2018). Alvarez-Roldan et al. (2018) conducted mixed methods research to better understand how the elements of a multiethnic educational community (including teachers, students, parents) could explain the high dropout rates among Spanish Roma students.

There were different perspectives among the clusters of responses, with some participants, reproducing some common (and stereotypical) views of the Roma community, claiming that the Roma



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families did not engage with the school routines and sustained sexist attitudes, and therefore did not support the education of Roma girls. Roma participants disagreed with these statements but acknowledged that girls in the Roma community can suffer from some limitations, including the pressure to take care of their younger sisters and brothers, amongst other tasks. Furthermore, the low level of literacy among Roma parents contributed to the girls' limited progress at school. In general, there was some recognition of the existence of discrimination against girls to which cultural aspects around family and marriage systems contribute. Early marriage and unequal gender expectations may contribute to the exclusion of Roma girls from better educational opportunities (Alvarez-Roldan et al., 2018).

Based on a participatory approach, Garcia et al. (2017) have reflected on the trajectory of two Roma women and their struggle for the inclusion of young people from their own Roma communities in the education system. Working as mediators, their fieldwork and agency also operate as positive role models for Roma girls. These mediators work with teachers to help de-construct social stereotypes, associated with the cultural minority, and support the emancipatory mission of education. They value resources, such as community mediation and increased communication between families and teachers as tools for transformation and the promotion of intercultural and community exchange.

Meanwhile, in the UK, there is growing concern about racism within the education system, and more specifically about how minority male students are affected in the school context. In their own discourses, non-white boys recognize experiences of racial discrimination in the education system, namely from their teachers, who, for example, treat them more harshly in moments of indiscipline. There is a clear stratification associated with blackness in the school context (Graham & Robinson, 2004). Looking at how gender intersects with minority status, work by Strand (2014), shows that girls achieve better than boys in white groups, but even more so among Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black Caribbean students. In fact, Black Caribbean girls make further progress, compared to their male peers, than White girls do in relation to White boys. When low socio-economic level is added to the intersection, White British students perform worse than all others, with White British girls at the lowest point. In the middle SES, all ethnic groups perform as well as or better than their White British peers, with the exception of



Black Caribbean boys (Strand, 2014). Similar results were obtained by Gerritsen and van Zenderen (2012), in the Netherlands, where girls also perform better than boys, but the gap is wider for immigrant students. This may be explained by a higher level of school satisfaction among immigrant girls. Socio-economic level, social capital, and school environment seem to moderate the effect of ethnicity. Furthermore, immigrant girls express more frequently how their parents emphasize the importance of education than immigrant boys do. This is in line with findings from Sweden (Behtoui, 2017) on the academic expectations of young people: girls, students from higher SES and young people of immigrant backgrounds manifest greater hope and satisfaction from their parents regarding their educational attainment.

3.3.2. Gender, Psycho-emotional, and Well-Being Determinants

Psychological traits associated with gender, and their consequences for academic achievement, have also been studied. In the case of mathematics, there is evidence that motivation and confidence levels are not similar for boys and girls (Coronado-Hijon, 2017). More girls (35%) than boys (25%) expressed inability to solve mathematical problems. Girls also showed higher rates of internal attributions of failure, and thus more aversion and anxiety, as well as lower motivation, towards mathematics homework.

In general, girls are more likely to report poorer mental health (Hjorth et al., 2016). However, mental health characteristics may also vary according to educational attainment, NEET status and symptom type (Minh et al, 2023). Young men without a Basic Qualifications Certificate, as well as NEET men, experience higher rates of externalizing symptoms than those with higher qualifications. There were no differences for young women in these conditions. As for internalizing symptoms, higher rates were observed for both young men and women who were NEET, compared to those who were not. With a similar pattern, in a vocational education context, boys showed more externalizing symptoms, while girls more internalizing symptoms, in both vocational and regular tracks (Parviainen, 2020).

Among adolescents, both the family and the school environments were found to be related to life satisfaction (Povedano-Diaz, 2020). While the amount of aid and support by teachers perceived by



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students significantly affects the well-being of both boys and girls, girls exhibit more positive relationships and better social adjustment.

Other determinants and intersections

Other links between gender and social determinants were present in the literature, even though less prominently. Specifically, we identified intersections with Cognition (Freeney, Y., & O'Connell, M., 2012), Early School Leaving (González-Betancor & López-Puig, 2016; García Crespo et al, 2019), the Institutional dimension (Salmela-Aro et al., 2008; Clinciu, 2014; Hartas, 2016; Felgueroso, et al., 2014) and School Climate (Edwards & Jones 2018; de Koning & Boekaerts, 2005), as well as socio-economic status (Bricheno & Thornton, 2007; Zava et al., 2022) and other characteristics of students understood as individual (Hakkarainen et al., 2015; Skelton, et al., 2010; Wolter et al., 2014).

3.4. Policies, gaps, and solutions

3.4.1 POLICY APPROACHES TARGETING GENDER.

UK government policy on teacher recruitment prioritizes increasing the number of male teachers, particularly in primary schools. A stated strategic objective of the Training Development Agency for Schools' Corporate Plan (2003-2006) was to increase the number of male trainees by 20 percent each year. To this end, the TDA launched a strategy to attract men into primary teacher training. This policy is based on the widely held belief that students perform better when there is a 'match' between the characteristics of students and teachers in terms of gender and ethnicity (Francis et al. 2008; de Salis et al., 2019).

Policies promoting 'open schools', that is, democratic schools with a community-based culture are seen as a way to further the inclusion of minority students (gender and other). In these schools, the classroom experiences should be connected to the outside world. In addition, strong communication between families and teachers should be encouraged to bring families closer to the school and teachers closer to the community (Garcia et al. 2017).

3.4.2 GAPS IDENTIFIED IN EXISTING RESEARCH ON GENDER



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A striking (and worrying) gap in the research is the notorious absence of studies focusing on genders other than those on the binary when examining school underachievement and dropout. Research on school achievement and dropout from a perspective that includes gender diverse and non-binary students is lacking and could be important to further our knowledge on the school experiences, success and well-being of these students including links to mental health and experiences of bullying and discrimination.

Some studies have highlighted the need for more research on masculinity and femininity and their possible negative effects in education (Theunissen et al., 2015).

3.4.3 POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS FOR REDUCING THE IMPACT OF GENDER ON UNDERACHIEVEMENT:

1. Suggestion to improve boys' motivation to read: provide a wider range of books and reading materials in school, such as newspapers, magazines on different topics, comics, swap cards, non-fiction books. Students should be more involved in reading choices at schools (Atkinson, 2009; Edwards, 2017).
2. Reflecting on policies designed to increase male presence in teaching: rather than presenting targeted recruitment as a solution to male underachievement and disaffection from school, initiatives to make the classroom more 'representative' should be justified by a stronger appeal to social justice and equity, and presented as part of an inclusion strategy
3. A broad, diverse and relevant curriculum can go a long way to improving success with targeted minority groups of boys. To cater for students' diverse interests and learning styles, the curriculum needs to offer a range of options, particularly for 14-16 year olds. Monitoring performance, communicating high expectations, improving staffing, implementing an inclusive ethos and involving parents can also be effective strategies. Recruiting teachers from the local community, including from the same ethnic minority communities as the students, can facilitate the success of this approach (Lindsay & Muijs, 2006).
4. In the training of future teachers, it is fundamental to work on and challenge gender stereotypes. The profession itself should become less tolerant of simplistic understandings of recruitment difficulties (de Salis et al., 2019).
5. Regarding the participation of Roma girls in education (Garcia et al., 2017), the results of the critical analysis of oral histories suggest the need for change:

- i. *“from a disciplinarian academic culture based on segregation,*



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individual effort, little participation from the community and the absence of recognition, to a community-based academic culture of redistribution, in which schooling becomes relevant in the lives of Roma girls as a necessary tool for emancipation without jeopardizing their acceptance in the Roma community” (p.381).

6. The use of community mediation to bring about change in education and the need for increased interaction between families and teachers, as well as the promotion of intercultural and community dialogue, are comprehensive strategies to improve Roma girls' achievement and persistence.
7. Boys' performance can be improved by tackling stereotypes about gender and achievement. Boys perform better when they are told that they are expected to perform as well as girls. Mixed ability desks and classes can also be beneficial. In classrooms, students are often placed in desks according to ability, with boys over-represented in low ability groups. (Hartley & Sutton, 2013)
8. Two main strategies appear to be useful in facilitating boys' help-seeking in schools: First, teachers should try to create conditions that enable even boys who are very concerned about their masculinity to seek help, for example providing good feedback. Second, it is important to change classroom norms so that help-seeking is no longer seen as a threat to masculinity, for example by providing male (and masculine) role models who do seek help (Kessels & Steinmayr, 2013).
9. There is a clear need to eradicate ideologies reinforcing men's presence in Early Child Education and Care as an 'unorthodox situation', and to work towards ending the normalization of ECEC as a 'woman's job'. This should involve a process that extends beyond a gender binary perspective, in order to offer equal support and value to the presence of education workers across the wide gender spectrum' expression (Bhana et al., 2022).
10. Good mental health is an important factor to consider in preventing school dropout and should be emphasised in school-based programs and staff training (Parviainen et al., 2020). It is also important to consider how gendered processes create differences in mental health and their downstream effects (Minh et al., 2023).
11. Community-based strategies could be useful in counteracting institutional racism. Strategies such as African-centered life cycle development programs, could be integrated into pedagogical strategies. In



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addition, educators should be more willing and trained to listen to the experiences of young black people (Graham & Robinson, 2004).

12. There is a need to create the conditions for greater acceptance and understanding of different gender roles and beliefs in the school context. Future research should go deeper to investigate the role that gender variables still play in interactions with peers, parents and teachers (Theunissen et al. 2014). Furthermore, teachers should be trained to address gender stereotypes and pay special attention to involving girls in activities that are typically masculine and boys in activities that are typically feminine (Wolter et al., 2014).

4.0 Key takeaways from the systematic review

a) There is clear evidence of higher levels of underachievement and early school leaving among boys. It should be noted that:

- This gap is mediated by socio-economic and cultural variables. In groups from lower SES, and minority groups the difference is bigger (except in the UK);
- Boys' underachievement is rooted in stereotypical gender roles that translate into differences in attitudes, self-expectations and behavior, and thus affect male students' engagement.

b) There is a shortage of male teachers, particularly in primary schools and ECEC and a discussion regarding how this may relate to the underachievement and ESL of boys.

- Teachers display a strong traditional gender perspective on male and female roles as educators – teachers (male teachers in particular) point to the benefits of having masculine role models at school to match the characteristics and interests of boys, to provide male models for those for boys from single families, and to complement the styles of female teachers (sometimes assuming clear differences between them). There seems to be a lack of academic knowledge and a critical perspective on gender construction and performativity among the school staff, which perpetuates gender stereotypes and their consequences in daily interactions in the school environment.
- Teachers' expectations vary according to gender, consequently influencing boys' self-perception and engagement in academic tasks.



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c) The implementation of policies and institutional measures designed to tackle traditional binary gender role attitudes, viewpoints, constructions and behaviors across educational community may improve boys' achievement and make schools work in the promotion of social justice and progress.

d) A striking feature of this literature review is the lack of studies focusing on trans and non-binary students. Their school experiences, school underachievement and dropout rates are not examined, nor are other elements that, given their minority status, may be important to investigate in relation to academic success and integration, particularly social and psychological well-being.

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Horizon Europe

Poverty is not their destiny!

Work Package	WP1 - Analysing causes and social determinants of underachievement
Identifier	
Task	Task 1.1 – Systematic Review on Social Determinants – Socio-economic Factors and Early School Leaving
Lead Beneficiary (for sub report)	Dublin City University – Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection
Authors	Sarah Gardezi, Gerry McNamara, Mike O’ Sullivan, Orla Walsh, Martin Stynes, Joe O’Hara, Martin Brown and Aideen Cassidy
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Systematic Review on Social Determinants – Socio-economic Factors and Early School Leaving



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1.0 Introduction

An early leaver from education and training, also known as an early school leaver, according to EU definitions, is an individual between the ages of 18 and 24 who has not continued their education or training after completing lower secondary education (Eurostat, 2021; Eurydice, 2014). ‘Across the EU, approximately six million youth leave school, on a yearly basis, before acquiring basic qualifications or skills required to enter the labour market’ (Moarcas et al., 2020, p. 6). Early school leaving is a pressing and complex issue that has gained significant attention on the European educational agenda. By 2030, European nations have committed to reducing the rate of early school leavers to below 9% (European Council, 2021). Students dropping out of school before completing their compulsory education or training have negative consequences for both the individual and society as a whole (Bayón-Calvo et al., 2020; Beekhoven & Dekkers, 2005; Freeney & O’Connell, 2012; Mínguez, 2013; Sacco & Rose, 2022; Traag & Van der Velden, 2011). According to these studies, when we look at the larger picture, early school leaving often leads to a chain of adverse corollaries for society. These may include a decrease in national income, tax and revenues, heightened reliance on social services, a rise in criminal activities, a decrease in social and political involvement, restricted intergenerational mobility as well as inter-generational poverty, poor health conditions, and most significantly, a lack of fulfilment of human potential. While at the individual level, the repercussions are: a higher risk of unemployment, poverty, social maladjustments or even exclusion, psychological problems and delinquency. Tarabini et al. (2019) argue that the occurrence of early school leaving in Europe challenges the fundamental principles of European education systems, which are supposed to ensure equal opportunities and the right to education for everyone.

Eurostat (2021) reports that the proportion of 18 – 24-year-olds leaving education and training in the EU is 9.7% on average, with significant variation among member states, ranging from 2.4% in Croatia to 15.3% in Romania. A few countries, including Ireland, have achieved a rate of early school leavers below 5%. Conversely, countries such as Spain and Italy have rates around 13%, closely following Romania. Despite 16 EU member states reaching the goal of reducing early school leaving below 9% even before 2030, with the disparities between countries there remains a need for ongoing efforts to address the phenomenon Europe-wide.

Early school leaving (ESL), as Bayón-Calvo et al. (2021) define it, ‘is a complex phenomenon that has multiple causes and is affected by multiple factors, with different dimensions that are usually interconnected’ (p. 482). ESL is an ultimate outcome of a gradual process that has several early signs, such as amotivation, behavioural issues and truancy followed by long absenteeism and disengagement leading to low academic performance. The factors and actors affecting ESL are divided into two large groups, according to a Eurydice report (2014). The first set relates to individual and family circumstances including - socio-economic status (SES), migrant or minority background and gender and the second set comprises the education system-related factors which impact ESL grade retention, socio-economic segregation or early tracking, smooth transition to upper secondary education, relevant curricula, better availability and accessibility of different educational pathways and flexibility in the education system that allows school completion to all students (p.35). Brown et al. (2021) in their study categorise them as exogenous (outside the education system) and endogenous factors (pertaining to the education system and school).



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Though the factors and actors contributing to ESL are intertwined, this report focuses exclusively on the socio-economic factors causing ESL. The report is one among the several intellectual outputs of the Horizon Europe Project 'Policies and Practices based on Scientific Research for Reducing Underachievement and Early School Leaving in Europe' (SCIREARLY). SCIREARLY is a consortium of eleven partners from Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain and the UK. The partner countries have been implementing policies and measures for tackling early leaving since ESL is identified as one of the major issues of social inequalities however, they have varying rates of ESL (Eurostat, 2021; Eurydice, 2014). The ESL rates in Europe are especially higher among vulnerable groups, for instance, refugee and migration background and Roma students. The SCIREARLY project endeavours to investigate, in its first phase, the impact of underachievement on ESL from all aspects, which has not been extensively explored previously. In order to accomplish this objective, a comprehensive review is being conducted to analyse various social determinants of underachievement, such as institutional, socio-economic, cognitive, linguistic, gender, psycho-emotional, and well-being. A set of reports, including this one, will be produced, each focusing on one determinant at a time. This type of detailed analysis of the social determinants of underachievement has not been systematically conducted in previous research.

This report utilises the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews) technique to provide a comprehensive overview of the socio-economic factors contributing to ESL. The study is organised around answering the following research question.

What does the existing literature say about the underlying root causes and socio-economic factors associated with underachievement in relation to ESL?

The initial part of the report offers an introduction and overview of the study and project, followed by a section outlining the definition of socio-economic status that was utilised for the literature review and screening methodology. A tabular presentation of the background of the literature included in the report is displayed in the subsequent section. Section 3 provides a comprehensive review of the themes that arose from the systematic literature review, as well as a brief discussion of the relationship between socio-economic factors and other social determinants of underachievement and ESL, and policies to address underachievement as well as any gaps and potential solutions. The fourth section summarises the entire discussion and emphasises the key points from the systematic literature review. Finally, the references to the literature cited in the report are listed in the last section.

2.0 Methodology for the implementation of the social determinant

2.1 Definition of socio-economic status that guided the literature search



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Socio-economic status is a broad concept and has multiple sociological and economic dimensions. For the purpose of this literature review, we will adhere to the following definition: One's socio-economic status defines one's access to financial, social, cultural, and human capital resources. A student's socio-economic status comprises three key components: family or household income, type or prestige of parents' occupation (parents' occupational status) and parents' educational level (type and amount of parents' education)³.

Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines steered our review of literature. This protocol ensures transparency in the selection process of papers and enhances the reporting quality in a systematic review. It also facilitates the replicability of a systematic literature review. We followed a predefined search protocol that consisted of research objectives addressing the research question, specific keywords, and a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria to screen relevant articles and remove irrelevant ones. The PRISMA statement defines a sequence of precisely stated phases that guarantee the precision of the research process and the applicability of the outcomes, as noted by Khalfaoui et al. (2021, p. 72). We made every attempt to ensure transparency, validity, replicability, and adequacy by closely adhering to the PRISMA statement, as recommended by Moher et al. (2009), during the search, selection and extraction phases.

The SCIREARLY consortium collectively established the protocol and guidelines for the literature search. We also shared the word strings with the partners for review before starting the database searches.

2.2 Databases and search strategies

The keyword searches were conducted in March 2023 in three databases: Web of Science, PsycINFO and Scopus. We opted for these databases based on their comprehensive range of data sources and easy-to-use interface. The databases were searched using the following word strings and phrases:

1. socio-economic factors AND early school leaving
2. poverty AND early school dropout rates
3. early school leaving AND socio-economic status
4. impact of socio-economic background on education
5. early school leaving AND social inequality
6. socio-economic disadvantage AND education outcomes
7. poverty AND school dropout
8. economic disadvantage AND early school leaving
9. socio-economic disparities in education

Prior to conducting the initial search in the electronic databases, we applied a date filter ranging from 2003 to 2023. A total of 6184 results were identified from three databases (Web of Science, n=3165; PsycINFO, n=82, Scopus,

³ American Psychological Association (APA). (2023). Socio-economic Status. Accessed <https://www.apa.org/topics/socioeconomic-status>



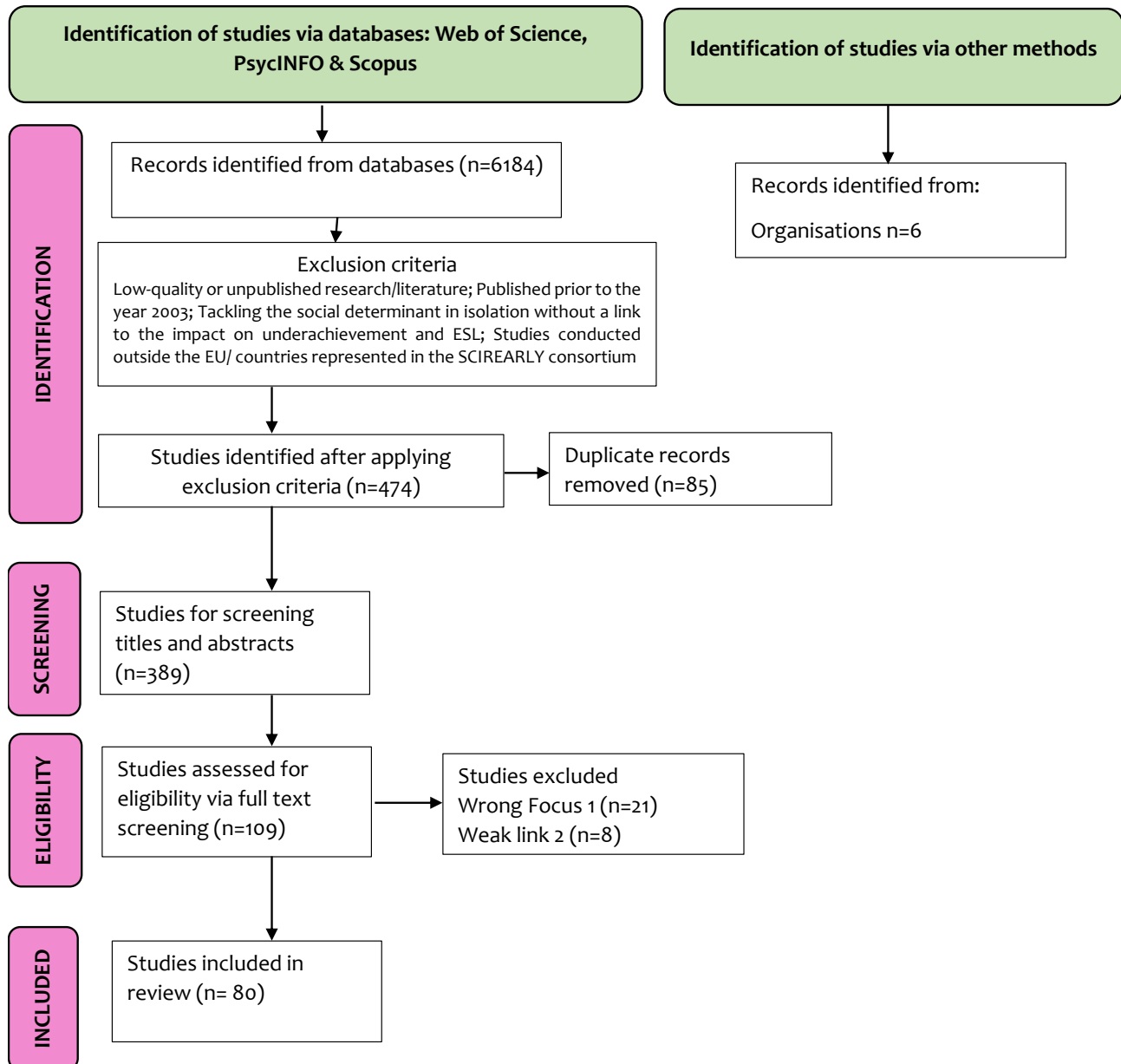
n=2937). Following this, we proceeded to apply inclusion and exclusion criteria as defined by our research objectives. We limited our search to journal articles written in English and focused on European countries with the subject areas of Education and Educational Research, Social Science, and Arts and Humanities. We excluded conference proceeding papers, book chapters, and review papers. Our screening process, as outlined in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1), yielded 474 results. These results were then exported to the Zotero reference manager to remove any duplicate articles. A total of 85 duplicated papers were eliminated, resulting in 389 articles being retained.

After the first search, we performed the first level of screening by examining the titles and abstracts of each article to determine their relevance to our research objectives. As a result, 109 articles were identified as relevant and progressed to the full-text review. During the full-text review, we excluded 29 articles that were not directly focused on underachievement or ESL (n=21) or looked at attainment in one subject or subjects without referring to socio-economic factors (n=8). Ultimately, 80 articles met our eligibility criteria and were included in the systematic review.



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Figure 1: The PRISMA flow chart for searching, screening and identifying articles about Socio-economic factors preventing/causing Early School Leaving



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3.0 Findings of the systematic review

3.1 Background to the type of literature included in the systematic review

Study	Objectives	Place	Size of Sample	Methods used
1 Anderhag et al. (2013)	To examine (a) the relationship between variables associated with socio-economic background and application frequencies to the Swedish Natural Science Programme (NSP) in upper secondary school and (b) whether there are lower secondary schools in Sweden that seem to compensate for these variables.	Sweden	the entire population of 106,483 ninth-grade students	Quantitative analysis of secondary data - Data from Statistics Sweden (SCB) covering the entire population ninth-grade students were used to calculate the probability for each student to apply to the NSP.
2 Atlay et al. (2019)	To investigate if teaching quality has the potential to reproduce, or even exacerbate social achievement inequalities or to reduce them.	Germany	3,738 students in 194 classes in multitrack	Quantitative analysis of secondary data-longitudinal data from PISA-I-Plus, which is a part of the German national extension to PISA 2003 study



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3	Bademci et al. (2020)	To present the findings of surveys- factors leading to early school leaving and to contribute to the development of a novel methodology that fosters equity, inclusivity and equality in education where marginalised children feel valued.	Bulgaria, Italy, Malta, Romania & Turkey	796 teachers and 900 students from Bulgaria, Italy, Malta, Romania and Turkey completed standard electronic surveys. The teachers' survey consisted of secondary school teachers from Bulgaria (N = 147), Italy (N = 105), Malta (N = 71), Romania (n = 261), and Turkey (N = 212). For the second survey, 250 secondary school students from Bulgaria, 109 from Italy, 67 from Malta and 401 students from Turkey took part in the study.	Two online surveys with teachers and students
4	Balenzano et al. (2019)	The article was aimed at testing the effectiveness of the Stories in Play project based on two hypotheses: is, it is effective in improving students' self-esteem, self-efficacy, and well-being at school. 2. It impacts students' classroom behaviour and social skills.	Italy	230 students were used to estimate SIG outcomes, focus group discussions (2 groups with 14 students each), interviews with two teachers and three social workers.	The research used a mixed-method approach: in the quantitative phase, a two-group pre-/post evaluation design involving students and in the qualitative step, stakeholders' focus group discussions and interviews have been used to interpret results.
5	Bayón-Calvo et al. (2021)	To analyse some of the endogenous factors behind ESL	Spain	Aggregate Data of Spanish regions	Quantitative analysis of secondary data



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6	Bayón-Calvo, Corrales-Herrero & De Witte (2020)	To develop a procedure to account for regional differences in assessing performance regarding early school leaving.	Spain	All regions in Spain: LFS data	Quantitative analysis of secondary data (Matching analysis). Spanish microdata of the Labour Force Survey
7	Beekhoven & Dekkers (2005)	The paper studies the role of participation and identification in the process of early school leaving and assesses the contributions of socio-economic background and available resources	Netherlands	157 boys following the lower vocational track	Four questionnaires in consecutive years
8	Behtoui (2017)	To explore the determinants of the educational expectations of young people in disadvantaged urban areas	Sweden	50 schools among students in their final year of 'compulsory school' (ninth grade) and the first year of 'secondary school'(n=2033).	Questionnaire survey
9	Bianchi et al. (2021)	To investigate the prospective relationships between peer acceptance and two aspects of well-being at school—intention to drop out of school and negative self-esteem—specifically focusing on the differential effect of having (vs. not having) an immigrant background.	Italy	249 preadolescents and adolescents living in poverty (Mage = 12.76; SD age = 2.34; 41.8% girls; 19.3% immigrants)	online survey



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10	Bodovski et al. (2017)	To examine the relationships between family socio-economic status (SES), cultural capital, and reading achievement among students in five post-socialist Eastern European countries	Bulgaria, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Russia	All students who participated in PISA 2000 and 2009 in these five countries. Bulgaria: n=4657, 4507; Hungary: n=5365, 6064; Czech Republic: n=4887, 4605; Poland: n=3654, 4917; Russia: n=6701, 5308	Quantitative analysis of secondary data: Data from the 2000 and 2009 waves of Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)
11	Borgna et al. (2022)	To investigate the potential equalising role of such real-world school guidance	Italy	The analytical sample was composed of 46 schools: 15 participating in the intervention and 31 schools not participating.	A mixed-method research design- Analysis of Arianna Test Score. a non-participatory observation of all phases of the intervention: the four classroom meetings and the final meeting between the COSP counsellor and the head teacher to examine the Arianna test results and formulate their recommendation
12	Bradshaw et al. (2016)	To examine the impact of perceived discrimination on well-being, perceptions of safety and school integration amongst children growing up within socio-economically disadvantaged communities	Ireland	(N=199) young people in the 7th to 9th year of compulsory education	Survey questionnaire



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13	Brannstrom (2004)	The study aims to evaluate the impact of neighbourhood poverty during adolescence on a wide range of social exclusion outcomes	Sweden	a unique cohort consisting of around 15 000 Stockholmers	Quantitative analysis of secondary data 'Swedish longitudinal data from the 'golden era' of Swedish welfare policy'
14	Brattbakk & Wessel (2013)	The paper aims to investigate if the social composition of the neighbourhood affects the socio-economic status later in life.	Norway	N= 5493 youths	Quantitative analysis of secondary data -longitudinal register-based data. The dataset is compiled from a range of Norwegian statistical registers (demography/ population, education, income and social benefits) and contains a large number of demographic and socio-economic variables.
15	Brown et al. (2021)	To explore Early Leaving this paper applies a conceptual framework of five key categories (personal challenges, social relationships, family circumstances, institutional features of school/work, and structural factors) to consider the comparative contexts of risks to Early Leaving in Spain and the UK	UK & Spain	77 interviews and focus groups with 309 educational stakeholders across 21 settings involved in the European Commission funded project [Orienta4YEL]. The young people interviewed were aged between 12 and 18 years old	Interviews and focus groups



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16	Brown et al. (2022)	To present a comprehensive analysis of the multiple risk factors to Early Leaving; and reflect on the difference in emphases between young people's perspectives of the key constituents of risk and those of the educators who support them.	UK	38 interviews and focuses groups with 39 young people and 53 adults working in various roles across 11 educational settings including mainstream and specialist schooling, alternative learning provision and vocational education and training	Interviews and focus group
17	Cefai et al. (2016)	To present a study on increasing participation in post-secondary education in Malta	Malta	Six 12–13-year-olds attending a secondary school for boys, and another six 13–14-year-old female students	Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (students, parents & teachers) and semi-structured interviews on the students' educational experiences, aspirations and challenges
18	Chevalier et al. (2013)	The study investigates the relationship between early school-leaving and parental education and paternal income	UK	Young people living with both parents aged 16 - 18 (n= 16,798)	Quantitative analysis of secondary data-Labour Force Survey. The study used data from households over the period 1993-2012



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19	Chiariello et al. (2022)	To investigate the interregional differences in providing public primary and secondary education and to single out the reasons for the poor performance of Southern regions, context variables (per capita gross domestic product, poverty, institutional quality, adult education)	Italy		Quantitative analysis of secondary data PISA & INVALSI (The Istituto Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema educativo di Istruzione e di formazione)
20	Cockerill et al. (2021)	To report results of a phase 2 exploratory trial of a vocabulary programme delivered in elementary schools to improve student's reading ability, including their comprehension in areas with high levels of socio-economic disadvantage.	England	101 students in seven schools from three English district areas with high levels of socio-economic disadvantage	Randomised Controlled Trial (Pre-test-intervention-Post test - Reading Test)
21	Croll (2008)	The article studies young people's occupational choices at the age of 15 in relation to their educational attainment, the occupations of their parents and their actual occupations when they are in their early 20s.	Britain	The data used in this study includes 763 young people interviewed at the age of 15 between 1994 and 1999 and 528 of these young people interviewed in 2004 when they were aged from 20 to 25.	Quantitative analysis of secondary data from the British Household Panel Survey over periods of between five and ten years



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22	Danhier (2018)	To model the differential effect of class composition on pupils' achievement	Belgium (French-speaking Community), France, Spain & Portugal	sample sizes range from 3190 pupils in Norway to 8580 in Spain	PIRLS 2011 data
23	De Witte et al. (2015)	This paper examines if 'naming and shaming' is an effective tool to increase accountability in school dropout for cities with disadvantaged student populations.	Netherlands	500 random student samples from the target cities and compares them to the best comparable students of the selected control city	Quantitative analysis of secondary data from Statistics Netherlands. The data track the educational career of all Dutch students and also include background characteristics of the students, their parents, and their living area.
24	Dickson et al. (2016)	The paper studies the causal effect of parents' education on their children's education and examine the timing of the impact.	UK	Mothers n= 13,801 and children n = 19,966	Quantitative analysis of secondary data - the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC) cohort born between 1 April 1991 and 31 December 1992 in the Avon area and their mothers



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25	Doyle & Keane (2019)	To examine early school leaving from the perspective of parents of early school leavers in an inner-city local authority housing estate	Ireland	nine parents of young people who had left school early	In-depth interviews
26	Doyle et al. (2021)	To explores the extent to which the cost of sending a child to school represent a significant economic barrier to schooling for low-income families	Ireland	Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with 30 interviewees. These participants included government and public representatives, parents, school principals, teachers and nongovernmental organization (NGO) personnel	semi-structured, open-ended interviews
27	Dumay & Dupriez (2014)	The study investigates if the quasi-market, rather than being linked positively to the effectiveness of the education systems, would be associated with the students' achievement dependence on their socio-economic and cultural background and on the social composition of the school they are enrolled in.	Belgium	29 education systems (including 6872 schools and 187,922 students)	Quantitative analysis of secondary data: analysis of the PISA 2006 database
28	Early et al. (2022)	The study examines the individual and collective influences of pupil- and school-level factors on post-primary attainment, measured according to GCSE outcomes	Northern Ireland	61,373 pupils and 217 schools were included in analysis	Quantitative analysis of secondary data: national Census (2011), School Leavers Survey (2010–2014) and School Census (2010-2014)



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29	Elchardus et al. (2013)	This paper examines the impact of private, quasi-market versus public steering of educational systems on European youngsters' attitudes towards immigrants.	Belgium	The analysis pertains to 57,399 pupils from 3,021 schools in 21 European educational systems (of which 19 countries and 2 regions, Flanders and England).	Quantitative analysis of secondary data obtained from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS 2009)
30	Fleming & Harford (2021)	an in-depth examination of the experience of existing DEIS policy in six case study schools, as articulated through the voices of school leaders, teachers, parents and pupils.	Ireland	Interviews - 43 teachers and principals and a group of 28 stakeholders, including academics, educationalists, psychologists and others working in support services; Focus group discussions were held with senior students (n = 29) and parents/guardians (n = 41).	Interviews and focus groups
31	Freenev & O'Connell (2012).	The aim of this study was to investigate the predictors of the intention among young Irish people to leave school early and to examine the contribution of the elements of the TPB (Theory of Planned Behaviour)	Ireland	The size of the actual sample of Junior Certificate students was 1131. A greater percentage of males (60.3%) than females (39.7%)	Questionnaire



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32	Geven et al. (2021)	To compare the expectations of teachers who are forced to make tracking decisions for students (Netherlands) and to the expectations of teachers who do not have to engage in this task (e.g., Norwegian teachers).	Norway, Netherlands & US	71 teachers from 24 schools participated in the survey (Amsterdam); 49 teachers from 19 schools (Oslo) and 65 teachers from 24 schools (US).	vignette experiment (factorial survey experiment)
33	Giannelli & Mangiavacchi (2010)	To investigate the long-term effects of parental migration abroad on the schooling of children left behind in Albania.	Albania	A total of 3,640 households were interviewed, amounting to a national representative sample of 17,302 individuals, 33.75 per cent of whom were children (under 18 years old)	Quantitative analysis of secondary data based on the 2005 Albanian LSMS
34	Gilleece et al. (2010)	To examine student and school background characteristics associated with low and high achievement in mathematics and science on the Programme for International Student Assessment	Ireland	4,184 students (48.8% male)	Quantitative analysis of PISA 2006 data
35	Gómez-González et al. (2022)	To present the role played by family involvement and family educational expectations in educational failure, segregation, and early school leaving.	Spain	Semi structured interviews (N = 61), communicative focus groups (N = 24), communicative daily life stories (N = 13), and questionnaires (N = 111).	Convergent mixed methods - semi structured interviews, communicative focus groups, communicative daily life stories, and questionnaires



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36	Gorard & Siddiqui (2018)	To present how the pupils attending grammar schools are stratified in terms of chronic poverty, ethnicity, language, special educational needs, and even precise age within their year group.	England	75,787 (14%) are listed as eligible to receive free school meals (FSM). There are 171,397 in local authority areas that contain at least one grammar school (defined here as selective areas), of which 22,402 attended a grammar school at KS4.	Using National Pupil Database for England specifically the 2015 Key Stage 4 (KS4) cohort, with attainment, school and background information for every year that these pupils have been in compulsory schooling.
37	Gorard (2014)	This paper investigates the link between the prevalence of Academies and local levels of segregation between schools, performance of academies in comparison to school with equivalent pupils and gain in pupil attainment from Academies.	UK	Analysis of the intakes to all state-funded secondary schools in England other than those designated 'Special schools' based on figures from the Annual Schools Census	Quantitative analysis of secondary data
38	Gorard et al. (2021)	The study investigates if the Pupil Premium is linked to a reduction in the attainment gap between poor children in England and their peers	UK	National Pupil Database with records for all pupils in maintained schools in England who reached the age of 16 in 2015/2016	Quantitative analysis of secondary data from National Pupil Database
39	Gorard et al. (2022)	To evaluate the impact of Pupil Premium funding provided to schools in England to reduce socio-economic segregation, and the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers.	UK		Quantitative analysis of secondary data



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40	Goux & Maurin (2007)	This study identifies the causal impact of close neighbours' characteristics on children's outcomes.	France	15-year-old adolescents (N = 13,100).	Quantitative analysis of secondary data obtained from 12 waves of the French Labour Force Survey (LFS), conducted each year between 1991 and 2002.
41	Gries et al. (2021)	To test the hypothesis: A younger age at arrival increases the educational opportunities of immigrants	Germany	the sample size of first-generation, second-generation, and native adults is 20,794, 33,368 and 53,956, respectively	Quantitative analysis of secondary data from the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP)
42	Hadjar et al. (2021)	To report a study that investigated secondary school students' higher education aspirations	Luxembourg & Switzerland	Secondary school students from Luxembourg (N = 387; t1: 57.4% boys; Mage = 12.7 years [SD = .64]) and from the Swiss Canton of Bern (N = 403; t1: 44.3% boys; Mage = 13.0 years [SD = .54]), who took part in all three waves in Years 7 to 9.	Quantitative analysis - based on a three-waves panel dataset of the research project "School Alienation in Switzerland and Luxembourg"
43	Harju-Luukkainen et al. (2020)	To investigate the relationship between family-related socio-economic and other factors like, parental education, number of books at home, parental attitudes towards mathematics and science, parental perception of child's early skills and student's later academic achievement.	Finland	The data comprises 158 schools and 5251 students.	Quantitative analysis of secondary data 'Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2015 for fourth-graders in Finland'



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44	Harris & Williams (2012)	This paper explores the variation in teacher–learner interactions in classrooms in ‘poor’ and ‘affluent’ schools	UK	Systematic observations of teachers’ questioning wait-times and pupils’ responses in 102 classrooms (51 science and 51 literacy) in a diverse sample of 20 schools.	Systematic observations of teachers’ questioning wait-times and pupils’ responses
45	Hartas (2015)	To examine the unique and cumulative contribution of children’s characteristics, parenting practices and family’s socio-economic background to children’s educational outcomes	UK	The working sample derived from the surveys was 9419 singleton cohort children.	Quantitative analysis of data from fourth sweep of the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS)
46	Hascher & Hagenauer (2010)	This study aims to understand the processes and causes of emotional school withdrawal.	Austria	Study 1: n= 434 students from grade 5 to grade 8 participated (20 classrooms). Study 2: n= 356 students from 17 classrooms within eight secondary schools	Questionnaires
47	Horn (2013)	To a) show that higher socio-economic status students are more likely to attend the early-selective academic tracks and b) their mathematical and reading performance diverges	Hungary	4th, 6th, 8th and 10 grade students from every school	Quantitative analysis of secondary data. The National Assessment of Basic Competencies (NABC) is a standard-based assessment designed similarly to the OECD PISA survey.



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48	Kaiser & Schneickert (2016)	To examine the impact of family background on children's personality development	Germany	The data contain information on roughly 20,000 individuals living in 12,000 households	Quantitative analysis of secondary data from the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP) and the SOEP enhancement Families in Germany (FiD) were used
49	Kellett (2009)	To challenge some of the assumptions about our understanding of and approaches to literacy.	England	a group of six Year 6 pupils (11-year-olds) in two schools in socio-economically contrasting locations (12 children)	Intervention - developing children's research skills and children were made to conduct their own research projects
50	Kluczniok & Mudiappa (2019)	This paper focuses on the influence of socio-economic risk factors and various aspects of the home learning environment in early childhood on children's language competencies (academic attainment)	Germany	a sample of four-year-old children starting in preschool (n = 2406 children)	Quantitative analysis of secondary data of the German National Educational Panel Study (NEPS); NEPS Starting Cohort Kindergarten from 2008 to 2013- Questionnaires and tests are conducted in the preschools.



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51	Kluczniok & Schmidt (2021)	This paper aims to address this limitation, how well children from socially and educationally disadvantaged families succeed in interacting with other children and teachers in preschools, by analysing the relationships between the quality of children's interactions in preschools and indicators of socio-cultural disparities, e.g., migrational and educational background.	Germany	241 children at the age of 3–4 years in preschools in Germany	Parents' interviews and children observation to measure interaction quality using the standardised observational instrument Individualised Classroom Assessment Scoring System.
52	Lavrentsova & Valkov (2019)	To highlight a number of risk determinants that trigger school failure	Bulgaria	152 students who are studying in secondary schools. Participants were in 5th, 6th and 7th grade (11 – 17 years old)	Questionnaire survey
53	Lavrijsen & Nicaise (2015)	To examine how macro-level determinants influence school dropout risks among different social groups.	Belgium	The full sample consists of 141,178 respondents	Quantitative analysis of secondary data drawn from the 2009 ad hoc module of the Labour Force Survey on Entry of Young People into the Labour Market
54	Ledwith (2017)	To present clear evidence of migrant segregation as a result of how school choice impacts attendance patterns on the ground.	Ireland	Archdiocese of Dublin	Analysis of secondary data-Student population nationality data from the 2013/14 School Census and 2011 Census



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55	Lenkeit et al. (2018)	To investigate how the relative importance and configurations of different disadvantaging factors have changed over time to form educational inequalities	France, Germany, Sweden and the United Kingdom	Data from five PISA cycles (2000–2012)	Quantitative analysis of PISA data
56	Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen (2012).	To offer an integrated understanding of the relationships between the socio-economic contexts of schools and the pedagogical processes within them	UK	Quantitative analysis of composition and attainment in 300 schools, supplemented by interviews with head teachers and analysis of a bespoke survey of parents in 44 of these schools	Mixed methods - Quantitative analysis of composition and attainment, interviews and ethnographic investigation
57	Maragkou (2020)	The paper investigates socio-economic gaps in the match between student quality and upper-secondary qualification quality	England	A single cohort of students totalling approximately half a million students, born in 1989–1990 and took compulsory age 16 examinations (GCSE exams) in 2006	Quantitative analysis of secondary data obtained from National Pupil Database (NPD)
58	McKinney et al. (2012)	This article reports on a research project that focussed on Glasgow city secondary schools for the period 2006-2009. The project aimed to establish an association between poverty and deprivation and attainment in public examinations and in initial leaver destinations.	Glasgow	29 Secondary schools in Glasgow	Quantitative analysis of data obtained from: Free Meal Entitlement, Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation and Staged Intervention for the years (2006/7, 2007/8, 2008/9)



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59	McKinney et al. (2013)	To seek a deeper understanding why some secondary schools in Glasgow in areas of high deprivation achieve a high success rate in initial positive school leaver destinations, while others with a similar profile record a lower success rate.	Glasgow	Head teacher (2), Deputy Head teacher (3), Principal Teacher of Pastoral Care and Careers Coordinator (1), Careers Advisor (1), Former Employability Officer (1), Principal Teacher of Enterprise, Employability and Partnership (1)	Interviews
60	Mínguez (2013)	This study sets out to test the combined impact of investment in education, gender, ethnic and family background in explaining early school leaving in the different countries selected and aims to quantify the phenomenon of early school leaving and presents employment status and training of young school leavers	Germany, Belgium, Spain, Denmark & Finland	In 2010, around 1.5 million people across the EU were part of the survey	Quantitative analysis of secondary data - Data are taken from the European Labour Force Survey
61	Mocetti (2012)	To analyse the selection process at work before and after compulsory schooling by assessing the determinants of school failures, dropouts, and upper secondary school decisions of young Italians.	Italy	Representative sample is approximately 76,800 families per period. Individuals are interviewed from their 15th birthday onward. The study relies on data gathered in 2004 and 2005	Quantitative analysis of secondary data: individual data by the Labour Force Survey and aggregate data on local labour markets and school supply by the Italian National Statistic Institute and the Minister of Public Education



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62	Morris et al. (2016)	To determine the influence of cognitive ability on educational outcomes and the extent of socio-economic disparities in education across a wide range of indicators while accounting for cognitive ability.	England	children 4049 and 1768 parents	Quantitative analysis of secondary data (Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC))
63	Nita et al. (2021)	To analyse how the socio-economic conditions and family type can influence the phenomenon of school dropout.	Romania	363 people	Survey questionnaire
64	Norley (2023)	The study aims to explore, and reflect upon personal experience, and to be able to weave greater understanding and connections between apparently disparate factors related to the correlation between social class and language, and academic achievement.	UK	Author	auto-ethnographic methodology



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65	Oberti & Savina (2019)	The study looks at the unequal spatial distribution of middle schools across the Paris metropolitan area and measures school segregation using classical indices and shows that school segregation is higher than socio-residential segregation, particularly for students from upper-middle class backgrounds and for students from working class backgrounds.	France	The study includes 589,413 students and 1138 middle schools with parents' socio-economic position distributed among 26 socio-economic modalities; 2. 433 public middle schools (353,229 students) and 140 private middle schools (100,004 students).	Quantitative analysis of secondary data from 1. Base scolaire' (2009) and 2. 'Base Diplôme National du Brevet' (2006–2012)
66	Pàmies Rovira et al. (2016)	To identify factors that contribute to academic success in primary and secondary schools located in disadvantaged socio-economic areas	Spain	in-depth interviews were carried out with head teachers (1), inspectors (1) and municipal education managers (1), and focus groups were organised with students (1), teaching staff (1) and families (1). We carried out a total of 55 interviews – 75 participants of focus group	use of quantitative databases (such as PIRLS and PISA), and a qualitative phase which has carried out 24 case studies in schools (interviews & focus groups) in five Spanish urban environments: Barcelona (5) and its metropolitan area (5), Seville (4), Madrid (5) and Valencia (5)
67	Parsons (2013)	To show that areas of poverty are made and sustained. The challenged school is a product of a challenged society.	England	One school with 900 students	Micro-focus case study and using local, national and international data



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68	Payne (2018)	To provide new opportunities for participants living and studying in an area of deprivation in a South of England city with uneven access to broad cultural experiences.	England	99 Year 7 pupils (aged 11 and 12)	Micro ethnography: unsolicited conversations, 99 resulting artworks and focus group interviews
69	Sacco & Le Rose (2022)	To represent the interplay of contextual and self-perception variables in dropping out	Italy	26,316 students. The 49.72% of the sample is composed by females and the average age is 12.99	Quantitative analysis of secondary data- the analysis of data from INVALSI national large-scale programme.
70	Savvides et al. (2021)	To analyse and compare 'Structural Factors' (SF) and 'Institutional Factors' (IF) of risk [of early school leaving] in a region in England and in Portugal	England & Portugal	59 semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 209 educational stakeholders working in a variety of settings and school pupils across 18 settings.	Comparative case study_ interviews and focus groups
71	Shain (2016)	The paper explores the extent to which reforms within, and of, education can make a difference in terms of equalising educational outcomes and improving the life chances of poorer children.	UK	Five institutions that reflected the demographic profile of deprivation. Phase 1 (sample) 26 teachers (22 were EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage) or KS1); 5 family support workers (one from each school); 3 Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs); 1 speech therapist ; 25 parents; 8 governors; 26 teaching assistants (22 EYFS and KS1).	Qualitative case-study research



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72	Sierens et al. (2020)	To investigate the relationship between pre-school duration and fourth-grade academic achievement	Belgium	Pupil (9 year olds) questionnaire and Parents of the pupils in this sample and all teachers from their schools (67 schools) were asked to fill in a paper-and-pencil questionnaire	academic achievement tests (for pupils) and questionnaires
73	Sneyers et al. (2018)	To investigate how perceptions held by teachers impact upon teacher track recommendations regarding pupils' enrolment in secondary education	Belgium (Flanders)	1014 sixth-grade pupils (when pupils are aged 12) assessed by means of a written questionnaire by Sixty-six teachers	Quantitative method - questionnaire
74	Spencer et al. (2017)	a) whether adolescents with higher educational outcomes overall had higher language abilities; and b) associations between adolescent language ability, socio-economic background and educational outcomes, specifically in relation to Mathematics, English Language and English Literature GCSE grade.	England	adolescents aged between 13 to 14 years old	A standardised nonverbal assessment and a battery of language assessments selected to investigate: receptive skills at word, sentence, and narrative level and expressive skills using a narrative task. Associations between these assessment scores educational attainment when participants were 16 years old were measured and analysed with participants' socio-economic background.



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75	Straková (2007)	The aim of this paper is to explore the impact of the structure of the Czech education system on the development of the relationship between a student's achievement and his/her family background.	Czech Republic		Quantitative analysis of secondary data obtained from IEA PIRLS 2001, the IEA TIMSS 1999, and the OECD PISA 2003.
76	Sykes & Kuyper (2009)	To investigate the associations between the educational achievement of Dutch youth and their neighbourhood conditions.	Netherlands	17 836 secondary school students living in 3085 neighbourhoods	Quantitative analysis of secondary data derived from two sources. All individual data are derived from a large-scale, longitudinal cohort study of secondary school education in the Netherlands, the Voortgezet Onderwijs Cohort Leerlingen and all neighbourhood-level data come from Statistics Netherlands. Case study (interviews & focus groups)
77	Tarabini et al. (2019)	To explore the impact of secondary schools in student (dis)engagement and subsequent opportunities to succeed in school	Spain	In-depth case studies in five secondary schools. Interviews with teaching staff (N 47) and students (N 54), focus groups of teachers (N 5) and students (N 6)	



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78	Traag & van der Velden (2011)	This study explains early school leaving in lower secondary education in the Netherlands, taking into account background characteristics, family resources and school composition factors at the same time.	Netherlands	19,254 students from a random sample of 108 schools, who started secondary school in 1989/1990	Quantitative analysis of secondary data: longitudinal survey carried out in the Netherlands by Statistics Netherlands and academic researchers (Statistics Netherlands 1991; Driessen and van der Werf 1992).
79	Usán et al. (2022)	To analyse the relationship between academic motivation, academic burnout, and academic performance, differentiating between adaptive and non-adaptive patterns	Spain	398 students, both male (N = 224; 56.28%) and female (N = 174; 43.71%) with ages ranging from 11 to 13 years	Questionnaire
80	Wolf et al. (2020)	To identify predictors of a very early ECEC usage (in the first two years of life) among families with a Turkish immigration background	England, Germany, Netherlands and Norway	Overall, N = 943 parents (England n= 293, Germany n = 338, Netherlands = 247, Norway n= 65)	Interviews (a part of the EU funded Inclusive Education and Social Support to Tackle Inequalities in Society (ISOTIS) project)



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3.2 Themes emerging from the systematic review.

The academic research indicates a correlation between socio-economic status, educational outcomes and early school leaving (Doyle et al., 2021; Freeney & O'Connell, 2012; Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015; McKinney, 2012; Parson, 2013; Spencer et al., 2017). Being socio-economically disadvantaged can lead to reduced opportunities for accessing quality education due to various factors, such as its effects on availability of social, cultural and human capital, housing, well-being, and health as well as the availability of high quality schools (Behtoui, 2017; Bodovski et al., 2017; Chiariello et al., 2022; Spencer et al., 2017; Traag & Van der Velden, 2011). As a result, children and young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds may not receive the necessary support to achieve their full potential, leading to lower levels of academic attainment, lack of motivation, disinterest in lessons, hindered holistic development, and eventually dropping out of school before completion. The term 'socio-economic status' is a multifarious concept and traditionally, several indicators are used to assess its level for instance, parents' income, level of education and occupation, household income, and characteristics of the neighbourhood in which they reside (De Witte et al., 2015; Dickson et al., 2016; Early et al., 2022; Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2020; Spencer et al., 2017). The systematic review of literature has identified several socio-economic factors resulting in premature school dropout. These factors have been categorised into the subsequent five themes:

Theme 1. Poverty

Theme 2. Parents' Level of education and occupation

Theme 3. Lack of motivation and low academic achievement

Theme 4 Social disadvantage

Theme 5. School Segregation, Neighbourhood Effect and Resources

However, in the following sections of this report, it becomes apparent that there is a considerable overlap among the themes discussed, such as poverty, parental education and occupation, and social disadvantage, which can lead to diminished motivation and low academic achievement of students. This reality is further compounded by the impact of school segregation and neighbourhood effects, which limit the availability of essential resources and academic opportunities, thus exacerbating the issue.



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3.2.1 THEME 1. POVERTY

Resources

The literature agrees that the most significant factor in the educational success of an individual is their cognitive abilities (Morris et al., 2016; Traag & Van der Velden, 2011). However, the ability to achieve at school requires different sets of resources (Bianchi et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2016). Two of the main contributors to ESL are family and poverty (Nita et al., 2021). Individuals who do not have the family resources to help them achieve at school are educationally disadvantaged and are at a higher risk of ESL.

Traag and Van der Velden (2011) identify four different types of family resources that contribute to ESL - economic capital, human capital, social capital and cultural capital. Economic capital is provided by families who have sufficient financial resources and the material supports that are required for their children “to perform well at school” (Traag & Van der Velden, 2011, p. 47). Human capital relates to the “cognitively stimulating environment” that is provided by the family, which is a product of the family background (p. 47). Social capital is concerned familial and social interactions, and with “the relationship between parents and children” (p. 47). Cultural capital relates to the intergenerational transmission of social disadvantage and influences how children adapt to the dominant culture of schools where the children of parents with high cultural capital are more successful in school. This typology of poverty offers us a framework from which to examine the literature’s engagement with these resources.

Economic capital

Poverty, as a socio-economic indicator, is often linked to other indicators of disadvantage and the results of providing targeted financial inputs to ease disadvantage are varied (Lenkeit et al., 2018). Knowledge about targeted financial interventions that are designed to counteract educational disadvantage is important information. Financial interventions that are inputted to improve educational attainment is limited and contested regarding its influence on poverty (Doyle et al., 2021; Gorard et al., 2022; Lenkeit et al., 2018).

Financial initiatives to improve educational outcomes are often targeted at schools with lower socio-economic cohorts (Doyle et al., 2021), but the analysis of the research into such initiatives is influenced by other metrics such as the economy (Gorard et al., 2022), gender (Traag & Van der Velden, 2011), migration (Lenkeit et al., 2018), language (Norley, 2023), or the pervasiveness of poverty (Nita et al., 2021). Educational inequalities are also further exacerbated by newer metrics such as the global pandemic. The success of financial initiatives that were introduced to ease the educational burden on families during the Covid-19 pandemic are still being investigated (Doyle et al., 2021).

The entangled complexity of social metrics and their influence on ESL require differentiated approaches. Quantitative studies in Ireland show that focusing resources on individual students combined with school based resources are required to promote equity (Gilleece et al., 2010).



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While public education systems aim to equalise access for all children, the ability of disadvantaged families to compete financially is compromised in comparison with more advantaged families in sending their children to school (Doyle et al., 2021). Costs associated with school attendance not only include books and uniforms, but also “school trips and extracurricular events” (p. 125). The argument is developed in the literature on whether education is viewed as “a tradeable service” among national economic systems and the extent to which this aspect is related to ESL (p. 129). Furthermore, challenged economic conditions that include cuts to education can compromise financial support mechanisms that are geared towards improving school leaver destinations and towards easing ESL concerns (Gorard et al., 2022; McKinney et al., 2013).

In a study of financially targeted student funding in England (Gorard et al., 2022), pupils who receive free school meals (FSM) are compared with those who never received FSM. Challenges arise when trying to assess the impact of targeted financial inputs among pupils who are always disadvantaged, among students who are temporarily disadvantaged due to circumstances such as the economy and among students who are never eligible for financial interventions. The analysis reveals that students who are never eligible for targeted financial funding attend schools with “fewer than their fair share of disadvantaged pupils” (p. 1,000). This conclusion amplifies concerns about the clustering of pupils who are continually disadvantaged. Such analysis aligns with other studies that highlight that “inequalities are still very much a reality in education systems” (Lenkeit et al., 2018, p. 67). Students who are continually disadvantaged might have issues that are not related to educational progress and attainment, such as the length and depth of their disadvantage. Therefore, attention is focused on “the need to distinguish between indicators of family background” (Lenkeit et al., 2018, p. 68).

Social capital

Social capital, like other forms of capital, has multi-dimensional aspects (Traag & Van der Velden, 2011). The amount of social capital available to help reduce ESL is related to parental support, the family structure, and the number of siblings. Students “with totally unsupportive parents” are twice as likely to leave school early (p. 55). Children from single parent families and children from larger families are more at risk of ESL.

In research from Sweden, it was found that “school-based social capital” such as the expectations of teachers influences the educational decision making of students (Behtoui, 2017, p. 499). This form of social capital, that is generated outside of the direct family, also includes social activities that are bound within social networks. The analysis shows that students are not “isolated islands” but are part of a “nexus of various kinds of social networks” (p. 500). Activities that are organised by mainstream society influence the expectations of educational achievement in young people. Effective external interventions can drive social capital when young people have access to networking resources such as those provided by local community organisations.

Cultural capital



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Data about cultural capital are sometimes captured by measuring the level of cultural possessions, such as works of art, the number of books in the home and the reading habits of children (Bodovski et al., 2017). Students from higher socio-economic groups possess larger levels of cultural capital than those with lower socio-economic positions. The intergenerational transmission of cultural capital influences how children adapt to the “dominant culture in schools” and the children of parents with high cultural capital are more successful in school (Traag & Van der Velden, 2011, p. 47).

This analysis aligns with country comparative studies, where the children of families who have higher levels of cultural capital show higher levels of reading achievement (Bodovski et al., 2017). This finding suggests that the socio-economic level of the family, their cultural capital and the educational achievement of the children are interlinked. However, children with higher reading abilities tend to have better “reading habits”, so whether this finding is directly related to cultural capital is less clear (p. 903).

The literature highlights that small cultural interventions at a school level can develop important agency for children to help increase cultural capital and diminish marginalisation (Payne, 2018). Cultural learning through the Arts has “multiple values” (p. 571) that can have profound effects, but its value often appears dispensable when educational investment decisions are being made by families and by economic policymakers.

Human capital

In studies from Italy, the poor performance of an educational system can result in lower levels of human capital and may contribute to further socio-economic disadvantage by impacting on a whole region (Chiariello et al., 2022). From this perspective, breaking the cycle of “human capital loss” that restrains future development should be a target for policymakers (p. 1740). The influence of human capital can be intergenerational and second generation migrants are less successful at school than native communities (Traag & Van der Velden, 2011). A study from Romania shows that the family profile is one of the “main determinants” of ESL (Nita et al., 2021, p. 19). Educational initiatives that are targeted at human capital can be seen in these circumstances as a catalyst for future economic improvements.



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Teacher expectations / influence of schools

The importance of school and school resourcing, such as specifically trained teachers, is a strong influence on ESL (Nita et al., 2021). Anderhag et al. (2013) suggest that attention should be drawn to practices in some schools, depending on their contextual characteristics, that can help to counteract the socio-economic backgrounds of students. It is widely accepted that education is a route out of poverty and proficiency in literacy is an important component of that (Kellett, 2009). The literature agrees that while literacy experiences outside of school can contribute to a form of literacy poverty, schools and the expectations of teachers can be effective in addressing these issues (Anderhag et al., 2013; Gorard et al., 2022; Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012; Shain, 2016).

Literacy proficiency plays a vital role in education and offers a platform for improvement in other curricular areas (Kellett, 2009). A theme that emerges in the literature is the link between literacy proficiency and confidence levels among children, which is related to educational attainment. Children from more advantaged backgrounds display a form of “literacy confidence” that stems from a variety of circumstances that include support at home, the linguistic levels of parents and the opportunities to discuss literacy in favourable environments (p. 395). On the other hand, children from less advantaged backgrounds have less of these opportunities to support their literacy confidence. In terms of children’s own self development, the “private confidence” that advantaged children can build from having access to favourable background conditions contributed to their public confidence, which contrasts with children from less advantaged backgrounds who did not have the same opportunities to practice reading and writing privately in supportive environments (p. 404).

Targeted literacy interventions that were carried out at a school level during studies in England show that improvements can be made in literacy levels that display linkages between cognitive development and linguistic abilities (Cockerill et al., 2021). Contributions to the literacy development among the children from socially disadvantaged areas and the enhancement of their capability for developing further literacy skills are claimed by these interventions.

Harris and Williams (2012) suggest that reforming the quality of interactions in oral literacy and the pedagogic discourses in classrooms with socially disadvantaged pupils should be a focus of attention. Important aspects of classroom student-teacher interactions among younger students such as the quality of questioning and the “wait-times” for responses relate to teacher expectations and learner engagement (p. 373).

However, the literature also highlights that teachers need “the tools to be able to interrogate the ways in which economic and social class relations in society, as well as marginal poverty per se, affect students’ experiences of learning” (Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012, p. 616). Studies that were conducted in Switzerland and Luxembourg (Hadjar et al., 2021) highlight those specific experiences at school influence educational decision making among students. Deepening individual student mentoring and widening student guidance initiatives that address the “values of education” (p. 24) in its broadest sense, rather than narrow career-oriented trajectories, could increase student aspirations to continue in education. Studies from England draw attention to “a mismatch between student



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demands and organisational capacity” in schools, when deeper understandings of how student experiences at school might be required (Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012, p. 601).

The student voice and the importance of accounting for the perceptions of students towards their schooling may go beyond social inequalities. Initiating differentiated responses to student attitudes and beliefs are not fully appreciated, which may be a restraint to solving ESL: “Early identification of negative mind-sets towards the education process would appear to be of paramount importance” (Freeney & O'Connell, 2012, p. 570). Nevertheless, educational disadvantage continues to be viewed as a “school based issue”, when a deeper acknowledgement of society’s “wider economic inequalities” might be required (Fleming & Harford, 2021, p. 15). While resources matter in schools to help with improving educational achievement in the short term, the longer-term perspective is influenced by a wide variety of factors that mainly point to socio-economic policies. Schools and teachers “can lead the way but they cannot address the impact of wider social inequalities alone” (Shain, 2016, p. 16).

3.2.2 THEME 2. PARENTS EDUCATIONAL LEVEL AND OCCUPATION

An important aspect of ESL is the level of education that parents have and its effect on the intergenerational transmission of that education to their children. Parental education is sometimes measured according to “the highest level of schooling in the household” (Kaiser & Schneickert, 2016, p. 5). It may also be aligned with whichever parent has the “highest parental education in years” (Horn, 2013, p. 30). Parents with a low level of education, or who are educationally disadvantaged, may be less well equipped to support their own children’s education. From this perspective, educational poverty is a key challenge for policymakers and is defined as “the failure to achieve an adequate standard of education and training” (Balenzano et al., 2019, p. 69). The education level of parents and how that is transmitted to their children, as well as their hopes and beliefs, is an important influence on children’s educational attainments later in life (Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2020). However, few studies assess the age at which “intergenerational education transmission emerges” and its relative effects on educational achievement (Dickson et al., 2016, p. 185).

Much of the research about parental education levels and its influence on ESL is drawn from large national empirical studies. Some studies investigate the impact of migration and the relative influence of country systems on ESL (Giannelli & Mangiavacchi, 2010; Gries et al., 2021). The contribution of parental education levels is a constituent part of these inquiries.

Studies that investigate the risk factors to ESL combine the effects of parental education with other risk factors and socio-economic indicators (Beekhoven & Dekkers, 2005; Chevalier et al., 2013; Dickson et al., 2016; Freeney & O'Connell, 2012; Kaiser & Schneickert, 2016; Kluczniok & Mudiappa, 2019; Kluczniok & Schmidt, 2021; Lenkeit et al., 2018; Nita et al., 2021; Sacco & Le Rose, 2022). These studies combine the effects of parental education levels with parental income levels, parental occupations or other socio-economic factors that relate to parental backgrounds.



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The literature suggests that isolating the risk factors that relate to parental educational levels alone is challenging for researchers for a variety of reasons that includes access to adequate data about the parents.

The impact of parental education levels on ESL also form part of discourses on the social mobility of children, the intergenerational transmission of education levels and parental choices in the selection of schools for their children (Balenzano et al., 2019; Croll, 2008; Hartas, 2015; Horn, 2013; Kaiser & Schneickert, 2016; Maragkou, 2020; Morris et al., 2016).

Some studies on ESL examine regional comparisons that highlight the differences in education systems across regions, and within regions, and their relationship with parental education levels as well as intergenerational transmission mechanisms and processes (Chiariello et al., 2022; Mocetti, 2012). Studies that include parental education level effects illuminate socio-economic clustering and the persistence of inequality in different jurisdictions (Borgna et al., 2022; Gilleece et al., 2010)

Investigations about school related factors that can offset the effects of parental education levels on ESL also examine how attainment gaps that are experienced by students can be reduced (Anderhag et al., 2013; Atlay et al., 2019; Chiariello et al., 2022; Early et al., 2022; Shain, 2016; Sneyers et al., 2018)

From a qualitative perspective, the literature tries to gain contextual understandings about the impact of ESL and its relationship to stakeholders including parents and children (Bradshaw et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2022; Doyle et al., 2021; Doyle & Keane, 2019). Research about parents' views on how early school leaving is shaped by the context in which they find themselves is limited and discourses about "how education can better meet their and their children's needs is long overdue" (Doyle & Keane, 2019, p. 84). Arising from the empirical nature of most of the studies on the impact of parental education levels, the absence of qualitative nuances is an important concern. However, it appears that longer term longitudinal studies of educational systems provide better observations of educational and economic reforms due to the nature of other effects that influence a family's socio-economic position such as an economic recession or a global conflict (Lenkeit et al., 2018).

The influence of parental education levels on ESL

The literature agrees that parents who attend school longer have children who stay longer in education (Dickson et al., 2016). Parents who have higher education levels and who are more economically advantaged can provide better educational environments for their children (Chevalier et al., 2013). Parents with higher education levels are more likely to have a better appreciation of the potential benefits of education (Freeney & O'Connell, 2012). Croll (2008) finds that while choice is evident, it is also "heavily constrained" for many individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds in terms of the selections that they make about their children's schooling (p. 243). Maragkou (2020) finds that the further education of students from lower socio-economic groups is influenced by the secondary school that they attend leading to concerns about social mobility.



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Parents education levels and occupation status

Parental education and parental occupational status are two of the factors that indicate a family's socio-economic status (Lenkeit et al., 2018). The occupation status of parents is sometimes measured by factoring in the father's and the mother's employment situation (Horn, 2013). Social research studies indicate that schooling and educational achievement continues to be influenced by socio-economic backgrounds (Balenzano et al., 2019). Low parental education levels and low parental occupational status further compounds income related inequalities in later generations. In a study of personality traits and their impact on the intergenerational mechanisms that impact educational inequalities, Kaiser and Schneickert (2016) argue that parents with highly skilled jobs transmit important aspects of personality to their children such as focus, intellect and curiosity, and that these personality traits are more likely to be encouraged by parents with higher educational levels.

Lenkeit et al. (2018) argue that parental education levels and parental occupation status contribute highly to attainment in reading levels and that these socio-economic factors have a significantly positive effect on educational achievement when these factor levels are high. Therefore, increasing reading attainment levels in schools is a focus of educational policy makers towards children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, but there are limitations. Morris et al. (2016) argue that without intervention disadvantaged children "are less likely to fulfil their intellectual potential" (p. 160). However, Morris and his colleagues also find that inequalities in educational attainment persist among young children with similar intellectual ability. The supports that children receive at fee-paying schools provide for 'considerable advantages over similar ability children in state schools' leading to a persistence in social divisions (p. 162). These findings not only draw attention to the limits that schools might reach in relation to tackling social inequalities, but also highlight the financial power that might come from parents with a higher occupational status and a higher ability to pay towards their children's education (Doyle et al., 2021).

Evaluating the impact of parental education levels on ESL

The impact of parental education levels on ESL is relatively complex to evaluate. Identifying robust indicators that illuminate the effects of parental education on the future educational participation of their children is a challenge (Chevalier et al., 2013). Aspects that make parental education levels relatively difficult to measure include accessing data about parents and measuring the influences of reform initiatives.

Parents with "higher levels of schooling" have children who perform better at school (Dickson et al., 2016, p. 184). However, analysing aspects of parental backgrounds such as their education qualifications, the cognitive abilities of parents and the life-stage at which they leave full-time education is often limited by data that "are more restricted" (p. 191). The literature points out that "increasing parental education has a positive causal effect on children's outcomes" (p. 185). Therefore, identifying the point at which parental education levels begin to influence their children's schooling is important information for those who wish to support the educational progress and attainment levels of children. However, questions remain in the literature about the mechanisms "through which parental



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education causally affects children's outcomes" (p. 218). The causal effects of parents with low education levels on children's educational attainment are important to policy makers who are concerned with the impact of their legislative changes and educational reforms that include transitions to further education opportunities for school leavers (Dickson et al., 2016; Gries et al., 2021; Horn, 2013; Maragkou, 2020).

In terms of reform initiatives, the changes to compulsory school leaving ages are a factor in intergenerational education levels analysis. In England, for example, legislative reforms were made to the minimum school age requirement over a number of decades and the increases in the minimum school leaving age resulted in some parents spending longer at school (Dickson et al., 2016). Arising from these changes, the empirical treatment of parental educational levels requires intricate analysis that considers the ages of the parents, the gender of each parent, the age gap between the parents, the birth year of the children, the country of origin of each parent and the language of the parents. The challenge of including these statistical factors requires an abundance of sources.

It appears that raising of the age requirements for full time schooling is also a consideration for students, as they are required to spend more time at school and spend less time in a home that may offer a less stimulating educational environment (Lenkeit et al., 2018). The effects on children's education levels and how they may be related to educational reforms that have taken place at school, where they are now required to spend a greater amount of time, are varied.

In studies from Germany, the effect of parental education on the children of immigrants highlighted that the differences in the education systems "in the countries of origin are not directly comparable" with the local education system leading to issues in comparing parental qualifications (Gries et al., 2021, p. 837). The literature consistently acknowledges that data require rich assemblage and that aspects of relationships between factors that affect children's attainment demands careful interpretation (Anderhag et al., 2013; Dickson et al., 2016; Gries et al., 2021; Maragkou, 2020).

Studies in Sweden and Finland also found limitations in measuring the direct effects of parental education levels on children's outcomes. Empirical results are often bundled with other factors that relate to parental influences such as family income or country of origin effects (Anderhag et al., 2013; Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2020). These studies indicate that parental tertiary education positively affects boys more than girls, particularly in science, yet despite these linkages there were varying effects on different subsets of students leading to suggestions of other factors interacting (Anderhag et al., 2013; Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2020).

The breadth and depth of socio-economic indicators on educational attainment is highlighted by Early et al. (2022). This "multidimensionality" aspect to a student's background reflects the complexity and various factors that can influence educational achievement (p. 183). This research found that a mother's socio-economic background was a "key driver" of educational outcomes in her children, which highlighted the importance of multiple measures in evaluating the impact of parental educational levels (p. 183).



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In terms of evaluating parental education level effects on children's achievement levels, researchers have urged that the multi-dimensional aspects of socio-economic indicators, such as parental education levels and household income, should be separated from other indicators of socio-economic status and that separate pathways should be explored particularly when attempting to measure the impact of parental education levels on ESL. Complex inputs such as health, ability and household income might also directly or indirectly affect children's educational outcomes (Chevalier et al., 2013). Further inputs such as the effects of family breakup or parental absence due to migration may result in all the decision-making being placed on one parent, which further complicates evaluating parental impacts (Giannelli & Mangiavacchi, 2010).

Part of the debate around compulsory schooling that does not feature highly in the literature is school failure and how it might relate to parental education levels. It appears that failing at school is "not only widespread but also surprisingly under investigated" (Mocetti, 2012, p. 204). This phenomenon could add further useful knowledge to evaluating the parental education effects on children's education.

In terms of the empirical design of most of these studies of parental effects on ESL, researchers are required to balance the "pros and cons of robustness versus complexity in relation to the descriptive strength" of statistical models (Anderhag et al., 2013, p. 3150).

Regional influences

Intergenerational influences on education that are found in the corpus vary in different regions and within regions. While parental education levels affect ESL, there are other factors that influence intergenerational educational transmission that may overwhelm parental education level effects.

The impact of where an individual grows up or where they come from requires attention to be given to their educational ambitions (Doyle & Keane, 2019). The past experiences of parents during their own educational life can impact how they engage in their children's education. In a relatively small qualitative study, Doyle and Keane (2019) research parents who describe their own encounters with the education system and how it influences their aspirations for their children. The impact of "inter-generational and community disadvantage" highlight social inequalities that will continue to impact ESL and the meaningful engagement of younger generations with education (p. 84).

Empirical studies, from Germany, show that first-generation immigrants who had fewer years of schooling and a greater share of lower educational qualifications than native-born Germans, identified an educational gap that is reduced among the second-generation immigrants (Gries et al., 2021). This educational gap "is highly driven by age at immigration", which showed more disadvantage among older age groups of children than younger children of immigrants due to the less well-developed education systems in the country of origin (p. 836). However, the education gap between native Germans and second-generation immigrants is found to be reduced. In this study, Gries et al. (2021) found that educational differences among countries of origin accounted for much of this



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educational gap among first-generation immigrants. The differences in education levels reflected motivations to migrate and the education systems that were in the countries of origin. Immigrants who had an ethnicity that was closer to the German language and culture show better education outcomes than those who came from southern European countries or from regions in Asia or Africa. Immigrants from countries that had relatively poor education systems, sometimes interrupted by war or poorer economic conditions, have greater educational difficulties in Germany.

Similarly, empirical studies from Finland (Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2020), illustrated spatial distributions of family related backgrounds across geographical areas. Novel ways of analysing the data from a large-scale study showed that underlying real-world issues, other than school related conditions, affected educational attainment in different local regions. Effects of parental education levels on students' educational outcomes are varied across different geographical areas and are not the same within the country. These results offer some significance when, oftentimes, international assessment results are presented on a countrywide basis leading to perceptions that results are constant inside a country. When the effect is stronger in some areas within a country than in others, the research offers further information about the complexities that are found between family related variables, such as parental education, and student educational attainment (Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2020).

Research from Romania determines that the parents' level of education is one of the main influences on ESL of children in rural communities (Nita et al., 2021). The way that school is valued by parents, despite financial considerations, often results in ESL. However, the absence of parents due to parental migration, which impacts parental guidance and support at school, or that they are not interested in their child's education are also contributors to ESL.

Educational interventions

The literature suggests that some schools can improve educational outcomes for some students to mitigate the effects of parental background in the shorter term, but that this situation is not sustainable in the longer term (Shain, 2016). Initiatives such as parental engagement strategies have been developed to increase parental involvement in schools but the expectation that schools alone can overcome wider socio-economic difficulties appears unrealistic without "significant investment" (p. 16).

Reducing inequalities that are related to parental education levels are different among countries and this aspect may reflect various reforms, such as improving reading attainment levels, which have been introduced in countries to tackle those inequalities. The effects of parental education levels are related to these reforms among some contexts (Lenkeit et al., 2018). Variables that were used in measuring reading attainment among students include sex, immigrant background, language use in the home, the number of books in the home, parents' highest education level and parents' highest occupation level (Lenkeit et al., 2018). The literature is consistent in recognising the need to disaggregate these different indicators of socio-economic positions to gain better understanding of the individual effects of the various influencing factors. The "need to distinguish between different indicators of family



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background” is acknowledged by the researchers (p. 68). Larger studies sometimes use “a composite measure of students socio-economic characteristics that is only occasionally disintegrated to evaluate its constituting components” (p. 69). Throughout the analysis cycles in these studies, the disadvantage of boys in reading attainment is independent of other individual characteristics while associations of immigrant background and language use are mediated by indicators of cultural affinity and economic status. Parental education levels and parental occupation levels significantly contribute to reading attainment over and above “other student characteristics” (p. 60). However, students may be further disadvantaged if they attend schools where socio-economic backgrounds is predominantly low and if they learn among peers from predominantly lower socio-economic backgrounds. Students with lower ability levels, who have parents with the ability to educate them at fee-paying schools, are “equally as likely” to gain high grades as their high ability peers in free state schools (Morris et al., 2016, p.164).

3.2.3 THEME 3. LACK OF MOTIVATION AND LOW ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

The literature accepts that ESL is not as a result of one consequence, it is propelled and empowered by a vast array of variables and events that result in a definitive end to the education of a young person thus leading to yet another series of disadvantaged life circumstances. Bayón-Calvo et al. (2020) agree with Savvides et al. (2021) who find that ESL is the end result or the cumulative point in a set of life scenarios that are for the most part beyond the control of the individual. According to Hascher and Hagenauer, (2010), motivation is a key factor in successful educational attainment and especially in early adolescence into young adulthood. Much recent literature (Brown et al., 2022; Maragkou, 2020; Sacco & Rose, 2022) has displayed the importance of scholastic performance in educational outcomes, one of which is actually being motivated to remain in education. Brown et al. (2022) reference a process of student attrition with underlying factors that eventually leads to the student dropping out of school and highlights the link between ‘academic failure or underachievement and drop-out for young people’ (p.4).

This paper will take a closer look at motivation and the different constructs it operates from. In order to perform academically, motivation is a key factor and it can be fuelled by internal as well as external factors. Within these constructs there are multidimensional variables at play including, actual academic aptitude, capacity and a sense of belonging and connectedness in school as well as society. A number will be outlined.

Academic Motivation

In agreement with Hascher and Hagenauer (2010), it is widely accepted that withdrawal from school is not based on a short-term development but is as a result of a continuing process of amotivation and disengagement’ (p. 220). Today, motivation is a recurrent factor in explanations concerning varying levels of school performance. Embarking on new curriculums, topics and bodies of work not only requires but demands a particular level of motivation for active participation and engagement that will have dividends into the future, from academic performance to life



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enhancing skillsets. While it is of course helpful to have a variety of knowledge, skills and attitudes, it is imperative to have the will to learn and the ability to sustain that will. To concur with Usán et al. (2022), one must have ‘the predisposition and will to learn’ (p. 2). Motivation plays an integral role in any task much less an educational one that involves acquiring, retaining and applying knowledge from a school curriculum. Of interest to add here is that Savvides et al. (2021) find educational stakeholders ‘dissatisfied with the centralised approach to educational policymaking, which resulted in a prescribed, broad, academic curriculum determined by government officials out of touch with students’ current requirements. Educational provision was seen as a ‘one size fits all’ model that fails to adequately prepare young people for the labour market.’ (p. 803). Of interest is Usán et al. (2022) study that includes an exploration of academic motivation in terms of self-determination theory (SDT) (p.2) posited as a macro-theory of human motivation that assumes persons as active organisms who integrate their experiences consistently. According to the research, SDT includes many degrees of self-determination that are internally or externally controlled by an individual and then defined in terms of intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation and amotivation, (Usán et al., 2022).

Intrinsic Motivation - From Within

Intrinsic motivation means taking on something because one is drawn to it and therefore is compelled from within (Usán et al., 2022). This is an intentional task driven from the internal capacity of self. In terms of ESL, we know there can be many outside variables that impact intrinsic motivation such as socio-economic status, parental educational status, family support (or lack thereof), mobility and so on, each impacting one’s ability to become internally motivated. While Hascher and Hagenauer (2010) note that attitudes towards ESL can begin as early as preschool, they agree that adolescents are particularly at risk for ESL because of a decrease in motivation as well as a decline in positive attitudes towards school and a specific vulnerability to motivational conflicts between leisure activities and academic tasks. Doyle et al. (2021) concur that a number of the participants in their study reported that students ‘were aware from a very young age that financial inequality existed between them and their peers’ (p.125), leading to feelings of shame and embarrassment. Thus it may be suggested that internal or ‘intrinsic motivation’ (Usán et al., 2022) although originating from within the individual, points to a job of work for the educator as motivation must be enabled from within and at the same time empowered from without. To concur, Doyle and Keane (2019) proffered that ‘teachers and Principals need opportunities to engage with research about links between socio-demographic positionality, the impact of trauma on educational experiences and outcomes’ (p.84).

Intrinsic Motivation - Gender

The literature holds that gender is a contributing factor towards motivation for education and attainment. One might suggest that this variable falls within the construct of intrinsic motivation. For the most part, males dominate the numbers of those who leave school early (Bayón-Calvo et al., 2020; Beekhoven & Dekkers, 2005; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2010). In an Irish study Freeney and O’Connell (2012) posit that 75.5% of males stayed in school as opposed to 85.7% of females who stayed and completed their Leaving Certificate examination. Mínguez (2013) find



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that males are more at risk, 17.2%, of early school leaving as opposed to females who at 12.69% in the countries researched were in the majority. This difference was very specifically obvious in Spain with 25.7% of girls compared to 37.3% of boys. It is held that this is so in Spain and Denmark. In Spain, because the female students hold education and training in higher esteem than their male peers and in Denmark because of generous gender policies (Mínguez, 2013). It might be suggested therefore that female students are less likely to disengage from school, lack academic motivation to attain and thus leave school early. In Denmark and Spain there are gender supportive educational policies to support females staying in school, (Mínguez, 2013). Of note however, is that the same study finds when Spanish females leave school early, they have little opportunity to find employment so this may also be a contributing factor in their sustained motivation to stay in school and attain academic success that will lead to gainful employment and additional life choices.

Extrinsic Motivation - Relationships

The literature holds that extrinsic motivation originates from outside factors and variables that impact a student's ability to sustain an interest in education. It is held that a sense of belonging and connectedness (Tarabini et al., 2019) in school means that teachers and peers matter (Behtoui, 2017; Freeney & O'Connell, 2012). Similarly, Hascher and Hagenauer (2010) note that the support of competent teachers together with a teacher's positive attitude with the student as well as the capacity to teach well is important. Negative relationships between students and teachers as well as disinterested, disrespectful or unfair teachers foster the development of alienation (Doyle & Keane, 2019; Geven et al., 2021; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2010).

The opposite also holds true, when teaching is based on positive and supportive relationships between teachers and students, with teachers working to empower and support students with focused learning intentions that have scaffolded success criteria, students' needs are met (Borgna et al., 2022; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2010). In addition, a student develops a long-term perspective whereby education is seen to be connected to future (monetary) life opportunities (Straková, 2007).

Extrinsic Motivation - Socially Disadvantaged Areas

Research holds that there is a correlation between the level of educational qualification awarded and each student's individual's socio-economic background (Behtoui, 2017). Students from poorer backgrounds may not have had educational toys, books and play presented to them in a positive light due to low income in the former instance and low interest in the latter (Dickson et al., 2016; Freeney & O'Connell, 2012). Thus, it follows that external factors that impact motivation and academic attainment are socio-economic background as well as parental positioning in society. In addition, it is noted that students from a lower economic background who are clustered in the same area and educated in local schools experience economic isolation with long-lasting negative impacts. Empowering the intrinsic motivation to academically achieve, to be aspirational for academic success or even to participate has long-term individual as well as societal impact (Early et al., 2022; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2010). With regard to extrinsic motivation, Fleming and Harford (2021) add that this kind of clustering of lower achieving schools can act to deter



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more qualified teachers from working in heavily disadvantaged schools. It is interesting to note that Harris and Williams (2012) hold the classroom interactions in more socially affluent schools usually incorporate more open questions leading to better learning outcomes as evidenced in student answers together with teachers willing to wait for the student to collate and complete their answers.

Extrinsic Motivation - Parental Educational Status

As we have already seen, parental education has an impact on ESL. According to Straková (2007), 'all advanced countries show a correlation between a student's achievement and his/her family background.' (p. 589). Further, Freney and O'Connell (2012) concur that parents with higher levels of education themselves have a better appreciation of the possible impact of education and are in a more amenable place to offer scaffolding that encourage their sons/daughters to continue with education. Behtoui (2017) agrees with the findings of Straková (2007) who holds that parents with a higher educational status comprehend the education system and share supportive advice as well as provide opportunities and relationships of educational interest in the elements and choices to be made along the educational journey. Students from a lower socio-economic status with lower educated parents are said to experience less educational encouragement from their domestic environment (Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015). Parental support is a primary agent both inside and outside the school and therefore impacts intrinsic as well as extrinsic student motivation. Mínguez (2013) concludes that in researching two 19-year longitudinal studies of families it was deduced that the experiences leading to lack of motivation for educational attainment which led to eventual school dropout, began at home, early in each student's life, even at preschool age.

Behtoui (2017) echoes the findings of Beekhoven and Dekkers (2005) when he adds that social capital generated from a 'resource-rich family social network and friends with a positive attitude towards education showed a positive impact on the educational expectations of young people' (p. 500). Dickson et al. (2016) continue by stating that 'The causal impact of parental education on children has potentially important policy implications for intergenerational mobility, especially lower educated parents (2019, p.216). Further, Freney and O'Connell (2012) agree with the findings of Downes et al.'s (2006) study in Blanchardstown, Dublin, which found that students from lower income backgrounds have to contend with hunger, poor diet and tiredness have to deal with barriers to motivation and concentration in school.

Amotivation

Amotivation is a general term for different forms of a lack or loss of motivation. In accordance with Usán et al. (2022), amotivation references the lack of motivation awarded to any given task. It is suggested that academic motivation is a key factor in terms of academic commitment and attainment as it is indicative of the intention to actively participate in any learning activity (Hascher & Hagenauer, 2010). Numerous studies have related academic motivation with academic effort and academic results. Hascher and Hagenauer (2010) find that amotivation along with disengagement is a continuing negative development that can lead to a long-term issue that can lead to eventual school dropout.



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Brown et al. (2022) concur with Usán et al. (2022) when they hold that a key factor impacting student attrition is a student's loss of motivation and ability to sustain energy and enthusiasm for education. It is suggested that student motivation strategies are key for education in the secondary school system. 'Students perform better when they are motivated and open, engaged in school tasks, and interested in the topics that are being presented in the classroom, leading to adaptive behaviours and a positive personal and academic development' (Usán et al., 2022, p.1). The research finds that loss of motivation can lead to lower academic attainment. Further, a negative correlation is apparent between academic burnout and academic performance. Usán et al. (2022) define academic burnout as 'the loss of interest in academic topics and the lack of commitment to school tasks, along with self-doubt concerning the student's ability to meet their academic targets, resulting in stress and poor motivation' (p.1).

Summing up, motivation is a key factor in ensuring that students stay in school and further are afforded the opportunities to pursue long term education and training. Lack of motivation derives from a range of variables that can begin during the preschool stage and progressively lead to the end of all educational opportunities. Usán et al. (2022) explore academic motivation in terms of SDT, a macro-theory of human motivation that assumes persons as organisms who incorporate experiences regularly. Low academic motivation derives from lack of achievement and academic success, low self-esteem, family background, socio-economic grouping as well as the many variables that play out in school itself, from peer, parental and teacher support (or lack thereof) to a sense of belonging and connectedness in school (Behtoui, 2017; Fleming & Harford, 2021; Sacco & Rose, 2022). The literature notes that lack of motivation and all its elements do not exist in a vacuum, unfortunately they lead to and are part of a process that leads ultimately to early school leaving (Hascher & Hagenauer, 2010).

3.2.4 THEME 4. SOCIAL DISADVANTAGE

Early school leaving (ESL) has profound social and economic outcomes for young people, not only on an individual level but also at a societal level. This is especially evident and amplified for students from marginalised or minority groups, such as indigenous or ethnic minorities (Giannelli & Mangiavacchi, 2010; Gómez-González et al., 2022; Wolf et al., 2020). Interestingly, and with reference to the children of migrants, Gries et al. (2021) find the ESL and low educational status impact to be more profound for migrant children of secondary school age as opposed to the younger pre-school and early school age group.

For many decades, early school leaving has been and is continuing to be a substantial concern for educationalists and policy makers (OECD, 2016). The literature widely holds that social inequalities in educational attainment are an inherent feature of societies within mass educational systems (Beekhoven & Dekkers, 2005; Freeney & O'Connell, 2012; Mínguez, 2013; Shain, 2016; Wolf et al., 2020). One might suggest that socio-economic disadvantage posits a launch pad for a whole plethora of educational inequalities and disadvantage (Freeney & O'Connell, 2012; Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015). However, the literature reveals that the degree to which individual educational outcomes are affected by socio-economic status (SES) varies across institutional contexts (Borgna et al., 2022) and age groups (Giannelli & Mangiavacchi, 2010; Gries et al., 2021). Therefore, we know that socio-economic disadvantage is not a



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stand-alone deficit. The literature also notes that national interventions can impact this disadvantage (Balenzano et al., 2019; Fleming & Hartford, 2021; Mínguez, 2013) as well as local interventions albeit a lower level (Borgna et al., 2022; Tarabini et al., 2019).

Educational Attainment

Early et al. (2022) hold that the breadth and depth of socio-economic impact on attainment is as a result of the multidimensionality and variety of factors having the capacity to incur influence. These are, for example; the costs of education (Freeney & O'Connell, 2012; Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015; Doyle et al., 2021) as well as experiencing limited opportunities to socially integrate on the cultural school experiences (Doyle et al., 2021; Doyle & Keane, 2019; Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015). Conversely, Parsons (2013) quite frankly describes this as 'a simple poverty-attainment link' (p.267). It is widely researched that factors such as parental educational status being low (or not at all), has a negative influence on student attainment and achievement as well as the act of actually staying in school, (Dickson et al., 2016; Early et al., 2022; Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2020; Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015). These factors will be further explored below.

Parental Educational Status

Once again, the issue of parental educational status needs to be acknowledged. Parental background will always impact educational outcomes (Chevalier et al., 2013; Dickson et al., 2016; Gries et al., 2021; Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2020). Further, Dickson et al. (2016) add an interesting factor, that the level of parental education status impacts children in two ways, firstly the 'selection story' (p.184) i.e. the choices made in terms of education and schools, secondly, the 'causal story' (p.184) i.e. parents with higher educational status tend to have higher educational expectations. The findings from Brown et al. (2022) concur with earlier research (Shain, 2016) which holds that the right mix of educational and social policies may work to lower educational inequalities, but certainly not close the socio-economic attainment gap. Accordingly, Gries et al. (2021) state that 'educational policies should actively aim to facilitate the inclusion of migrants and migrant children and alleviate their disadvantages in the education system' (p. 836). Thus, it is proffered that there is a strong causal impact between socio-economic status and ESL. It is helpful to further explore parental impact on ESL at this point.

Early et al. (2022) concur that 'Parental qualifications were the greatest socio-economic predictors of attainment, after adjusting for other factors within the model' (p.183). In the case of migrant households, this impact is amplified due to geographical mobility. Interestingly, parental gender in terms of qualifications, matters. Maternal qualifications and training status is found to be a key driver of a student's attainment outcomes. (Chevalier et al., 2013; Early et al., 2022). Dickson et al. (2016) concur that although the mother's impact is more significant at an earlier stage, the father's impact is as significant and can ultimately have a slightly larger effect as the student gets older, albeit of a similar magnitude. Conversely, Chevalier et al. (2013), concluded that there are stronger impacts from maternal educational status than paternal educational status and further that this has a more compelling effect on sons rather than daughters. For children of migrant workers, Giannelli and Mangiavacchi (2010) add that while



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migrant families economically benefit from migrant as well as seasonal work, there is a 'left-behind' (p.78) phenomenon due to this seasonal work. Again, the impact is differentiated between two age groups of young people.

According to Doyle and Keane (2019), parents can feel stigmatised as a result of the social disadvantage, media coverage of their area and their perceptions of how they (and their children) are viewed by others. The research holds that 'this sense of stigma that had been internalised was evident in the extent to which a hyperawareness of the significance of place permeated the participants' perceptions of how they were viewed by others, and their accounts of their parenting beliefs and approaches.' (Doyle & Keane, 2019, p.79). Similarly, Freeney and O'Connell (2012) concur by noting that behaviour in school due to relationships with family, teachers and peers added to the impact of socio-economic disadvantage. This point is again amplified in the study by Bianchi et al. (2021), who focusses on the impact of negative peer relationships in school as experienced by immigrant students (especially adolescent age groups) living in a socially disadvantaged area. To concur with the literature 'peer acceptance at school is negatively associated with school dropout-intention and negative self-esteem in immigrant students living in poverty', (Bianchi et al., 2021, p.275)

Lack of Motivation and Attainment

A salient point found in the research holds that students' lack of motivation, academic attainment and ultimate low self-esteem and self-efficacy is underpinned by their socio-economic status - thus a further causal impact of socio-economic disadvantage that leads to early school leaving (Doyle & Keane, 2019). Brown et al. (2022) agree with earlier findings from Straková (2007) when they note that low academic achievement is identified as 'the strongest predictor,' (p.4) of ESL. It is further suggested that this is not solely as a result of low academic attainment, but nuanced by the student voice who holds that attainment failure is as a result of schools' having an overwhelming emphasis on academic attainment (Brown et al, 2022). This as well as a personal sense of impossibility, too many tasks to complete and the rationale that suggests gaining traction to excel in education is simply not possible. Brown et al. (2022) conclude that 'it may be the perception that the education system has no other pathways or support, which may explain the link between academic failure or underachievement and drop-out for young people' (p.4).

Brown et al. (2022) are in agreement with Tarabini et al. (2019) and Usán et al. (2022) when they find a key factor impacting student academic attainment is a student's loss of motivation and ability to sustain energy and enthusiasm for education. Of interest here is that, Bianchi et al. (2021) find that for students of migrant background, lack of motivation for attainment arises from lack of peer acceptance in school and can eventually lead to school dropout. To concur with this finding, Tarabini et al. (2019) conclude that 'students' beliefs about the usefulness of school and their self-perceptions as proper learners are not independent of their social status' (p.239). Pertinent to add here is that Giannelli and Mangiavacchi (2010) find for females from migrant families, the impact on attainment is even higher compared with males as 'older men, taking up the role of absent fathers, apply traditional customary laws that discriminate women.' (p.90).



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It is argued in the research that student motivation strategies are key for education in the secondary school system. ‘Students perform better when they are motivated and open, engaged in school tasks, and interested in the topics that are being presented in the classroom, leading to adaptive behaviours and a positive personal and academic development’ (Usán et al., 2022, p.1). This research finds that loss of motivation can lead to lower academic attainment and further, a negative correlation was found between academic burnout and academic performance (Usán et al., 2022). Academic burnout is defined as ‘the loss of interest in academic topics and the lack of commitment to school tasks, along with self-doubt concerning the student’s ability to meet their academic targets, resulting in stress and poor motivation’ (Usán et al., 2022, p.1).

Lottery of Birth

In accordance with Harju-Luukkainen et al. (2020) ‘Learning should not be hindered or restricted in any way even if a child comes from a poor family, has an immigrant background, is raised by a single parent or has limited resources at home.’ (p.1). Doyle et al. (2021) agree with the literature that finds the right to education has important social rationale and cannot be shared out by the ‘lottery of birth’ (p.128). Conversely, Sacco and Rose (2022) argue that particular ‘inequalities area not inevitable’ (p.1474), and agree with Freeney and O’Connell (2012) that an educational system accessible to all is possible if work begins on each students’ negative perception of school as well as his/her own capacity and ability. Of interest to add here is that Tarabini et al. (2019) find in all of the schools they studied, students with the lowest SES did not place a high value on education and how it might positively impact their socio-economic future, nor did they see themselves as *good* students. Accordingly, these findings conclude that, ‘students’ emotional engagement with their schools and their sense of belonging do not correlate exactly with the social composition of the schools, but rather with their perception of support, help and encouragement from teachers’ (p.238). Hence suggesting that there is a body of work that needs to be actively engaged with, on-the-ground in each school at local level and simultaneously with the policy makers at national level.

Teachers’ Impact

Teacher interactions are found to be negative as well as positive in terms of the motivation and support systems for socially disadvantaged students. Interestingly, findings from Hascher and Hagenauer (2010); Doyle and Keane (2019); Fleming and Harford (2021) as well as Geven et al. (2021) posit that teachers in the main, have lower academic expectations for students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, sometimes bordering on negative attitudes and stigmatisation, as well as teachers not being adequately trained to provide pertinent support for students who are living with trauma, disorder and working daily to survive (Borgna et al., 2022; Doyle & Keane, 2019). It is pertinent to add here that Gorard et al. (2021) suggest, teachers who are more qualified may be deterred from working in socially disadvantaged areas. Conversely, Fleming and Harford (2021) hold a more nuanced conclusion in that school personnel themselves, although working to support students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, recognised that their resources are limited and their ability to impact change, minimal. This finding is because ‘educational



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disadvantage continues to be viewed as a school based issue, with a lack of recognition and response at a policy level of its fundamental, deep-seated relationship with wider economic inequalities across [Irish] society' (P.15).

Another salient finding in the literature suggests that although it is acknowledged that what happens in the classroom does not occur in the abstract, the fertile ground of learning and exchange between leader and learner is not always on a level playing field. Behtoui (2017) argues that the interactions with teachers as well as the teachers' expectations of the student's educational attainment 'have a significant impact on forming the future educational plans of these young people' (p.500). In agreement with Beekhoven and Dekkers (2005) and Freeney and O'Connell (2012), Behtoui (2017) found that males as well as groups of students of immigrant background note 'lower levels of support and fair judgement from their teachers. In all dimensions of school-based social capital, the lower-class background of young people was associated with lower levels of teachers' support and expectations' (p.500).

Conversely, the same is also true of socio-advantaged students in their classrooms, Harris and Williams (2012) and Behtoui (2017) agree that having a resource-rich family with supportive intentions and aspirations towards education can positively impact one achieving a fulfilling independent life as well as contributing to and feeling a sense of belonging in society at large. Could this research offer weight to previous findings (Doyle & Keane, 2019; Fleming & Harford, 2021; Geven et al., 2021; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2010) suggesting that some teachers may operate out of a bias SES worldview?

Academic Undermatch

Of additional interest is the findings from (Maragkou, 2020) who states that in England there is a significant SES gap in academic match among students in upper-secondary post-compulsory education. It is noted that students with socio-economic disadvantage achieve less highly ranked qualifications compared to their similarly attaining but more socio-economic advantaged peers. This gap is greater among the highest academic achieving students which leads to the research conclusion that 'SES inequality works more by keeping high-ability low-SES students down than pushing low-ability high-SES students up.' (Maragkou, 2020, p.17). In addition, the paper establishes that the school and area composition are the main drivers of the SES gap in academic match. Policymakers interested in closing this gap ought to focus on the provision of adequate information on further education and training opportunities for teachers as well as students (Borgna et al., 2022; Doyle & Keane, 2019) that are more suited to each individual's academic capacity and possible educational aspirations. It is also imperative that educational policies 'actively aim to facilitate the inclusion of migrants and migrant children and alleviate their disadvantages in the education system' (Gries et al., 2021, p.836).

Equally, the reverse is also true, young people from higher socio-economic backgrounds with families that possess the wherewithal to scaffold their educational journey and empower high educational attainment attain a high educational status and continue to further education or training (Straková, 2007, Usán et al., 2022). This in turn leads to the self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem; a necessary skillset to build intrinsic and extrinsic motivation



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(Hascher & Hagenauer, 2010), that empowers educational status and sustains social and cultural capital. (Beekhoven & Dekkers, 2005; Straková, 2007; Tarabini et al., 2019).

School Guidance Intervention

To this end, Borgna et al. (2022) hold that school guidance interventions are of paramount importance. They suggest that by establishing an effective school guidance programme (the Educational Choice Programme), in their research, the impact shows self-confidence being increased, negative influence of family members is decreased and the expanse of the educational and occupational ambition is enhanced. The aforementioned research concludes that in 'order for school guidance to fulfil its equalising potential, we claim that counsellors should be trained to recognise the importance of social inequalities in track choices and the micro-level mechanisms behind them, so that, in their daily practice, they do not unintentionally contribute to their reproduction.' (Borgna et al., 2022, p.11). Conversely, Freeney and O'Connell (2012) add that 'Early identification of negative mind-sets towards the education process would appear to be of paramount importance.' (p.570).



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Series of Events

While in agreement with the literature, Bayón-Calvo et al (2020) argue a salient point. They hold that ESL is not ‘a purely exogenous phenomenon’ (p.490), it is an ultimate presentation of a series of events, internal and external, that lead to dropping out. Thus, it can be agreed that intrinsic motivation may be interjected at an early age and impacted to alter the anticipated trajectory. The importance of early educational intervention during each educational age and stage of a young person’s life (Freeney & O’Connell, 2012), can impact the endogenous factors that support early school leaving thus echoes the call to support policy and processes among the many and varied agents contributing to education as well as the on-the-ground interchange. Harju-Luukkainen et al. (2020) conclude that although the many exogenous factors including socio-economic disadvantage are prevalent and can often cause negative impact on a young person’s education, they do not have to remain a constant. However, for socially disadvantaged students (because of migration) the echoes of Giannelli and Mangiavacchi (2010) ring true, the young children who are ‘left-behind’ (p.78), or those who have to take on leadership roles in the family due to parental migration offers itself as another area for policy makers to invest in.

The literature (Giannelli & Mangiavacchi, 2010; Freeney & O’Connell, 2012; Tarabini et al., 2019; Bayón-Calvo et al., 2020; Gries et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2022) argues that in order for policy to impact or stem socio-economic disadvantage in education, all stakeholders must be on the same page. Again, quite frankly Parsons (2013) states that, ‘interrupting the adverse force of poverty remains hugely challenging and deserving of huge resources’ (p.281). This means including the student voice (Fleming & Harford, 2021) and the parents’ voice, continuing to explore the variables that are attached at an intrinsic motivational level; from having a low SES to having low self-efficacy, academic achievement, self-esteem and equal opportunity (Giannelli & Mangiavacchi, 2010; Bianchi et al., 2021; Sacco & Rose, 2022). Again, the literature echoes the sentiment that low SES is indeed a launchpad for a series of events that contribute to the ultimate *choice* to leave school. In agreement, Balenzano et al. (2019) concur that ESL prevention programmes should garner interventions that include the families of the students and advocate for a more personalised approach from teachers. This would work to take into account the ‘educational, behavioural, and socio-relational aspects by social workers in informal learning contexts. This research goes further to add that the intentional corrective kind of support programme promotes ‘moral responsibility to ensure respect for human rights and social justice norms.’ (Balenzano et al., 2019, p.78). An important point of note from Mínguez (2013) is that the amount of funding invested in education showed significant variations in European countries asserting that Finland (for example), invested in education based on comprehensive and flexible models and thus the impact is presented in a lowering of early school leavers. In turn, countries like Spain (Mínguez, 2013) who have invested little in education, experience the early school leaving rate as well as educational inequality as becoming ever more significant. This salient point concurs with the findings of Parsons (2013).

3.2.5 THEME 5. SCHOOL SEGREGATION, NEIGHBOURHOOD EFFECT AND RESOURCES

In this section of our review, we focus further on socio-economic factors that impact upon early school leaving and in particular, we examine European policy and educational research on school segregation. We review



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neighbourhood effect and we explore some ideas on how curriculum, school resourcing and the influence of pedagogy is considered to impact positively upon school retention. Our debate recognises the theoretical, methodological and social complexity of knowledge making in a politicised and contested arena and it rests with an appreciation that deeply embedded contextualised investigations may offer a way forward.

In 2017, before the war in Ukraine and before the increased displacement of migrant and refugee peoples across Europe, the Council of Europe Commission for Human Rights described the then 'unfortunate reality' of school segregation in Europe as a 'serious violation of the rights of the children concerned' and as 'an injustice' against minority and vulnerable groups (p.5). In a broad ranging report, the Commission identified that substantial numbers of children across Europe with additional learning needs, as well as children from Roma, Traveller, migrant and refugee family backgrounds, are not included in mainstream education. Many are concentrated into segregated settings and some are deprived of access to schooling altogether.

The Commission recognises that the causes of such school segregation are numerous and varied. Governments advance national policies that perpetuate segregation and attribute the causes to austerity, system capacity and school administration while at local level, vested interest groups, residential geography and cultural factors such as linguistic competence, all contribute to the complexity that is school segregation. The effects of school segregation are considered to be wide-ranging and long-lasting. The practice is seen as a first step in a life of social segregation and one that most likely limits educational attainment, qualification and life opportunities.

Segregation practices, in a range of vastly different education systems across Europe, are studied by educational researchers in an arena that is arguably bogged down by often contradictory factors such as social justice policy, the rights of families to choose their own schools and the pressures of testing and attainment as indicators of school effectiveness. Dumay and Dupriez (2014) explore issues of school segregation in Belgium and outline how school autonomy and the reality of pupil and family school choice, based on local competition, give rise to a subsequent quasi-marketisation and thereby leads to disparities in funding and resourcing between public and private schooling.

Gorard (2014) mirrors a similar social justice dilemma in a national UK study, demonstrating that Academy schools, set up from 2002 with preferential and recurrent per pupil funding to improve school outcomes in areas of significant educational disadvantage, actually came to function as a two-tier segregated system, with noticeably higher levels of segregation evident in 'converter academies' and limited system-wide improvement achieved overall (p.268). Gorard et al.'s later (2021) UK research offers more promise however and reports that a provision known as Pupil Premium funding has actually impacted positively on the social poverty gap and while it is complex to determine precisely, it has decreased socio-economic school segregation practices. The complexity of making any accurate assessment in such a matter however is echoed in Oberti and Savina's (2019) investigation of inequality and school segregation in Paris, as is the difficulty of attempting correlations between school segregation and socio-residential segregation, particularly when factors such as achievement on test scores are included.



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Parents typically want their children to achieve well at school and the perceived and actual rights of parental choice have served to increase school segregation. This is again echoed in Ledwith's (2017) study of the Irish context, one in which long-standing traditions and homogenous school ethos is impacted by rapid social change, particularly the changes brought about by a rapidly increasing ethnic diversification of rural and urban populations. This, and similar research by Elchardus et al. (2013) and Lavrentsova and Valkov (2019), raise awareness as to the role of schools during times of social upheaval. Evidence suggests that when schools are seen more as traditional academic institutions, that are focused on attainment outcomes primarily, segregation practices limit the potential for interethnic interactions within school communities and networks, thereby giving rise to perpetuation theory.

However, when schools are envisioned and operate more so as civic institutions, serving children and parental networks while working towards positive outcomes, they can act as 'agents of unification in an ethnically, racially, and religiously diverse society' (Ledwith, 2017, p.338). Lavrentsova and Valkov (2019) express this juxta positioning sociologically in terms of the human capital output of schooling. Segregation, disaffection and school drop-out are the by-products of a mechanism designed for the productivity of 'one-dimensional skills' they argue. An alternative conception of education might be to consider schools as social mechanisms that are designed to 'generate different types of experience and affect many dimensions of skills' (p.947). Elchardus et al. (2013) cite evidence from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS 2009), pointing to the market-driven cost-effectiveness reality that immigrant children are generally hived away from private school settings and are instead highly concentrated into public schools and into areas with lower socio-economic status in particular.

Gorard and Siddiqui (2018), in an alternative but not altogether different study of state-funded selective UK grammar schools, describe a stratified segregation in terms of chronic poverty, ethnicity, language and special educational needs, noting that such a 'clustering of relative advantage is potentially dangerous for society' (p.909). That students are systematically sorted into schools across the UK, Europe and beyond, based on their socio-economic backgrounds and/or religious, ethnic, immigrant or special education status is undeniable. Research to investigate the functioning of schools, state systems, their end-products and their by-products, and how they are 'entangled in processes of inequality reproduction' (Danhier, 2018, p.341) is, by its nature, undeniably complex and politicised.

To further unpack the component elements of school segregation we revisit the Council of the European Commission for Human Rights (2017) report, to encounter a recommendation for the possible establishment of socially balanced school districts, on the basis that 'if school districts coincide with neighbourhoods with a high concentration of persons from disadvantaged groups, it is very likely that schooling will reproduce the high levels of residential segregation' (p.26). The influence of neighbourhood effect on school segregation and on early-school leaving has been widely researched but that said, the outcomes are by no means conclusive.

Brannstrom's (2004) longitudinal study from the so-called 'golden era' of Swedish welfare state policy tracks groups of 10-year olds through adolescence and beyond, and notes importantly that 'the outcome for those who grow up in a poor neighbourhood is not more likely to be worse than for those who grow up in a more affluent neighbourhood'



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(p.2515). The possibility that poor neighbourhoods make residents poorer is difficult to evaluate both quantitatively and qualitatively. Sample selection is non-random and is fraught with bias. Social interpretations of being 'poor' or 'excluded' (p.2518) are open to interpretation. The results of Brattbakk and Wessel's (2012) research in Norway reveal only small effects 'of neighbourhood deprivation on educational achievement and, even less pronounced, on income' (p.391).

A factor that may be significant however is that variation in the behaviour of children and adolescents at the individual level is seen as a function of neighbourhood-level characteristics. Goux and Maurin (2007) develop this premise further in their study of neighbourhood socialisation in French as they explore the influence of close neighbours on attitudes to schooling. They echo the challenge of 'providing a convincing evaluation of neighbourhood effects' but do conclude that 'adolescents' outcomes at the end of junior high-school are strongly influenced by the performance of other adolescents in the neighbourhood' (p.1193).

Sykes and Kuyper (2009) provide further elaboration of peer-to-peer influence, noting the 'vast amounts of time' spent in numerous daily childhood and adolescent encounters, any or all of which may serve to influence individuals' 'social, cognitive, health, and behavioural outcomes' (p.2417). The results of their investigation support many of the conventional ideas about neighbourhood quality; that 'disadvantaged areas are associated with lower outcomes, and affluent areas and areas with stronger housing milieus (i.e. higher levels of homeownership and home values) are associated with better outcomes' (p.2431). In recognising this generalisation however, the researchers point to the need for further study, particularly with regard to the interconnectedness of families and their parenting contexts, given that on an individual basis, 'some students appear to be more or less susceptible to certain neighbourhood effects than others' (p.2434).

Freeney and O'Connell's (2012) Irish study further highlights the significance of individual contextualisation, noting in terms of disengagement and early school leaving, that the presence of strong and positive pro-school attitudes, observed among students, parents and teachers, outweighed other general factors such as economic deprivation. The reasons why significant numbers of children and adolescents are found to be leaving school early across Europe and, as importantly, why some stay in school longer, are explored more recently by Bademci et al. (2020) with similar findings. Evidence from surveys of teachers (n = 796) and pupils (n = 900) across Bulgaria, Italy, Malta, Romania and Turkey indicates that early school leaving is 'a complex phenomenon caused by multi-factorial issues spanning personal, organizational, social, economic, policy and societal marginality' (p.184).

Possible explanations for individual disengagement are offered in micro-level evidence and are reported in difficulties in student relationships, in low levels of institutional trust and in students experiencing little interest and connectedness with school learning processes. The study concludes with the possibility that teachers are ideally situated to influence such matters and that their influence rests within effective pedagogical approaches, particularly the development of democratic conceptual thinking tools that enable and empower learners to participate as active contributors within their school and local societies.



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Our discussion returns again at this point to the Council of the Europe Commission for Human Rights (2017) report and to their recommendations to incentivise the development of teachers' professional expertise in schools in economically deprived areas. They recognise the value of training and support for teachers in areas of social disadvantage and the benefits of teaching methods that are tailored to respond to their students' needs. Producing the best teachers for the most challenging schools could, the report argues, make these schools more attractive to families and strengthen the integration of children of migrant and of immigrant communities.

While the Council's report appears arguably somewhat aspirational, research in education does serve to support such recommendations. Mocetti's (2012) statistical assessment of the determinants of school failure and drop-out across Italy point clearly to the importance of local factors such as staff attendance monitoring, the availability of qualified fully-contracted teachers and the quality of school infrastructure. In Spain, Pàmies Rovira et al. (2016) investigate the variance in how schools cater for their most vulnerable young people. Their research 'shows the importance of internal institutional dimensions' (p.1), in other words, the direct involvement and leadership on a personal level of the management team, who through distributed leadership practices, work to foster purposeful communication and establish inclusive structures. Primary school student B/C1 offers a telling insight: 'They [the teachers] believe more in me than I do myself; I thought I couldn't do it and look, I can' (p.8).

An interesting aside to improving school effectiveness in such contexts is a focus on exploring the importance and development of everyday language and communication abilities, from early years settings (Harris & Williams, 2012) to working with adolescents (Spencer et al., 2017). The acquisition of vocabulary and the development of spoken language skills 'is strongly implicated in predicting educational outcomes' (ibid, p.194) and thereby reducing the gap between differing groups.

Straková's (2007) findings in the Czech Republic also supports 'the hypothesis that the relationship between a student's attainment and his/her socio-economic status is strengthened not only by the structure of the education system (=early tracking) but also by the teaching methods and teacher attitudes' (p.606). Lupton and Hempel-Jorgensen (2012) speak of a pedagogical architecture that matches student demands and organisational capacity by shaping awareness of leadership and teacher identity in schools. In Germany, Atlay et al. (2019) contend that what teachers actually do in their classrooms by way of daily lived practice, has the potential to reduce social achievement inequalities' (p.1). They identify cognitive activation, classroom management and supportive climate as key dimensions of teaching quality.

We conclude with a focus pull, one that draws us from classroom practice to system level planning and implementation. In the Irish education system, the DEIS programme is intended to prevent the inter-generational transmission of educational disadvantage and early school leaving and its effects and rationale are critically analysed and debated by Fleming and Harford (2021). Their treatment moves beyond the aspirations of EU Commission policy guidance and acknowledges the 'complex, wide-reaching and intractable issues of educational disadvantage' (p.2). Recognising the value and significance of the roles played by teachers in the interplay between students,



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management and policy, they rightly contend that ‘performativity’ and an over-reliance on the assessment of such a valuable and ultimately expendable resource, may in fact side-line the more centrally important realities that are child poverty, educational disadvantage, school failure and drop-out. The balance must be struck between de-contextualised Departmental positivist data gathering and perceived accountability auditing and the contextualised considerations of the challenging circumstances that present themselves daily in classrooms and across school communities.

The first and obvious finding of the Fleming and Harford (2021) study, and one that translates equally beyond the confines of the data set, is that schools in disadvantaged settings are significantly different to school in mainstream settings and equally importantly, ‘they are significantly different from one another’ (p.8). Matters of pedagogy, leadership, resource management and well-being in challenging contexts therefore require delicate sensitive handling and responsible respectful treatment. Research that is aimed at improving the experiences of students in such schools and that works to target segregation and school completion, is best served when it embraces the ‘systemic, pervasive and engrained nature’ (p.16) of social and educational disadvantage on a human, lived-experience level.

3.3 Interplay between socio-economic factors and other social determinants on underachievement.

Early school leaving is a multifaceted phenomenon that arises from a variety of contributing factors. For simplification and a better understanding of the issue, these factors can be divided into two broad categories: those associated with the education system and those linked to the societal factors outside of the education system (Eurydice, 2014; European Commission, 2020). Brown et al. (2021) classify them into five sets: personal challenges, family circumstances, social relationships, institutional features, and structural factors. While Traag and Van der Velden (2011) categorise them as Family-related factors, effects of school composition and Individual characteristics. There is never one single set of factors leading to ESL. For every individual student, these factors combine and interact in unique ways leading to cumulative disadvantage and ultimately resulting in ESL for some students (Traag & Van der Velden, 2011). ESL is in fact influenced by diverse factors operating at different levels ranging from the immediate environment (micro and meso) to broader societal factors (exo and macro) (Bademci et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2021; Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2020). Early school leaving is not a simple or singular issue, but rather a complex phenomenon that caused by a range of factors that are interrelated and overlapping. According to Bademci et al. (2020), these factors can be classified into different domains such as personal, organizational, social, economic, policy and societal marginality. Personal factors may include a lack of motivation, poor academic performance, or a negative attitude towards schooling. Organizational factors may include poor school climate, inadequate teacher support, or limited educational resources. Social factors may cover peer pressure, bullying, or discrimination. Economic factors may encompass poverty financial hardship, or lack of access to educational resources. Policy



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factors may include educational policies, limited funding, or poor governance. Societal marginality can involve issue related to cultural identity, immigration status or social exclusion.

The social determinants of underachievement identified and explored through the SCIREARLY Project include institutional, socio-economic, cognitive, linguistic, gender, psycho-emotional, and well-being. Among these, according to research studies, the socio-economic status appears to be the strongest determinant of academic achievement and early school leaving (Bademci et al., 2020; Doyle et al., 2021; Horn, 2013; McKinney et al., 2013; Morris et al., 2016; Nita et al., 2021). Socio-economic factors such as poverty, lack of access to educational resources, and poor living conditions can affect a child or young person's psycho-emotional well-being and hamper cognitive development. At school, low expectations and deficit-views of teachers can affect educational aspirations and result in low motivation, poor self-esteem and social maladjustment resulting in truancy, absence from school and finally ESL. The cultural norms around gender and low proficiency in the language of instruction can further aggravate the situation. Early school leaving is often reported to be prevalent among immigrant or refugee students; nevertheless, the key factor that leads to it is not the immigrant status itself, but the frequently linked low socio-economic status (Hippe & Jakubowski, 2022). Findings of Lavrijsen and Nicaise's (2015) study suggest that the risk of dropping out of school is influenced by both the structure of the education system and socio-economic factors including poverty rates and employment patterns.

All of the studies quoted above present a combination of factors that affect a child or young person's cognitive and educational progress. It can be said that this progress is strongly related to the family's resources and level of deprivation, the school climate and support systems, local and national policies regarding teaching, learning, and assessment, as well as the value system that child brings with them to school. These factors form a delicate balance that promotes learning and greater engagement, while disaggregation of any element may disrupt the equilibrium and result in disengagement, lack of motivation, low academic attainment and early school leaving. Therefore, addressing ESL requires a comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach that takes into account the various factors that contribute to this phenomenon.

3.4. Policies, Gaps and Solutions

In the process of conducting the literature review for this report, we found various studies that referred to policy narratives and measures taken by governments to address ESL. In the next section, we provide a brief overview of these policy measures, drawing on the European Council's three-pronged approach to addressing ESL, which involves prevention, intervention, and compensation measures. Preventive measures aim to address the root causes of potential ESL, while intervention measures are designed to improve the quality of education and training and provide targeted support to students facing difficulties. Compensatory measures offer alternative pathways to those who have already left education and training to gain qualifications (Eurydice, 2014). The European Union's ET2020 Working Group on School Policy to Tackle Early School Leaving Policy Messages (2020) emphasises the significance of preventive and early intervention measures at both the school and local community levels. The group advocates



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for a "Whole School Approach," which involves stronger collaboration between schools and a broad range of stakeholders, including social services, youth services, outreach care workers, psychologists, nurses, speech and language therapists, guidance specialists, local authorities, NGOs, businesses, unions, and volunteers, taking a cross-sectoral approach. The primary objective of this approach is to ensure that every learner receives support for their academic journey and emotional, social, and psychological well-being. We will examine policies from this perspective as well.

3.4.1 POLICY APPROACHES TARGETING SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS TO ADDRESS ESL

While doing the literature review focused on socio-economic factors and ESL, we encountered some articles that discussed and appraised the policies meant to address socio-economic factors that lead to ESL. The policies and measures that we came across include a school accountability policy by the Federal Government of the Netherlands (De Witte et al. 2015), Pupil Premium Funding in England (Gorard et al., 2021, Shain, 2016), the statutory legislation, Raising the Participation Age of young people in England from 16–18 (Brown et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2022), State reforms to improve quality of education and ESL in Spain (Bayón-Calvo et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2021) and DEIS programme in Ireland (Doyle et al., 2021; Fleming & Hartford, 2021).

According to De Witte et al. (2015), in the Netherlands cities and municipalities enjoy greater autonomy to devise policies to tackle ESL however, the federal government's policy is centred on accountability. Cities and municipalities are offered incentives for effectively dealing with the issue. Incentives are provided in two ways to ensure accountability. Firstly, schools are provided with a monetary incentive of 2500 euros for each early school leaver who drops out less than the number of dropouts during the base year 2005 - 2006. Secondly, cities receive incentives through the use of a 'sunshine incentive' which is a naming and shaming mechanism. The Ministry of Education not just publishes all dropout rates on a website⁴ but also sends a report to the city council about its performance compared to other cities. In this way, cities with higher levels of ESL receive public shaming by the Ministry, while those with low levels of ESL get public recognition for their 'good practices' in this regard. The authors believe that this 'naming and shaming' strategy is designed to increase accountability among all stakeholders and is used as a persuasive instrument to reduce ESL (p. 217-218).

De Witte et al. (2015) argue that using the same standard for all municipalities and cities to address ESL is not justified. This strategy completely disregards the differences in population and regional characteristics that are largely responsible for ESL. The new suburbs and towns are often built for the low and middle-income populations, and the regions with socio-economically disadvantaged populations have higher ESL rates. Therefore, the central government should facilitate the local governments in addressing ESL instead of merely shaming them. However, the 'Sunshine Incentive' policy appraised by De Witte et al. (2015) presents only a slice of the whole picture. The study does not provide information on how schools use this extra funding. We can only assume that schools expend it on acquiring additional resources for disadvantaged students and organising professional development and capacity building of teachers and school leaders to deal with and manage the needs of such students. In other words, the

⁴ www.aanvalopschooluitval.nl



funding is spent on carrying out prevention and intervention measures. However, without examining the local and regional policies, it will not be appropriate to discuss whether this policy can be effective or ineffective in preventing student attrition.

In a study by Gorard and colleagues (2022), the effectiveness of Pupil Premium Funding in improving education outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in England is investigated. This grant is given to all state-funded schools based on the number of disadvantaged pupils they enrol, with disadvantage mostly determined by eligibility for free school meals. The funding is intended to provide support and interventions to enhance the academic achievement of disadvantaged pupils, ultimately narrowing the poverty attainment gap. The government aims to encourage schools to use evidence-based strategies that have been evaluated by the Education Endowment Foundation to maximise the impact of funding.

According to Gorard et al. (2022), the introduction of additional funding has led to a decrease in socio-economic segregation among primary schools. This decrease is apparent for pupils who are eligible for FSM upon arrival in year 1, as well as for pupils who have been eligible for FSM for five years or more by the end of primary school in year 6. The attainment gap at Key Stage 1 (KS) has also decreased, while the attainment gap at KS2 is also beginning to reduce. From their findings, the authors argue the Pupil Premium Funding has been effective in improving long-term disadvantaged pupils' prospects. They note that these pupils are now less concentrated in specific schools and have better KS1 and KS2 scores than before 2011. The authors recommend that the Pupil Premium grant should continue in its current form, with a greater emphasis on KS1, and increased funding for long-term disadvantaged pupils.

Shain (2016) shares similar findings as a result of her study of five institutions utilizing Pupil Premium Funding. Schools have been able to effectively utilise resources to narrow the attainment gap between students coming from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (eligible for FSM) and those who are not, according to her case studies. However, she contends that schools cannot tackle the influence of broader social inequalities alone, and considerable investment is required to achieve this goal.

According to Brown et al. (2021, 2022), raising the participation age legislation decrees that young people in the UK must participate in education or training until their 18th birthday, either through full-time study in a school, college or with a training provider. Local governments are made responsible to accomplish this statutory duty, which includes ensuring the availability of enough education and training provisions to meet the demand, providing support for all young people aged 13 -19 and those aged 20 – 25 with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities to remain engaged in education and training, and managing a tracking mechanism to report on the participation and ESL status in order to identify those who require support. The legislation is based on the idea that the longer a young person remains in education and training, the greater their likelihood of obtaining qualifications and skills, and improving their employment prospects in the future.

Between the two policy measures mentioned above, the first one, the Pupil Premium Grant, is about supporting schools in terms of resources to take preventive and intervention measures to identify early signs of ESL and then



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support potential early leavers so that they complete their schooling. The Education Endowment Foundation is supposed to provide schools receiving the Pupil Premium Grant with evidence-based best practices. The EEF website⁵ has a wide range of resources to support individualised learning and differentiated instruction to engage every learner in education. The overarching aim of the organisation is ‘to break the link between family income and educational achievement.’ Through EEF resources schools are supported to take the ‘Whole School Approach’ by involving parents and family. Nevertheless, there is not much about involving sectoral stakeholders as recommended by the European Council WG (2020). The other policy ‘Raising the Participation Age’ deals with compensatory measures and complements the Pupil Premium Funding. Though in policy rhetoric, the UK have taken all EC recommended measures to reduce ESL, the Eurostat data (2021) does not indicate a major reduction in the ESL rates over the last decade (13.4% in 2012 and 10.9% in 2019).

Bayón-Calvo et al. (2020) and Brown et al. (2021) refer to two statutory educational reforms undertaken in Spain in recent years, namely the 2006 ‘Organic Educational Law’ (LOE2) and the 2013 ‘New Organic Act for the Improvement of the Quality of Education’ (LOMCE3). The authors also discuss the ‘Plan to Reduce Early School Leaving’ (PRESL4), which was initially published in 2008 and revised in 2015 to comply with the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in the field of education and training. These policies aim to address ESL by implementing measures such as providing career guidance, offering flexible education pathways, second-chance education, language support, and data collection and monitoring. The authors are particularly impressed with the introduction of alternative pathways and second-chance measures to tackle ESL, which young people can access at the age of 15 years. The strategies mentioned in the context of these reforms encompass all EC recommendations, prevention, intervention, compensation and the whole school approach and the Eurostat data (2021) vouchsafe the remarkable decrease in ESL rates (24.7% in 2012 and 13.3 % in 2021).

The DEIS Programme, as mentioned in Fleming and Harford’s (2021) study, was introduced in 2005 and was revised in 2017 in light of the findings of evaluations and research by the Educational Research Centre, the Inspectorate and the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). The revised programme makes use of primary and post-primary school databases for the identification of schools to be designated as DEIS schools and allocated additional resources to address educational disadvantage. According to Fleming and Harford (2021), the designated schools receive an additional grant for the School Book Scheme, support for a whole School Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, and Participation in the Home School Liaison Scheme (HSLs) and School Completion Programme. To ensure targeted progress, evidence-based target-setting and school planning measures are provided and all post primary schools serving disadvantaged areas have the facility to offer the Junior Certificate School Programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied as an alternative pathway for their students. The authors acknowledge that although there have been some improvements in the retention and performance of students in DEIS schools, significant disparities persist in comparison to their non-DEIS counterparts. Moreover, there are variations in student retention and achievement levels across DEIS schools. As a result of their study, they argue that the DEIS schools do not have adequate resources

⁵ <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/about-us>



and criticise the measures in place in the state's funding, especially of secondary schools, for maintaining the cycle of educational inequality. Doyle et al. (2021) concur that this programme has not been able to provide 'tailored support to schools' with high concentration of disadvantaged students.

The DEIS programme, as presented in Fleming and Harford's (2021) study, offers a mix of prevention, intervention and compensation measures as recommended by the EC (2014). For example, prevention by offering teachers and school leaders professional development opportunities on priority, more teaching hours and one-to-one tutoring to support students' learning, and increased parental involvement through HSLs. For intervention, DEIS schools have more access to counselling and psychological services and in the case of compensation, by introducing new curricular routes. The Department of Education has also attempted to introduce a whole-school approach by involving the various stakeholders but as Fleming and Harford (2021) point out the goals and objectives related to parental engagement and community links are very general in the DEIS plan.

3.4.2 GAPS IDENTIFIED IN EXISTING RESEARCH

Numerous research studies have been conducted that look at various aspects and social determinants of underachievement and ESL; however no single article comprehensively covers all socio-economic factors causing or impeding student attrition. This report is ground-breaking in its attempt to provide a comprehensive outlook on the socio-economic determinants of ESL. The literature reviewed for this report, shows a predominance of quantitative studies, both empirical and using secondary data. Out of the 80 studies reviewed for this research, only 11 were purely qualitative, mostly employing interviews and focus groups, and three were mixed methods studies (Balenzano et al., 2019; Gómez-González et al., 2022; Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012). Qualitative studies may offer further contextual insights into the various factors of socio-economic disadvantage, as discussed in this report, and their effects on ESL. However, the voice of the child and the perspectives of parents is limited. Among these 11 qualitative studies, Doyle and Keane (2019) and Doyle et al. (2021) solicited parents' views through interviews; while Balenzano et al. (2019), Brown et al. (2021) and Brown et al. (2022) interviewed young people along with other stakeholders. Doyle and Keane (2019) state that:

Further research on the parental perspective in relation to issues of educational disadvantage, and on the experiences of young people who left school early compared to those who remained in school in a 'disadvantaged' area, would contribute significantly to our understanding of the complexities of educational dis/engagement (p. 84).

Hippe and Jakubowski (2022) argue that the higher rates of ESL among immigrant and other minority students are mainly due to their low socio-economic status and the social disadvantage. These students often face language barriers, cultural barriers, and a lack of access to academic resources and support, which can lead to dropping out of school early. However, the literature on socio-economically disadvantaged student groups often overlooks the psychological health of immigrant students and how it may impact their likelihood of experiencing ESL (Bianchi et



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al., 2021). The differentiated needs of vulnerable immigrant students with a disadvantaged social background create a “double minority condition” (p. 266), which further exposes this population to disadvantage. Despite these challenges, there is a gap in research on the psychological well-being of immigrant and minority students, as well as all socio-economically disadvantaged students in general. During our review, we identified an additional research gap concerning the relationship between parents’ occupational status and their children’s decision to discontinue their education. Although studies have examined the association between parents’ educational level and occupation status and students’ ESL (see for example Kaiser & Schneickert, 2016; Lenkeit et al., 2018; Morris et al., 2016), the independent impact of parents’ occupational status has not been adequately explored. Filling this gap through dedicated research efforts would be a valuable contribution to the field.

3.4.3 3.4.3 POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS FOR REDUCING THE IMPACT OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS ON UNDERACHIEVEMENT

The research studies that have highlighted the socio-economic causes of ESL also propose specific solutions to overcome these barriers to student achievement and retention. The recommendations made to tackle these causes are offered at three levels: systemic, regional or school district, and individual schools. Mostly the studies have recommended systemic level changes considering the broader scope of the socio-economic factors and their intergenerational impact. Fleming and Harford (2021), Freeney and O’Connell (2012), and Bademci et al., (2020) and other scholars emphasise the need for a review of educational and social policies that can address the interlinked issues of ESL, educational disparities based on socio-economic factors, and the larger economic inequalities in society. For instance, according to Oberti and Savina (2019) there exists a robust association between socio-residential segregation and school segregation and emphasise the need to revisit the inflexible school catchment area policies that restrict students’ choice of school to their place of residence. Straková (2007) stresses the need for evaluating the structure of the education systems with regard to early or delayed tracking. She contends that in non-tracked education systems, teachers tend to implement differentiation strategies, employ remedial approaches, and provide students with greater support, ultimately mitigating student attrition.

Mínguez (2013), Freeney and O’Connell (2012), and Shain (2016) urge more spending on education. De Witte et al. (2015) maintain that funding earmarked for schools is given at the regional level to be disbursed to schools. Gorard (2014) suggests that this funding should be spent either to refurbish underprivileged schools or follow the most disadvantaged students to their school of choice to decrease the poverty gap by diminishing the differences in opportunities and resources across schools.

Freeney and O’Connell (2012) and Bayón-Calvo et al. (2020, 2021) propose the need for a differentiated response to ESL and its causes. In their study about ESL patterns in different regions of Spain, Bayón-Calvo et al. (2020) realised that dropout rates differ between populations and regions. It will be helpful to conduct a comparative analysis of the implementation of education policies meant to tackle ESL so the gaps in practice can be identified and addressed.



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Despite the systemic scope of socio-economic factors, as we could see, some measures can still be taken at the school level to encourage and support low SES students to prevent ESL. For instance, in the study conducted by Doyle and Keane (2019), the importance of collaborating with teachers to assist parents in ‘disadvantaged’ areas is emphasised. It is necessary to involve parents from ‘disadvantaged’ communities in conversations on how education can better cater to their and their children’s requirements. There is also a clear need for more relevant and focused assistance for parents in disadvantaged regions, which could potentially mitigate the negative consequences linked with perceived discrimination and stigma, such as poor school integration, lower levels of well-being, and safety concerns (Bradshaw et al., 2016).

Some studies included in this review (for example Borgna et al., 2022; Cockerill et al., 2021; Gómez-González et al., 2022) are about the interventions conducted at school level to support students from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds. These interventions outline practical measures aimed at bridging the academic achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students, providing information on multiple tracks available to the latter and addressing the deficit view that some teachers may hold towards disadvantaged students to enhance their engagement with school. Cockerill et al. (2021) tried to support language development of students from high poverty areas focusing on vocabulary, reading ability and overall English language comprehension. They observed significant gains in student’s overall reading ability and comprehension. While Borgna et al. (2022) sought to narrow information gaps and reduce family influence on students’ decision-making with regard to track selection in an interventional study of school guidance. The researchers found that while the school guidance programme designed for low socio-economic and immigrant students helped reduce indecision in track selection, it did not have a significant impact on social inequalities in intentions or choices. They contend that this may be due to the heavy emphasis of certain programmes on academic achievement records, dropout risks, and short-term labour market outcomes, which discouraged low SES students from pursuing academic tracks. Gómez-González et al. (2022) in their paper refer to an intervention carried out in five Spanish regions, Family Education. The programme aimed to establish a positive environment with high expectations for Roma/Gitano and Moroccan children and their families, enhancing the academic skills of family members, and promoting new role models. The school and minority families jointly developed the climate of high expectations through a process of co-creation. As a result of this process, teachers’ prejudices towards families’ capabilities and interest in their children’s education were reduced.

Another essential measure to be taken at schools can be creating parents or mothers’ support groups (Cefai et al., 2016). Parents coming from disadvantaged backgrounds due to low levels of education and little access to educational resources or lack of time to explore them on their own generally do not know how to engage meaningfully with children. Through these groups, approaches for engaging with children can be shared with parents, especially mothers as children spend more time with them. Although schools can be influential in tackling socio-economic disadvantage and its impact on students’ learning, they cannot tackle the consequences of societal inequalities by themselves, indicating the necessity of a comprehensive collaborative approach (Fleming & Harford, 2021; Shain, 2016).



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4.0 Key takeaways from the systematic review

The scope of socio-economic factors leading to ESL is very broad. On one hand they are a part of deeply ingrained systemic social inequalities and on the other, they are very specific to every individual student. To mitigate their influence, it is necessary to review and update social and educational policies that perpetuate intergenerational social, economic and academic disparities. Schools and teachers also have a significant role to alleviate the impact of socio-economic factors as discussed in this report.

Research has highlighted the need for increased resources in schools to compensate for the lack of family resources that socially disadvantaged students often face. Furthermore, it is crucial to build the capacity of school leaders, teachers and guidance counsellors to better understand and meet the needs of these students. Studies have emphasised the importance of school-based social capital in the form of positive relationships between teachers and students, as well as among students themselves. Teachers' expectations of students from disadvantaged backgrounds can strongly influence their self-image, motivation to learn, and engagement with school.

Moreover, research has found a strong correlation among various social determinants of ESL, with socio-economic status being one of the most powerful determinants. It is therefore essential to address the various social determinants of ESL in a holistic and integrated manner to reduce their impact on disadvantaged students. By addressing these factors comprehensively, it may be possible to assuage the negative effects of socio-economic disadvantage on student achievement and retention.

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Horizon Europe



SYSTEMATIC REVIEW ON INSTITUTIONAL DETERMINANTS OF UNDERACHIEVEMENT AND EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IN EUROPE

Work Package	1. Analysing causes and social determinants of underachievement
Task	Task 1.1 – Systematic Review on Social Determinants – Institutional
Lead Beneficiary (for sub-report)	UDEUSTO
Authors	UDEUSTO team
Due Date	April 2023
Submission Date	30th April
Dissemination Level	Internal at this stage



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History of changes			
Version	Date	Created or modified by	Comments
v1	30/04/2023	UDEUSTO	First draft for internal review

Systematic Review on Institutional Factors as Social Determinant of Underachievement and Early School Leaving in Europe

1.0 Introduction

This report presents the methods and main findings of the systematic review carried out exploring the influence of institutional determinants on underachievement and early school leaving (ESL hereinafter) in Europe in the last two decades among students in the early years, primary, and secondary education. It has been developed as part of the SCIREARLY Horizon Europe project, which aims at analysing a set of social determinants that influence students' underachievement and ESL such as socioeconomic status, certain cognitive elements, cultural aspects, linguistic competences, gender, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), psycho-emotional factors and well-being. More specifically, this systematic review sought to:

- Analyse the effect of institutional factors on students' underachievement and ESL
- Analyse the nature and degree of the impact of institutional factors on underachievement and ESL
- Collate data about how institutional factors impact different countries, cultures, and vulnerable groups (in Europe and the UK)
- Identify which institutional factors have the greatest impact on underachievement and ESL
- Examine whether there are combinations of social determinants that particularly impact vulnerable groups
- Investigate the institutional determinants common among vulnerable groups when exploring underachievement and ESL
- Determine institution-related determinants that promote achievement
- Identify successful policy actions to combat underachievement

To conduct this systematic review, a rigorous search was performed on the quantitative and qualitative aspects of primary sources. Then, a team of eight researchers from the University of Deusto (UDEUSTO) analysed them in depth and applied the inclusion and exclusion criteria agreed by the consortium (see table 2), as well as the requirements for validity, veracity, methodological quality, and reliability, following the structure for carrying out a systematic review (Baker, 2016; Gough et al., 2019).

The whole procedure is explained in detail in section 2 (Methodology). Sections 3 and 4 gather the main findings from the systematic review and the gaps identified that future research could address when targeting underachievement and early school leaving in Europe.

2.0 Methodology. systematic review of Institutional determinants of underachievement and early school leaving in Europe

This systematic review covers scientific literature published in peer reviewed journals between 2003 and 2023 to examine which (and to what extent) **institutional factors** act as a social determinant of underachievement and ESL in early years, primary and secondary education in Europe. To gain a deeper understanding on the ways in which some elements linked to educational institutions (i.e., teacher-student ratio, teacher quality, educational policies, among others) impact students' underachievement and ultimately lead to early school leaving, this systematic review has followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (**PRISMA**) statement (Page et al., 2021; Rethlefsen et al., 2021) to ensure rigour.



Following the stages of PRISMA explained below (see also Figure 1), the UDEUSTO team conducted the literature search between January and February 2023. It focused mainly on the search for scientific articles published in indexed journals (Web of Science, SCOPUS), as well as those included in Education and Psychology databases (PsycINFO). The search involved combining the different keywords on institutional aspects connected with underachievement and ESL (Table 1, columns 1 to 3) using the Boolean operator "AND" for all the combinations. This resulted in 208 searches per each database and 624 searches in total.

Table 1. Keywords used for database search

GENERAL KEYWORDS		SPECIFIC KEYWORDS - INSTITUTIONAL DETERMINANTS			
1	2	3			
1.1 Underachievement	2.1 Students	3.1 Ratio	3.5 Teaching method*	3.9 Peers	3.13 Decision making level
1.2 Early School Leaving	2.2 Migrants	3.2 Teacher* quality	3.6 School facilities	3.10 Educational Policies	3.14 School autonomy
1.3 School dropout	2.3 Vulnerable group	3.3 School Leadership	3.7 Streaming	3.11 Assessment	
1.4 School disengagement	2.4 Policy	3.4 Calendar	3.8 Single sex schooling	3.12 Resources	

The search results were downloaded in .csv format and imported to **Rayyan**⁶, the software used by the UDEUSTO team to systematise the screening process. A total of 7,049 entries were included, after which **duplicates** were identified and removed (n=2,074). As a result, 4,971 papers went through the first round of screening, where the **inclusion** and **exclusion criteria** determined by the whole consortium (Table 2) was applied. Two additional researchers from UDEUSTO were involved at this stage to facilitate the process. The resulting entries (n=428) were then downloaded and exported to **Mendeley**⁷. This was followed by a second round of screening that involved a thorough reading of the papers and extraction of key information following the guidelines in Table 3. At this stage, full texts were also screened for eligibility aspects related to (a) the relevance of the study to the scope of the review and (b) methodological reliability aspects such as the appropriateness of the method and data collection, claims and evidence. A total of 398 papers were excluded. Overall, the results presented in this report draw from the final list of 29 articles that were included in this systematic review, which were checked to ensure that they meet all the inclusion criteria listed in Table 2. Figure 1 summarises the whole process.

Table 2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria
1. Focus on students in early, primary, and secondary education
2. Focus on institutional elements as a social determinant of underachievement and/or ESL
3. Focus on impact of institutional elements as social determinant on underachievement and/or ESL
4. Publications are high-quality papers published in peer-reviewed journals; relevant books; policy documents as well as research reports and other grey literature from relevant public and private institutions
5. Published in 2003 or later
6. Empirical studies conducted in the context of EU Member States (and the UK)
7. Pertaining to relevant disciplines/fields (education, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics etc.) to represent interdisciplinarity as an approach to the review
8. Literature reported in English
Exclusion criteria
1. Low-quality or unpublished research/literature
2. Pertaining to studies conducted with students outside of ECEC and compulsory schooling contexts
3. Published prior to the year 2003
4. Tackling the social determinant in isolation without a link to the impact on underachievement and ESL
5. Studies conducted outside the context of the EU and the UK
6. Publications with no empirical data
7. Publication is not in English

⁶ Rayyan: <https://www.rayyan.ai/>

⁷ Mendeley: <https://www.mendeley.com/reference-management/reference-manager>

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram

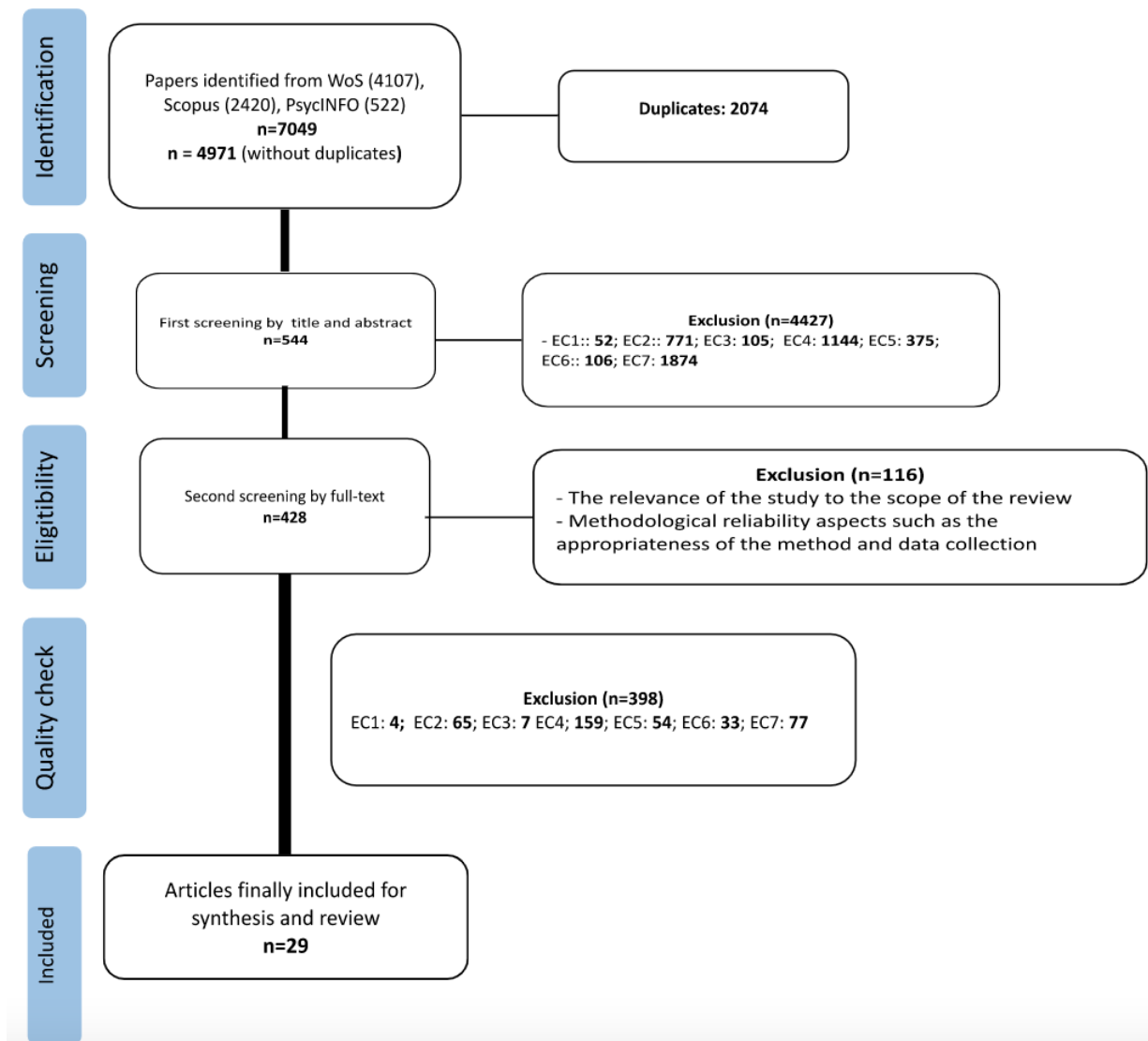


Table 3. Data extraction process

General information	Author(s); Type of source; Date of publication; Reference; URL; Date Accessed
Inclusion criteria	Focus on students in early, primary and/or secondary level of education; Focus on institutional factors; Refers to underachievement and/or ESL; published in peer-reviewed journals, relevant books, or as research reports (grey literature); Published in 2003 or later; Empirical studies conducted within the context of EU (or UK); Publication is in the English Language; Pertaining to relevant disciplines/fields.
Exclusion criteria	Low-quality or unpublished research/literature; Studies conducted with students out of ECEC and compulsory schooling; Published prior to the year 2003; Tackles social determinant in isolation without a link to the impact on underachievement and ESL; Publications with no empirical data; Publication not in English; Studies conducted outside the EU (or UK)

Double check	Checked by Reviewer 1 (name); Checked by Reviewer 2 (name)
Information about Social determinants (in addition to Institutional elements)	Institutional, Socio-economic, Cognitive, Cultural, Linguistic, Gender, Psycho-emotional well-being, ECEC
Characteristics of the studies	Participants/population; Objective of the study; Method; Type of study; Potential Solutions/Buffering Aspects

3.0 Findings of the systematic review

This section presents the findings of the analysed articles in the systematic review. Firstly, a brief description of these studies is presented, including a table with each article's key information. Secondly, the themes that emerged in the review are discussed, drawing interrelationships between the findings of the different studies. The main themes pertaining to institutional factors include (1) grade retention, (2) tracking, (3) accessible school counselling, (4) curriculum design, and (5) teachers' expectations and school relationships. More broadly, these institutional factors relate to a wider range of social determinants explored in the SCIREARLY project, such as those mentioned in the introduction of this report. In addition, educational policies that have appeared in the search are discussed, identifying gaps, and presenting possible solutions and recommendations for educational policies across Europe. Finally, a brief overview of the key findings is included.

3.1 Overview of the articles included in the systematic review

As a result of the screening process described in Section 2, 29 articles were finally selected for in-depth analysis (see Table 4 with details about the studies' geographic context, the number and profile of participants, the research design, and a brief insight into the key findings). It is noteworthy that all the studies included were published in peer reviewed journals, and no books or grey literature were selected in the process. Most of the research has been conducted in educational settings - normally in secondary education - and has particularly focused on vulnerable populations at risk of school dropout. The studies employed diverse methodological approaches, including quantitative (n=15), mixed methods (n=8), and qualitative methodologies (n=6). In terms of geographic context, the studies included were conducted across Europe encompassing different countries such as United Kingdom (n=6), Spain (n=5), Portugal (n=4), Romania (n=3), Belgium (n=2), Norway (n=2), Switzerland (n=2), Bulgaria (n=1), Finland (n=1), and Ireland (n=1). Meanwhile, two of the articles drew on data from a variety of countries.

Table 4. Overview of the included articles' key information

Authors (Year)	Country	Participants	Research design	Key findings
Ahola & Kivela (2007)	Finland	124 secondary students	Mixed methods	Effective school guidance and counselling adapts to the needs of the young people; Less effective school guidance requires young people to adapt to this service, which prevents them from making use of it
Alvarez & Gamella (2018)	Spain	63 high school students and teachers (38% Roma)	Mixed methods	Grade retention and learning gaps are linked to dropout among Roma students
Bayon-Calvo et al. (2020)	Spain	Comparison of educational policies and prevalence of student drop-out between regions	Mixed methods	Educational policies that foster equity are associated with lower ESL rates
Brown et al. (2022)	United Kingdom	110 young students at risk of ESL (12 to 16 years old) and educators, tutors, etc. across 11 educational settings	Qualitative	An individualised and tailored institutional support needs to start early and be sustained and personalized due to the complexity of issues that students at risk of ESL face
Cockerill et al. (2021)	England	30 primary schools	Qualitative	Cooperation between students, policymakers and teachers fosters academic achievement
Cudworth (2008)	United Kingdom	6 primary teachers in a school with a significant proportion of Gypsy/Traveller children	Qualitative	There is a negative effect of educational community's non-sympathetic attitudes towards Roma students and an inflexible curriculum in the school The pressure on schools to reach government targets results in the selection of high achieving children to secure a prime position in the league tables at the expense of equal opportunities
De Castro & Pereira	Portugal	305 8th grade students (average age: 14 years old)	Quantitative	Positive and supportive student-teacher and student-student relationships nurture educational engagement

(2019)				
Frehill & Dunsmuir (2015)	Ireland	37 Traveller and 41 non-Traveller students from three secondary schools	Quantitative	The promotion of a sense of belonging in schools reduces absenteeism
Gasser et al. (2018)	Switzerland	1,209 upper elementary grade students from 5th to 6 th grade (11 to 12 years old)	Quantitative	High emotional support from teachers is a protective factor in preventing school dropout
Hardoy & Schøne (2013)	Norway	277,233 students (All students enrolled in secondary school, 1996 – 2003)	Quantitative	The promotion of peer quality relationships and social interaction emerges as a protective factor against ESL
Hodgson & Spours (2014)	United Kingdom	2,400 students (14 to 16 years old)	Mixed methods	Career education and information, advice and guidance at school setting prevent ESL
Högborg & Lindgren (2023)	European Union	800,000 students (15 years old)	Quantitative	Students' sense of belonging fosters school engagement
Holen et al. (2020)	Norway	63,131 students, (15 to 16 years old; more than 60% boys)	Quantitative	Collaborative instruction practices develop subject matter expertise about how students learn and develop
Jerrim et al. (2022)	Spain	102,534 students (15 years old)	Quantitative	Grade retention designed as a pure repetition of a given academic year (without providing additional materials or resources) does not leverage repeaters' achievement
Kerekes et al. (2017)	Romania	1,280 students (13 to 17 years old)	Mixed methods	School performance is an influential factor to continue education
Lambrev (2015)	Romania	10 participants (7 teachers, 2 principals, and 1 vice-principal), 20 Roma (2 students and 18 adults - family members, community leaders, and NGO staff; 15 to 45 years old)	Qualitative	School segregation, imposition of mainstream curriculum and neglect educational needs appear as risk factors of ESL

Lasarte et al. (2020)	Spain	1,468 students (51% girls; 49% boys), 12 to 17 years old	Quantitative	Students' perceived support from their social environment and academic performance influence their level of school engagement
Lavrijsen & Nicaise (2015)	Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Spain, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Iceland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Latvia, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Sweden, Slovenia, Slovakia	141,178 respondents (20 to 30 years old)	Quantitative	The design of the educational system (tracking age, extent of vocational education) impacts on social distribution of school dropout risk Later tracking age might be associated with a lower effect of parental background on ESL Vocational education acts as a safety net Grade retention is an important predictor of individual dropout Educational reforms, like the “comprehensivization” of lower secondary education in Scandinavia, linked to larger welfare policy toward a more egalitarian society
Longas-Mayayo et al. (2021)	Spain	2,301 students (16 to 18 years old, whose families are living in relative poverty)	Quantitative	School's educational support team impacts on academic performance and school engagement of students

				Repeated grade retention is strongly associated with ESL
MacMaoilir & McGillicuddy (2022)	Ireland	33 female school students, 4 teachers, 2 year heads, 2 parents	Mixed methods	A critical pedagogical approach focused on conscientization arising from the process of reflection and action increases engagement
Makarova & Herzog (2013)	Switzerland	4,384 fifth-grade students, 1,186 migrant youths (10 to 16 years old; 50.3% male and 49.7% female)	Quantitative	Negative attitudes towards the formal aspects of school and the lack of positive relationships with their peers are a risk factors for ESL
Moreira et al. (2022)	Portugal	Gypsy (n = 42) and non-Gypsy students (n = 76) (9 to 16 years old)	Quantitative	Discrimination, racism, segregated classrooms, and teachers' negative expectations towards their academic success led to gypsy students' cognitive disengagement
Moreira et al. (2023)	Portugal	213 students with Roma background, from the 5th to 10th grade (10- 19 years old; 56% male)	Quantitative	Parental involvement impacts on the emotional and cognitive aspects of school engagement.
Pelin et al. (2022)	Romania	120 pre-teens (64 boys and 56 girls) at risk of dropout	Quantitative	Pleasant and uncompetitive peer relations at school mitigate risk of ESL Predictable educational activities (with clear rules) and out of school activities increase the participation and attendance of youth at risk of ESL
Savvides et al. (2021)	England and Portugal	209 educational stakeholders and young people who were potentially at risk for ESL (12 to 21 years old)	Qualitative	Further vocational provision at school is particularly important to reverse the lack of pedagogical agency
Spruyt et al. (2017)	Belgium	Pupils from 9th to 12th grade (N=4,189), 62 principals of Flemish secondary schools and 28 occasional and frequent truants	Mixed methods	Continuous and flexible identification and follow up of students at risk is more effective than fixed administrative strategies
Valkov & Lavrentsova (2019)	Bulgaria	152 students (53.3% male and 46.7% female), studying in low secondary schools, including Roma schools	Quantitative	Relationships between students and student-teacher are a significant factor in school engagement

Wilkinson & Wilkinson (2014)	United Kingdom	295 British Muslim boys from four secondary state schools in Muslim-dense areas of English inner-cities (11 to 14 years old)	Mixed methods	Addressing a community's history in school in a positive way promotes the success of its members

3.2 Themes emerging from the systematic review

A thematic analysis of the included articles was carried out (Clarke & Braun, 2017) and five institutional factors emerged related to underachievement and ESL: (1) grade retention, (2) tracking, (3) accessible counselling and school guidance, (4) curriculum design and (5) teacher's expectations and school relationships. These five institutional factors will be discussed separately in the following subsections, although they act together in weaving the institutional conditions behind underachievement and ESL. It is also worth noting that findings from the systematic review suggest that some of these institutional factors affect school engagement/disengagement, which is a powerful mediator of children's learning outcomes and is found to be linked to underachievement and ESL (Kerekes et al., 2017). As such, school engagement/disengagement has been included in the discussion below.

3.2.1. GRADE RETENTION

Grade retention, understood as the measure that requires children to repeat a grade level in school because they failed to meet required benchmarks or grade level standards, is negatively associated with students' academic performance, and may result in school dropout (Kerekes, 2017). Although applications of this measure vary in different contexts worldwide, evidence shows that students who repeated a grade were less likely to complete post-secondary education (Longas-Mayayo et al., 2021). In addition, grade retention in primary education emerged as the strongest predictor of grade retention in secondary education, with fatal consequences for ESL (Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015). Moreover, when grade retention is designed as a pure repetition of a given academic year (without providing additional materials or resources), it does not leverage repeaters' achievement (Jerrim et al., 2022).

Jerrim and colleagues' study involving 102,534 15-year-old students in Spain found that grade retention in this context often involves making students repeat the exact same activities and tasks again the following academic year without considering variations in terms of widening students' opportunities and developing their skills differently. Although this approach requires less effort for institutions, it is also less effective when combating underachievement and ESL (Högberg & Lindgren (2023). Grade retention also has important implications in repeaters' motivation and school engagement, since it exacerbates factors that lead to underachievement and school dropout (Longas-Mayayo et al., 2021). In addition, students from ethnic minorities, such as Roma, tend to represent higher grade retention rates (Alvarez & Gamella, 2018), which intersects with the negative effects of other social determinants of underachievement such as socioeconomic status and cultural background (Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015). In short, grade retention is shown to aggravate - instead of mitigate - the problem of underachievement and ESL.

3.2.2. TRACKING

Tracking is segregating students into different classrooms or groups based on their academic achievement at any given time. This has been a common response in many countries, and for many years, low achievers have been separated from their peers with better academic success by placing them into less demanding tracks. Although this measure can take place earlier or later in students' academic paths, it has been proven that early tracking has the worse effects on students' academic performance (Frehill & Dunsmuir, 2015). As revealed by Lavrijsen and Nicaise's study exploring the role of educational institutions in social inequalities and ESL (2015), early tracking increases the gap between strong and weak students and between students from different social classes, thereby reinforcing structural barriers for disadvantaged students to proceed successfully in their academic paths.



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3.2.3. ACCESSIBLE COUNSELLING AND SCHOOL GUIDANCE

Accessible counselling and school guidance has been less prominent among the studies analysed. In this regard, only three out of twenty-nine studies point out that vocational guidance in upper secondary education functions as a safety net against school dropout by offering different academic pathways as a valuable alternative with relatively attractive labour market prospects (Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015). According to Hodgson and Spours (2014), 14- to 16-year-old learners from six schools in southern England acknowledged the value of accessible counselling services and guidance in the school setting in terms of helping them consider different options as they shape their academic path (Hodgson & Spours, 2014). This is coherent with Savvides and colleagues' (2021) findings while exploring risk factors for ESL across 18 educational settings in Portugal and England, which revealed that the students' lack of choices to direct their learning paths could be reversed by providing accessible vocational provision at school level (Savvides et al. 2021). Facilitating this kind of provision within the school setting might improve students' learning experiences as well as help them overcome the lack of choices, freedom, and flexibility to pursue successful educational paths (Savvides et al., 2021). These authors highlight the need to establish measures that are holistic, preventative, coherent, consistent, inclusive, and ethical, thereby enabling all stakeholders including young people to be active agents of their learning pathways. Similarly, when Ahola and Kivela explored this issue in Finland, they found that a shortage of counsellors or a restricted service might have a negative impact on students' opportunities to access these important resources (Ahola & Kivela, 2007).

3.2.4. CURRICULUM DESIGN

Fixed or mainstream curriculums that are not sensitive to the cultures embedded in the school context are identified as an institutional factor of underachievement and ESL in Europe (Cudworth, 2008; Lambrev, 2015; Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2014). In the case of Roma students, Cudworth (2008) found elevated underachievement and ESL when the school curriculum fails to acknowledge the Roma culture or demonstrates a clear lack of knowledge of its traditions. Cudworth's conclusions are aligned with Lambrev's (2015) analysis about the factors that contribute to Roma students' underachievement, revealing that mainstream curriculum that neglects Roma's educational needs is linked to students' underachievement. On the other hand, when this issue was explored among Muslim students, research points out that a well-conceived and sound Muslim history curriculum has a positive impact on multidimensional academic success (Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2014).

Along with curriculum design, a critical pedagogical approach (which focuses on conscientization arising from the process of reflection and action) emerges as a driver of academic engagement among female students (MacMaoilir & McGillicuddy, 2022). Indeed, it has been shown to empower female at-risk students in marginalised contexts in Ireland by enhancing their self-confidence, motivation and empathy while fostering a sense of belonging in school and increasing (re)engagement in class. This institutional element appears to support the critical awakening of the students, evoking epistemic emotions and ultimately leads to improved academic achievement.

On the other hand, including predictable educational activities with clear rules in the curriculum as well as opportunities for out-of-school activities might prevent ESL among at-risk students by enhancing their engagement (Pelin et al., 2022). Meanwhile, in Bayon-Calvo and colleagues' (2020) study comparing causes of ESL in Spain, they found that those regions that prioritized equity-driven measures (such as specific programmes to promote the social and linguistic inclusion of immigrants, heterogeneous grouping, and implementation of personalized academic reinforcement) have been more successful in fostering inclusion and success in educational pathways regardless of students' ethnicity. Moreover,



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measures and policies tackling ESL based on close coordination within institutions have proven to be effective in linguistically diverse contexts such as the Basque Country (Bayon-Calvo et al., 2020).

3.2.5. TEACHER EXPECTATIONS AND SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS

Teacher support is essential when it comes to increasing students' engagement, especially if teachers have high expectations towards their capacities and possibilities. Conversely, low teacher expectations regarding attendance and achievement contribute to higher school dropout among Roma students (Moreira et al., 2022). Teachers' negative beliefs could also become widespread in the institution, resulting in catastrophic experiences of discrimination and racism that hamper Roma students' academic opportunities and presents dropout as the "natural" path for them (Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015).

Along with teacher's expectations, relationships between teachers and students as well as among peers emerge as a key institutional factor when it comes to unveiling the hidden mechanisms of underachievement and ESL in primary and secondary education in Europe. Scientific literature suggests that these interactions, when positive, nurture educational engagement that prevents ESL (De Castro & Pereira, 2019). For instance, Lasarte and colleagues (2020) study involving 1,468 secondary students in Spain found that the perceived social support at school predicted school engagement both directly and indirectly through perceived academic performance. Gasser and colleagues (2018) also identified, through multilevel analysis of students' perceptions of teacher care, that high emotional support from teachers protected students with high academic disengagement from school dropout. These results point to a protective function of teacher's emotional support. Duffy and Elwood's study reinforces these findings, concluding that student-teacher relationships are key factors that contribute to school engagement in 18 educational centres with students aged 10 to 13 in Ireland (Duffy & Elwood, 2013). Similarly, Valkov and Lavrentsova (2019) found that student-student and student-teacher relationships were a significant factor for school engagement for Roma students in Bulgaria.

All in all, the quality of students' relationships with teachers and peers serves as important institutional factors affecting school engagement and academic achievement (Makarova & Herzog, 2013; Duffy & Elwood, 2013; De Castro & Pereira, 2019) and has important implications for the focus of our study. Indeed, since the lack of positive peer relationships increases the risk of dropping out (Hardoy & Schone, 2013), it is essential that institutions and educators become aware of the potential of these relationships to effectively tackle underachievement and ESL.

3.3 Interplay between institutional determinant and other social determinants on underachievement

According to the studies this systematic review has analysed, the institutional elements explored might buffer and counteract the negative effects of other social determinants of underachievement and early school leaving. The following paragraphs summarise the links between institutional determinant (and elements within it as explained in table 1) and socioeconomic level, cognitive aspects, culture, linguistic background, gender-related issues, and psycho emotional well-being as well as linking points with Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC).

Socio-economic level: Institutional factors are largely interrelated with socio-economic aspects, both in the family and community contexts (Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015) and in relation to public funding of educational centres (Bayon-Calvo et al. 2020). Several studies have identified institutional factors that hinder (grade retention, early tracking, or low teacher's expectations) or promote (accessible counselling and school guidance, positive and pleasant relationships in



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school context both with teachers and among peers) educational success of students facing deprivation and in low socio-economic contexts (Lavrijen & Nicaise, 2015; Alvarez & Gamella, 2018; Savvides et al., 2021, Makarova & Herzog, 2013; Pelin et al., 2022).

Cognitive aspects: The scientific literature finds a relationship between institutional aspects such as parental involvement (Moreira et al., 2023) in fostering students' levels of school and/or cognitive engagement.

Culture: Migrant populations and students with culturally diverse backgrounds have been the focus of some of the reviewed studies (Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2014; Hardoy & Schone, 2013; Lambrev & Reed, 2015; Alvarez & Gamella, 2018; Moreira et al., 2023). In the case of Roma students and families, the sense of belonging in school – which is found to reduce absenteeism (Frehill & Dunsmuir, 2015) and facilitate school engagement (Högberg & Lindgren, 2023) - might be jeopardized by prejudices and systemic barriers identified at the institutional level (such as curriculum that do not include any features from Roma culture and traditions) (Cudworth, 2008). Moreover, a better understanding and integration into the school curriculum of minoritized cultures, such as Roma or Muslim cultures, is identified as an institutional aspect that fosters school engagement (Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2014; Lambrev, 2015).

Linguistic background: Through this systematic review, some studies have emphasised the relevance of linguistic differences in school engagement, particularly when exploring it with vulnerable populations (Brown et al., 2022). On the other hand, Bayon-Clavo and colleagues found that implementing specific programs that promote the social and linguistic inclusion of immigrants is an effective institutional factor preventing students from dropping out.

Gender: Research in general disaggregated results by gender and found, for example, that girls were more likely to complete secondary education (Hardoy & Schone, 2013) and demonstrate more school engagement (Moreira et al. 2023). Moreover, Pelin et al. (2022) have found that girls usually give significantly more importance to mastering basic skills (MacMaolair & McGillicuddy, 2022).

Psycho-emotional and well-being: Research has found an interrelationship between cognitive, emotional, and behavioural factors. For example, students' self-esteem is nurtured by properly addressing their emotional needs, which ultimately leads to increased school engagement and higher educational achievement (Brown et al. 2022). In this regard, excessive testing and competitiveness between peers not only correlate with school dropout but also might jeopardise students' well-being (Högberg & Lindgren, 2023). Finally, positive relationships between students and teachers promote a favourable perception of school (Duffy & Elwood, 2013). Therefore, ensuring a positive climate, which promotes the psycho-emotional development of students, fosters educational success, and prevents ESL.

ECEC: No research has been found that particularly interrelates institutional aspects with ECEC.

3.4 Policies, gaps, and solutions

The systematic review has focused on empirical evidence of institutional factors linked to underachievement and ESL. In this line, Ahola and Kivela (2007) mentioned the Education Guarantee and educational policy that the Finnish government implemented to ensure that by 2008, 96% of those who complete compulsory education move on to secondary education or the 10th grade without interruption. Other than that, Bayon-Calvo et al. (2020), Jerrim et al. (2022) and Savvides and colleagues (2021) have also looked at the policy level when exploring ESL and underachievement in the Spanish context.



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3.4.1 POLICY APPROACHES TARGETING INSTITUTIONAL DETERMINANTS IN PREVENTING ESL

Bayon-Calvo and colleagues (2020) found that educational policies based on equity were more likely to combat social inequalities by managing student heterogeneity through personalised and direct support as well as institutional coordination with a focus on diversity. Another study (Jerrim et al., 2022), focused on exploring grade retention in Spain, clearly states that policies that include this measure are systematically failing in overcoming ESL. Holistic measures that are coherent, consistent, inclusive, ethical, and that enable all stakeholders - including young people - to be agents of their learning pathways emerge as key elements of policies when tackling ESL in Europe (Savvides et al., 2021).

3.4.2 GAPS IDENTIFIED IN EXISTING RESEARCH

Several gaps in existing scientific research have been identified. On the one hand, conducting more longitudinal studies (including as many variables as possible) would enhance the knowledge we have so far about the institutional factors as social determinants of underachievement and ESL. Also, a vast number of studies conducted in contexts outside the EU and the UK were not included in the analysis, which highlights research gaps such as the significantly greater amount of research carried out in the US compared to Europe. In addition, the systematic review did not yield relevant studies on the impact of teacher-student ratio in underachievement or ESL, which suggests that this institutional factor is not being given enough attention in the scientific literature. Evidence on the impact of school calendar or configuration of the academic year was also missing in the studies analysed, potentially because other institutional factors have a more prominent impact on underachievement and ESL. Based on the body of literature reviewed, there is no single study that examines all the institutional factors identified in this study as determinants of underachievement and ESL.

3.4.3 POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS FOR REDUCING THE IMPACT OF INSTITUTIONAL DETERMINANTS ON UNDERACHIEVEMENT

Findings from this systematic review point to three potential solutions for addressing underachievement and ESL through institutional factors: 1) discontinuing grade retention and tracking policies; 2) providing and safeguarding school guidance services; and 3) promoting a whole-school approach in the design of the curriculum so that dialogues between educational communities and school staff are frequent and constructive.

4.0 Key takeaways from the systematic review

The present report highlights the following takeaways that summarize what science tells us about what (and how) institutional factors act as determinants of underachievement and ESL in Europe.

- Grade retention is not an effective measure to leverage academic achievement in students and only increases the odds of ESL, particularly when grade retention does not include new learning approaches or resources to the learner.
- Tracking students according to their academic abilities at any given time is related to underachievement and ultimately leads to ESL. Early tracking hampers academic achievement in later educational stages, and students from minority backgrounds (such as Roma and migrants) tend to be overrepresented in low ability tracks.
- Accessible counselling and school guidance fosters school continuity among secondary students, which prevents from ESL. On the other hand, less visible and accessible counselling services prevents students from benefiting from this support, which increases their chances of dropping out.



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- When curriculum is sensitive to and includes key features from students', school engagement of those from ethnic minorities or vulnerable backgrounds increase. This relationship also works the other way around: fixed and mainstream curriculum is associated with school disengagement and potentially underachievement and ESL, particularly among students from vulnerable groups.
- Teachers' expectations of students' abilities and possibilities strongly predict school engagement and lessen the risk for ESL. Similarly, pleasant, supportive and non-competitive school relationships enhance school engagement, which prevents both underachievement and ESL.

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Horizon Europe



SYSTEMATIC REVIEW ON LINGUISTIC DETERMINANTS OF UNDERACHIEVEMENT AND EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IN EUROPE

Work Package	WP 1. Analysing causes and social determinants of underachievement
Task	Task 1.1 – Systematic Review on Social Determinants – Linguistic
Lead Beneficiary (for sub report)	University of Newcastle, UK
Authors	Karen Laing, Lucy Tiplady and Liz Todd
Due Date	April 2023
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Systematic Review on Linguistic Factors as Social Determinant of Underachievement and Early School Leaving in Europe



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1.0 Introduction

This report presents the methods and main findings of the systematic review carried out in relation to the influence of linguistic determinants on underachievement and early school leaving (ESL hereinafter) in Europe among students in early years, primary, and secondary education. It has been developed as part of the SCIREARLY Horizon Europe project.

The definition of underachievement in SCIREARLY and in this review is based on that used by PISA: *Underachievers in PISA are those pupils who fail to reach proficiency Level 2, i.e. the minimum level necessary to participate successfully in society* (Education and Training Monitor 2020). ESL has devastating consequences for both the individuals who do not complete their education and for society. ESL has been associated with reduced opportunities on the labour market, poverty, health problems and diminished participation in political, social, and cultural activities. With nine Member States not having yet reached EU targets set, and knowledge of higher rates of ESL among certain vulnerable groups such as pupils with immigrant background, and Roma community, there is need to understand better the role of social determinants on underachievement and consequently ESL.

The multidisciplinary systematic review aims to analyse what literature reveals about the relationship between social determinants (Institutional, Socio-economic, Cognitive, Cultural, Linguistic, Gender, Psycho-emotional and Well-being and ECEC), underachievement and ESL. This paper looks specifically at the results of the systematic review in relation to the social determinant **Linguistic**. To conduct this systematic review, a rigorous search was performed on the quantitative and qualitative aspects of primary sources. Researchers from Newcastle University (UNEW) analysed them in depth and applied the inclusion and exclusion criteria agreed by the consortium (see table 2), for further details please see Section 2: Methodology. Sections 3 and 4 gather the main findings from the systematic review and the gaps identified that future research could address when targeting underachievement and early school leaving in Europe.

Our understanding of Linguistic as a social determinant of underachievement and ESL relates to how language and communication impacts children and young people's experience of and achievement within education and schooling. It concerns the different forms of language and how that language is used to different effect. It is closely related (but not restricted to) to notions of literacy, multilingualism, bilingualism, minority languages, literacy proficiency levels and/or communication and voice, and to the use of written and verbal language.

Language manifests in a multitude of different forms within school life, from the talk that teachers and students engage in, to the written materials both through reading and created through writing. Language exists as a form of dialogue between participants and as a means of access to learning through, for example digital resources and textbooks. Language can act as a vehicle for inclusion and exclusion in education, depending on who is utilising language, how and for what purpose.

Literacy is central to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development ([The Sustainable Development Agenda - United Nations Sustainable Development](#)). The European Union recognises that:



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‘Effective multilingualism policies and initiatives can strengthen the opportunities of citizens. Language skills may also increase individuals’ employability, facilitate access to services and rights, and contribute to solidarity through enhanced intercultural dialogue and social cohesion.’ ([Linguistic diversity | European Education Area \(europa.eu\)](#)) .

Linguistic diversity is embedded and protected in Article 22 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

Effective language skills enable participation for children and young people, both within formal and informal education systems and processes in order to achieve maximum benefit from education and the life chances it promotes, but also in terms of being able to influence those systems and processes to be able to respond to diverse individual social, cultural and economic needs. The ability to communicate can open up opportunities to shape educational experience to make it more relevant and meet the needs of those engaging with it, but an inability to communicate effectively through language can equally exclude some children from those opportunities and so a consideration of linguistic diversity becomes an important antecedent to participation.

2.0 Methodology

This multidisciplinary systematic review has used the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses) statement to analyse what literature reveals about linguistic factors as social determinants of underachievement with respect to ESL. Following the stages of PRISMA explained below (see also Figure 1), the UNEW team conducted the literature search in February 2023. Information sources included the scientific databases Web of Science and Scopus and searches were undertaken ‘by abstract’. The following combinations of keywords were used in each database search using the Boolean operator “AND” for all combinations.

Table 1: Keywords used for database search

Underachievement “AND” ...	ESL “AND” ...	School dropout “AND” ...	School disengagement “AND” ...
bilingual*	bilingual*	bilingual*	bilingual*
migrant	migrant	migrant	migrant
self study habits	self study habits	self study habits	self study habits
motivation	motivation	motivation	motivation
plurilingual	plurilingual	plurilingual	plurilingual
textbooks	textbooks	textbooks	textbooks
curricul*	curricul*	curricul*	curricul*
translanguag*	translanguag*	translanguag*	translanguag*

The search results identified a total of 6,521 entries, which then went through the first round of screening where the exclusion criteria 1, 2, 3, 5 and 7 (see Table 2) were applied using automation tools within Web of Science and Scopus (see also Figure 1 and Table 3). The remaining eligible records (n= 735) were downloaded in .csv format and imported to Zotero and duplicates removed (n=444). Two researchers from UNEW then independently screened the



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remaining abstracts (n=291), again using the agreed inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 2), resulting in 30 eligible records. These 30 records form the basis of the following review and findings. Figure 1 summarises the whole process.

Table 2: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criteria for inclusion
1. Focus on students from early, primary, and secondary education.
2. Focus on social determinants: Institutional, Socio-economic, Cognitive, Cultural, Linguistic, Gender, Psycho-emotional and Well-being and ECEC, as well as any other social determinant.
3. Focus on impact of social determinants on underachievement and/or ESL.
4. Publications are high-quality papers published in peer-reviewed journals. Relevant books; policy documents as well as research reports and other grey literature from relevant public and private institutions;
5. Published in 2003 or later.
6. Empirical studies conducted in the context of EU Member States and UK.
7. Pertaining to relevant disciplines/ fields (education, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics etc...) and methods applied (quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods) in the studies to represent interdisciplinarity as an approach to the review.
8. Literature reported in English.
Criteria for exclusion
1. Low-quality or unpublished research/literature.
2. Pertaining to studies conducted with students out of ECEC and compulsory schooling.
3. Published prior to the year 2003.
4. Tackling the social determinant in isolation without a link to the impact on underachievement and ESL.
5. Studies conducted outside the context of EU countries and UK.
6. Publications with no empirical data.
7. Publication is not in English.



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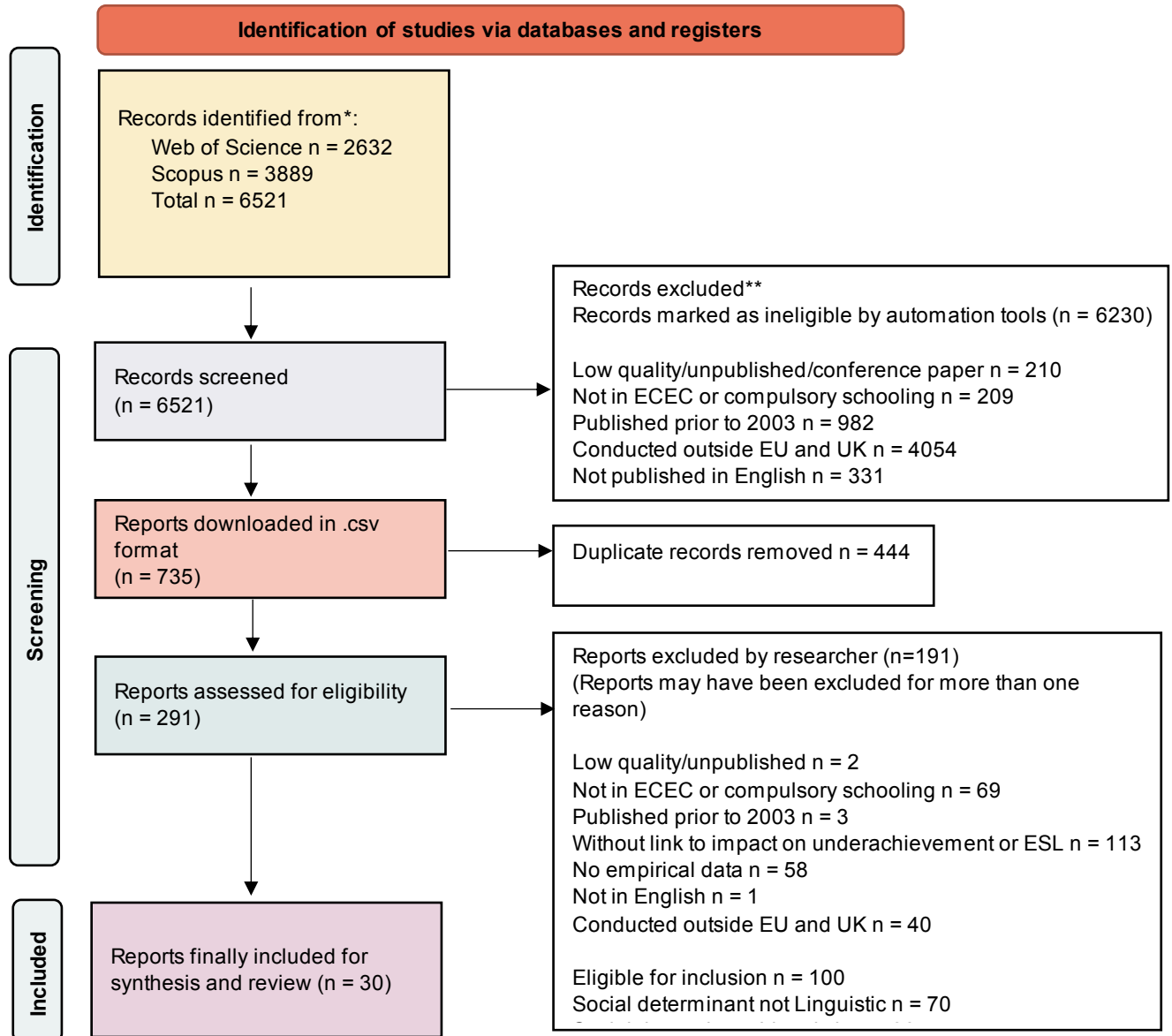
Table 3: Exclusions and inclusions using automation tools in data bases

Database	No. of records	Excluded by date	Excluded by language	Excluded by country	Excluded conference papers	Excluded non-ECEC or compulsory education	Included for screening (before duplicate removal)
Web of Science	2632	444	123	1616	61	84	304
Scopus	3889	538	208	2438	149	125	431
Totals	6521	982	331	4054	210	209	735



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Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram



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3.0 Findings of the systematic review

This section presents the findings of the analysed articles in the Linguistic systematic review. Firstly, a brief description of these studies is presented, including a table with each article's key information. Secondly, the themes that emerged in the review are discussed, these include: Bias and the re-enforcement of disadvantage; Intercultural awareness and linguistic practices; Curriculum; and, Learner autonomy and agency. The interplay between Linguistic factors and other social determinants (Institutional, Socio-economic, Cognitive, Cultural, Gender, Psycho-emotional and Well-being and ECEC) analysed by SCIREARLY is discussed in relation to underachievement and ESL. Findings related to policy, as well as identified gaps and solutions are presented, before ending with key takeaways from this review.

3.1 Background to the type of literature included in the systematic review

Following the screening process described in Section 2, 30 publications were identified for in-depth analysis comprising of 28 journal articles and two book chapters. Further detail of the studies' geographic context, the number and profile of participants, the research design, and key findings can be seen in Table 4. The majority of studies have been conducted within schools or early years settings: early years (n=1), primary phase (n=7), secondary phase (n=15), early years and primary (n=1) or primary and secondary (n=4). One study focused on early years was conducted in homes and another study was focused on documentary content analysis. Nineteen studies focused on students/children, one study on teachers, one on parents, six on a combination of students and teachers/school staff and two combined students, teachers/school staff and parents. Of these there was often a focus on vulnerable populations, including migrant, bilingual and plurilingual, and culturally diverse students, students from socio-economically disadvantaged contexts, children with disabilities and/or at risk of educational underachievement. A number of the studies also looked at how literacy or foreign language learning is impacted by gender. There was a diverse range of methodological approaches including quantitative (n=10), qualitative (n=8), mixed methods (n=11) and a documentary content analysis. Finally, the studies took place in a broad range of contexts including the UK (n=9), Belgium (n=1), Cyprus (n=1), Denmark (n=1), Germany (n=1), Greece (n=1), Hungary (n=1), Ireland (n=3), Italy (n=3), Netherlands (n=2) Spain (n=3) and Sweden (n=1) and three studies took place over multiple countries.



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Table 4: Overview of eligible literature

Authors (Year)	Country	Participants	Research design	Key findings
Agirdag & Vanlaar (2018)	18 countries (PISA 2012 data)	120,000 students (15 yrs, secondary, comparing language minority and native speaking students)	Quantitative	PISA results show achievement gap between language minority and native speaking students for reading and maths. However, in some countries speaking a minority language at home is positively related with achievement, with speaking the instruction language in the school context positively associated with achievement. Concludes more exposure to a minority language at home does not decrease students' academic performance. However, exposure to instruction language remains important, in particular in the school context and with schoolmates.
Atkinson (2009)	UK, England	20 boys (12-13 yrs, secondary) 12 school staff	Qualitative	Factors that facilitated or inhibited boys reading were the result of complex interactions between socio-cultural influences, peer pressures, gender perceptions and literacy preferences. A motivational model is proposed as a framework to help schools explore successful school-based literacy practices.
Backus & Yagmur (2019)	Netherlands and Turkey	60 children (5-6 years, early years, 30 bilingual Turkish immigrant born in the Netherlands; 30 monolingual Turkish in Turkey)	Mixed methodology	After controlling for socio-economic status, bilingual Turkish immigrants display much lower knowledge of socio-pragmatic skills in the Turkish language than monolingual Turkish children, with the cause attributed to limited Turkish input in the immigration context.
Baten et al. (2020)	Belgium	479 students (4th graders, approx. 9yrs, primary, in 14 schools)	Quantitative	Mathematics exercises perceived to be too difficult resulted in reduced interest in maths, thoughts about disengagement and irritation. Students also chose easier tasks afterwards. However, autonomy-supportive



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				instruction lessened the negative effects of difficulty compared to a controlling instructional style and led to enhanced autonomy satisfaction. Findings largely occurred independent of children's motives for maths.
Borgna et al. (2022)	Italy	Students (13/14 yrs, secondary, 46 schools, 15 participating in intervention, 31 not participating)	Mixed methods	The intervention reduced uncertainty about school choice, but resulted in no significant difference in the choices made afterward. The reduction in uncertainty was greater for foreign students, who were slightly more likely to choose technical schools rather than vocational schools, but no more likely to choose lyceums (more academic route), and no reduction in inequalities between groups was observed. Authors conclude emphasis on current achievement, dropout risks and (short-term) labour-market outcomes may push young people into making choices that are deemed by others as 'appropriate' or into job aspirations that are traditional for their circumstances, thus having a 'status-maintenance' effect.
Burgoyne et al. (2009)	UK, England	92 students (Year 3, 7-8 yrs, primary, 46 EAL)	Quantitative	Many EAL (second language) learners experienced difficulties in understanding written and spoken text, with comprehension difficulties due to significantly lower levels of vocabulary knowledge rather than decoding difficulties.
Ellis & Rowe (2020)	UK, Scotland	12,783 students (5-12 yrs, primary, from 48 schools) 650 teachers	Mixed methodology	Evaluation of a tool designed to support educators to use a broad range of professional knowledge to enable inclusive literacy teaching resulted in significant improvement in standardised age scores, the 'tail of underachievement' shortened for all social groups and a weakening of the relationship between poverty and attainment.
Garrido & Moore (2016)	Spain	872 students (15 yrs, secondary, workshops of 24 students)	Qualitative	Students reproduced standard school languages (Spanish, Catalan and English) but also incorporated other languages in composing raps. They



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				constructed plurilingual identities and performed these through their raps, playing with language and engaging in linguistic practices beyond standard school language. Many students identified as bilingual Spanish/Catalan students but were able to have conversations that challenged the linguistic authority of Catalan and explored the social role of language.
Grainger et al. (2003)	UK, England	390 students (early years and primary, across 8 schools)	Mixed methods	Younger children (Reception-y1) were more enthusiastic about writing than older children (y2-4) who found writing boring and disliked punctuation and spelling and their hands aching. Children expressed strong desire for freedom and autonomy in their writing and preference for narrative. Teachers felt that younger years had more opportunity in the curriculum for authentic writing experiences whereas curriculum for older children focused more on technical elements.
Hamilton (2013)	UK, Wales	9 migrant worker parents (7 Polish, 2 Lithuanian)	Qualitative	Factors identified as enabling migrant worker parents to establish and sustain effective links with their child's school include policies and practices which address language barriers, issues associated with changing family structures, and community relations. Schools who take a respectful, collaborative and reflective approach more likely to create an environment to successfully support children and families.
Jonker (2006)	Netherlands	Two 19-year-old students (one bilingual Dutch/Turkish, one native Dutch, reflecting on primary and secondary experiences)	Qualitative	ESL is seen to be caused by children internalising damaging labels that teachers had put on individuals early in their school careers; labels restrict children from being able to believe in themselves and use education. Students saw themselves as failing, rather than being at odds with a system they had not learned to fit within. Dropping out is a process over a school



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				lifetime, not an event. Need to listen to narratives of children and young people.
Kárpáti et al. (2014)	Hungary	380 students (6-10 yrs) and 27 staff from 22 schools (primary) Teacher survey of 600 schools with a Roma majority	Mixed methods	Roma have the right to education in their own language in Hungary but there are few Roma teachers or curricula in native languages and the pedagogy and curriculum content do not reflect Roma culture and heritage. Survey revealed that teachers felt reasons for underachievement included lack of verbal skills and questioning in the classroom, and difficulties understanding concepts without additional visualisation and explanation. Observations noted little 'authentic' curricula content. Project showed the potential of culturally ground ICT-supported teaching and learning that incorporates real-life situations and visualisations rather than verbal instruction.
Lamb (2009)	UK, England	24 students (Year 9, 14-15 yrs, secondary, studying foreign languages)	Qualitative	Learners need opportunities to make choices and have greater control of their own learning, teachers need to support students to make appropriate choices, avoiding rewards for short-term control but encouraging effort and responsibility leading to intrinsic motivation for learning.
Lamonica et al. (2020)	Italy	21 migrant students (approx. 14 yrs, secondary, 11 in intervention group and 10 in control, across 7 schools)	Quantitative	Study investigated effectiveness of small pilot targeted at foreign adolescents with low language skills and high risk of ESL. Participants randomly assigned either 10-week VET intervention or control group participating in standard school classes. Very small sample but results suggest effectiveness with some control students dropping out of school during pilot, all intervention students completed the school year (20% increase in school attendance with 80% confidence level). Intervention students did not prejudice their learning but reinforced school attachment.



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MacMaoilir & McGillicuddy (2022)	Ireland	Survey of 21 girls (secondary) Interviews with 9 girls, 4 teachers, 2 heads of year and 2 parents, and Ketso group with 9 girls (secondary)	Mixed methods	Critical pedagogies that co-create learning and facilitate student agency can increase motivation and engagement in school. Students reported being more motivated and learning things relevant to their studies. Half of students felt that as a result of engaging in the group they were more involved in classroom discussions, more likely to ask questions. They had an enhanced sense of belonging, both in terms of social and academic identity.
Manna et al. (2019)	Italy	65,535 students (aged 11-19, secondary)	Quantitative	Migrants are more likely to experience bullying, particularly verbal and relational, with predominantly boys also experiencing physical bullying. 74% of migrants reported being victims of bullying. Bullying was found to reduce participation and enthusiasm for school, with those being bullied self-reporting lower school performance. Impacted group work with peers and relationships with teachers.
Martinez-Usarralde et al. (2017)	Spain	n/a	Documentary content analysis	Identified principles for effective education of immigrant students in Spain: parental engagement including involvement of those sharing the same language and culture to aid child's integration into school; more information and parental integration may lead to a wider set of school choices being made, avoiding some schools having too high a concentration of migrants and associated inequalities; relationship between staff and students central to success, training needed for teachers about intercultural education; language a major barrier to success for immigrant children, particularly older students, recommend recruiting bilingual teachers and those who speak migrant languages.



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Meletiou-Mavrotheris et al. (2020)	Cyprus, Estonia, Portugal and Romania	100 students (9-15 yrs, primary and secondary) 57 teachers 4 school representatives	Mixed methodology	Potential for augmented reality (AR) and emergent technologies to increase students' motivation and engagement in literacy. Implementation challenges include: equipment and resources (e.g. internet), need for teacher training, practical as well as theoretical support for inclusive education, and supportive and collaborative school cultures.
Møller et al. (2014)	Denmark	10 Turkish speaking students (longitudinal study including primary and secondary)	Mixed methodology	Learners developed their language skills and metalinguistic awareness over time, drawing on linguistic features associated with several languages to varying degrees depending on age and situational context. Children may be progressing in linguistic development through <i>polylinguaging</i> but school may not provide activities that allow children to benefit from their full linguistic resources, thus giving the appearance of stagnation.
Montgomery (2008)	UK, England	536 students (Year 7, 11-12 yrs, secondary)	Quantitative	At least one third of students unable to meet national spelling criterion and 12% in dyslexic category. Over 95% did not meet handwriting speed criterion and boys 10% slower than girls.
Murphy (2010)	Ireland	Student exam papers (approx. 15-19 yrs, secondary, studying foreign languages)	Quantitative	Evidence of the prevalence of girls taking foreign language exams at Junior Certificate Examination (JCE) and Leaving Certificate Level (LCL) in Ireland. Girls outperform boys in LCL higher level exams in French, German and Spanish, with a far greater percentage share of the three higher grades (A, B and C).
Neophytou et al. (2018)	Cyprus	50 teachers (from 22 schools, age range of students unspecified, in mixed ability and culturally diverse classrooms)	Qualitative	Despite effort teachers were unable to connect intercultural competence with educational effectiveness, consequently failing to create inclusive instructional practises that could maximise learning potential along with intercultural competence for all children.



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Rojo (2013)	Spain	Students (secondary, 25% migrant student population) Teachers	Qualitative	Authors conclude that bilingual school programmes re-enforce inequalities as they don't take migrant language into account but strengthen 'elite' languages and serve to exclude migrant students from obtaining linguistic capital for success. The students selected are usually Spanish and migrants with a good grasp of English could be denied participation if their Spanish isn't good enough.
Spencer et al. (2017)	UK, England	35 students (12-14 yrs, secondary, at risk of educational underachievement in urban socio-economic disadvantaged context)	Quantitative	Study reported that cross-curriculum words were not consistently understood by students. A ten-week intervention increased depth of knowledge of targeted cross-curricular words but not on matched non-taught words.
Sprong & Skopek (2022)	Ireland	8520 children (age 5, 30.72% parent foreign-born)	Mixed methods	Child's first language powerful predictor of disadvantage (or advantage) by migration background in verbal skills (but not non-verbal skills) at age 5. Disadvantages largest for children with a parent from Poland or another Eastern European country, whilst no difference for children with parent from the Anglosphere.
Swanwick et al. (2005)	UK, England	73 deaf student test papers and analysis relating to 800 representative test papers (13-14 yrs, secondary)	Mixed methodology	Comparison of mathematics test papers from deaf and hearing students reveal discrepancies in performance in relation to language issues, pupils' working methods, written English responses and 'difficult to teach' items. Authors also highlight the predominance in the sample of deaf students being entered for the 3-5 level paper despite many achieving comfortably in the level 5 range.



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Toorenaar & Rijlaarsdam (2011)	Netherlands	21 students (15 yrs, 2 boys & 19 girls, secondary) 1 teacher	Qualitative	Meaningful learning means creating authentic communication, but also learning about the content and communication behaviour. Authentic communication can contribute to a vocational identity by integrating a language subject with the vocational subject. Reflective learning did not happen via a worksheet but via imagining the real situations, role play and simulation, which created shared discourse with peers. In order to create transferable learning outcomes, what is learnt needs to be applied.
Tzouriadou et al. (2021)	Greece	82 students (11-12 yrs, primary, 43 Roma and 39 non-Roma)	Quantitative	Teachers using a screening tool (Learning Disabilities Diagnostic Inventory) to detect Roma and non-Roma students at risk for developmental disabilities can predict actual language achievement. Need for universal assessment and differential diagnosis of culturally and linguistically diverse students.
Voß & Blumenthal (2020)	Germany	4268 students (grades 1-4, 6-10 yrs, primary)	Quantitative	Evidence that the recording of word recognition skills for silent reading can be used as an indicator for reading fluency/skills.
Warne et al. (2020)	Sweden	21 students (grade 9, 15/16yrs, secondary) 21 school staff (from 2 school, primary and secondary phases) 2 parents	Qualitative	Parents believe problems with tardiness to be caused by school environment, teachers believe problems caused by home environment and parental attitudes. Teachers varied in views about lateness, in that their reaction varied according to the situation. Students reported blurry signals and no clear norms, interpreting signals that punctuality is not important. However, the way teachers communicate and use language can influence students' sense of belonging and motivation for school.



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3.2 Themes emerging from the systematic review.

Our thematic analyses undertaken of the peer reviewed research selected for this review uncovered four broad themes related to linguistics as a social determinant of ESL and underachievement. The first theme explores the disadvantages associated with linguistic bias which are complex and can be re-enforced by educational practices. The second theme concerns intercultural awareness and linguistic practices, while the third concerns the linguistic issues in respect of curriculum. Finally, the section concludes with the theme of learner autonomy and agency, providing evidence of the effectiveness of listening to children and giving them choice and autonomy over their own learning, enhancing their motivation.

3.2.1 BIAS AND THE RE-ENFORCEMENT OF DISADVANTAGE

Research has revealed that many linguistic and associated biases and prejudices continue to exist in schools, disadvantage certain groups of students and contribute towards underachievement. Whilst research shows educational attainment gaps between native and language minority students (Agirdag & Vanlaar, 2008), the relationships between language and achievement are more complex as demonstrated by the Sprong and Skopek (2022) who found a child's first language at age 5 a powerful predictor of advantage or disadvantage by migration background in relation to verbal skills but found no connection in relation to non-verbal skills.

Swanwick et al. (2015) highlight how language affects deaf learners' access to the mathematics curriculum and impacts on learner and teacher expectations. The issue of expectation can have far reaching effects, with Tzouriadou et al. (2021) noting that teachers can attribute underachievement in Roma students to socio-economic, linguistic and cultural factors, rather than exploring the possibility of developmental disabilities; they argue for the need for universal assessment and differential diagnosis of diverse students to appropriately support learning and reduce underachievement. Further, Borgna et al. (2022) examined a school guidance scheme in Italy and concluded that the intervention did not reduce inequalities but may have strengthened stereotypes and job stratifications with students' socio-economic circumstances and linguistic background influencing recommendations for less academic pathways.

Issues of disadvantage have been known for some time and whilst policy has sought to address these, there are a number of instances where practices have further exasperated inequalities. Rojo (2013) reveal how bilingual secondary schools in Spain have strengthened 'elite' languages and excluded migrant students from utilising their linguistic capital. Many European countries have encouraged students with migrant backgrounds to abandon their first language in favour of the language of instruction, but research now recognises that this disadvantages immigrant students further and that linguistic diversity can in fact strengthen academic achievement (Agirdag & Vanlaar, 2008). Backus and Yagmur (2019) argue for the support of first language development in immigrant groups, in recognition of the interdependency between first and second language skills and that if students lack skills in their first language this may also delay skills in the second or subsequent languages, impacting upon achievement in school.

Finally, socio-cultural factors also impact student choices with Murphy (2010) highlighting gender factors in participation and achievement in foreign language learning in Ireland and Manna et al. (2019) the prevalence of bullying experienced by migrant students in Italian secondary schools, impacting students' participation, relationships and school performance and increased willingness for ESL.



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3.2.2 Intercultural awareness and linguistic practices

Across the review many studies highlighted the need for intercultural awareness and practices to engage students and families. Hamilton (2013) found schools in Wales, UK, underdeveloped in engaging culturally and linguistically diverse parents. Neophytou et al. (2018) found that despite effort, teachers in Cyprus were unable to connect intercultural competence with educational effectiveness and Karpati et al. (2014) note that despite policy to support Roma communities in Hungary, there are few Roma teachers, curriculum in native languages and the curriculum and pedagogical approaches do not reflect Roma culture and heritage. There is a call for initial teacher training and continued professional development to directly address intercultural awareness (Hamilton, 2013; Martinez-Usarralde et al., 2017) and for the recruitment of bilingual/multilingual teachers, including those who speak minority languages (Karpati et al., 2014; Lamonica et al., 2020; Martinez-Usarralde et al., 2017).

However, in addition to awareness, it is essential that schools are supported to enact change to meet the needs of a diverse range of students and to maximise learning opportunities; policy not only needs to support intercultural and inclusive practices but to provide practical guidance for schools. As noted above, research shows that whilst engagement with the language of instruction in schools is important (Agirdag & Vanlaar, 2008), that does not mean that students should be discouraged from using their full linguistic capabilities to advance their learning. Møller et al. (2014) call for schools to embrace students' polylingual development so that they might benefit from their full linguistic resources. With Garrido and Moore (2016) also celebrating young people's ability to construct plurilingual identities through raps, playing with language and linguistic practices in a way that goes beyond standard school language learning and propose a critical hip hop language pedagogy to be enacted in schools. Agirdag and Vanlaar (2008) emphasise that multi-lingual education should not mean segregation, tracking or ability groupings but that students should be encouraged to learn from one another's linguistic diversity.

3.2.3. Curriculum

In researching the experiences of Hungarian Roma, Karpati et al (2014) have called for the need for culturally relevant curricula, pedagogies and multi-modal ways of communicating that reflect students' culture and heritage, including possibilities for utilising ICT to enhance visualisation. Meletiou-Mavrotheris et al. (2020) evaluated the 'Living Book – Augmenting Reading for Life' project which has the potential to increase student engagement and motivation, but nevertheless acknowledged the challenges including equipment and resources, teacher training (including practical as well as theoretical support for enacting inclusive education) and the need for collaborative school cultures. Ellis and Rowe (2020) have reported the positive effects of inclusive literacy teaching in reducing the attainment gap associated with poverty.

Studies have sought to assess literacy skills (Voß & Blumenthal, 2020) and to examine underachievement in order to better adapt school curricula to meet student's needs. Burgoyne et al. (2009) found that reading comprehension difficulties in second (third/fourth etc) language learners in the UK was not due to decoding difficulties but to significantly lower levels of vocabulary knowledge. Burgoyne et al. report the need for greater emphasis on language development and vocabulary knowledge for students learning English as an additional language in the UK and similarly Spencer et al. (2017) argue for the explicit teaching of cross-curricular vocabulary in secondary schools for all students at risk of low educational attainment. Montgomery (2008) assessed the spelling and handwriting speed of secondary school students in the UK and found that at least one third were unable to meet national spelling



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standards and that 95% did not meet the expected handwriting speed, with boys 10% slower than girls. This has led Montgomery to stipulate the need for further support for handwriting and spelling in the curriculum to support academic achievement.

3.2.4. LEARNER AUTONOMY AND AGENCY

A strong theme that emerged from the analyses was the importance of enabling children and young people to co-create their own learning. Enabling children to be able to influence curriculum content and delivery mechanisms involves giving them choice and autonomy which in turn can increase the relevance of their learning, incorporate their linguistic diversity and motivate them to succeed. Having more control over their own learning in this way can enable children to develop a language in which to describe their own learning and share it with others in addition to encouraging reflection. Promoting *meaningful* language learning opportunities, for example, requires opportunities for authentic communication and learning about communication behaviours and utilising shared learning through dialogue (Toorenaar & Rijlaarsdam, 2011).

The importance of listening to student narratives in terms of *what* is said and in *how* language is used can have profound effects on student engagement and attainment at school. Jonker (2006) explains that those narratives can help educators to develop an understanding of how children make sense of the complex processes of growing up and being educated and prevent the re-enforcement of prevailing stereotypes of students that can serve to reproduce existing inequalities.

This relies on teacher skills such as encouraging active involvement and using multi-modal forms of communication and supportive communication styles, as well as teacher values and attitudes that influence the pedagogies they deploy. In one study of attitudes to writing, Grainger et al. (2003) found that children liked freedom and autonomy in their writing and the creative space to develop their own ideas, but that the opportunities to do this lessened as children got older and children became less enthusiastic about writing as a result. Lamb (2009) in his study of language learning, describes how some teachers are prone to tightening control with students who are not motivated to learn languages and utilise punishment and reward strategies, which is counterproductive and instead he suggests teachers should loosen control to enable students to learn in ways that are relevant to them by encouraging initiative, effort, effective planning and responsibility and enabling them to have a say in curriculum planning. An autonomy-supportive style of teaching is also advocated by Baten et al (2020), who found that this can buffer the negative effects of challenging curricula. They found that using inviting, empathetic language and providing students with choice in their learning can enhance enjoyment, engagement and motivation in learning and support children to take on harder challenges rather than become disengaged and irritated by them. Warne et al. (2020) describe how the way teachers communicate and use language can influence student's sense of belonging and motivation for school. In their study of tardiness, they found that teacher language (and the lack of it) could either promote inconsistent messages and unclear norms, or act to set clear expectations. There were accounts of children being scared of teachers who shouted.

Atkinson (2009), in her research with boys reading practices, suggests that the provision of reading resources in schools often do not take account of children's preferences or what they might be engaging with out of school. She found that children would like more choice of what to read and like to talk about their reading with people they know. Similarly, the research of MacMaoilir and McGillicuddy (2022) with girls in Ireland emphasised that critical pedagogies



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that co-create learning and facilitate student agency can increase motivation and engagement with school, resulting in stronger relationships between teachers and students, and more class discussion, and the likelihood of the girls' asking questions. In turn, this enhanced their sense of belonging in their social and academic identities.

3.3 Interplay between linguistic determinant and other social determinants on underachievement.

In analysing the selected publications, it was evident that in examining the linguistic aspects that effect under-achievement in education and ESL, there is also an interplay with other social determinants as discussed below.

Institutional: Articles highlighted the institutional processes, policies and values that often interact with linguistic determinants. For example, Borgna et al. (2022) highlighted that whilst the provision of guidance about school choices and information about different school tracks reduced uncertainty about which schools to choose, this did not result in significant differences in the choices families made about what type of school they wanted their child to attend, with evidence of stereotypes and bias by those providing guidance who were seen to be pushing students into making decisions deemed 'appropriate' for them, for example students with a recent immigration history being advised against academically demanding courses. Rojo (2013) concluded that bilingual schools in Spain have not benefitted linguistic minorities but strengthened English, reinforcing inequalities and excluding migrant students from utilising the linguistic capital they possess. Martinez-Usarralde et al. (2017) have identified factors that can support immigrant students in Spain including recruiting school staff who share the language and culture of communities, professional training for staff in intercultural education and parents playing an active and informed role in their children's schooling. Lamb (2009) discusses how institutional decisions on offering extrinsic motivation rewards can inhibit students' motivation and learning and Warne et al. (2020) how the communication and use of language by teachers influences students' sense of belonging. Finally, Ellis & Rowe (2020) highlight how professional knowledge and values of respect, social justice and inclusion, can enable inclusive literacy teaching to narrow achievement gaps.

Socio-economic: Several studies were in low socio-economic contexts. Spencer et al. (2017) refer to this as contextual information, whilst for Ellis & Rowe (2020) the socio-economic context was the driver for the research in seeking to narrow the attainment gap associated with poverty in the UK. Ellis and Rowe argue for the need for inclusive literacy teaching that uses a capabilities approach and delivers social justice, weakening the relationship between poverty and attainment. Borgna et al. (2020) highlight how school guidance practices can reinforce social bias, with counsellors taking account of family financial circumstances and recommending less demanding educational paths or options with quicker routes into employment for some groups.

Cognitive: Many studies used cognitive measures to assess the effectiveness of interventions (Baten et al., 2020; Ellis & Rowe, 2020; Spencer et al., 2017), to test the validity of instruments (Tzouriadou et al., 2021; Voß & Blumenthal, 2020) and/or to compare groups (Agirdag & Vanlaar, 2018; Burgoyne et al., 2009; Ellis & Rowe, 2020; Montgomery, 2008; Murphy, 2010; Sprong & Skopek, 2022; Swanwick et al., 2005; Tzouriadou et al., 2021).

Cultural: The research highlights that across Europe many schools struggle to enact appropriate intercultural awareness and pedagogies, with many studies calling for teacher professional development in intercultural and inclusive curricula and teaching (Ellis & Rowe, 2020; Karpati et al., 2014; Martinez-Usarralde et al., 2017; Neophytou



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et al., 2018). Cultural awareness and openness have been seen to be important in establishing and sustaining parental engagement with schools (Hamilton, 2013) and in student-teacher relationships (Martinez-Usarralde et al., 2017). It is also recognised that cultural factors can support linguistic development with Backus & Yagmur (2019) comparing the socio-pragmatic skills of native monolingual children and migrant bilingual children (in their first language), with the lower knowledge in bilingual children attributed to limited cultural input in the immigration context. However, socio-cultural and peer influences can both positively and negatively impact boys' engagement in reading, as demonstrated in one UK study (Atkinson 2009).

Gender: Some of the research compared the experiences of different genders, for example, Manna et al. (2009) found that migrant students were more likely to be bullied than native students, with males more likely to suffer from physical bullying and females from relational bullying. Murphy (2010) draws attention to the prevalence of girls participating in and achieving higher grades in foreign language learning in Ireland. Other studies sought to address gender issues, with Atkinson (2009) proposing a motivational model to facilitate boys' engagement in reading and MacMaoilir & McGillicuddy (2022) advocate for critical pedagogies in co-creating learning and facilitating student agency, motivation and engagement with marginalised female students.

Psycho-emotional and Well-being: It is recognised that students' engagement in education is affected by a range of psycho-emotional factors. Jonker (2006) reflects on how ESL can be caused by internalising damaging labels that schools put on children, damaging their self-belief and engagement in education and Manna et al. (2019) how bullying can impair participation and enthusiasm for school, disrupt trust and relationships with teachers and impact on school performance. Grainger et al. (2003) compared the motivation, confidence and self-esteem of children in relation to writing and demonstrated how having more autonomy and involvement in choosing their writing increased their motivation to engage in it. Atkinson (2009) and Lamb (2009) explore students' views on motivation and learner autonomy, whilst Ellis & Rowe (2020) and Baten et al. (2020) present supportive and inclusive teaching models to engage and empower students.

ECEC: Examination of the linguistic skills of children in ECEC revealed the complex relationships that influence children's development. Sprong & Skopek (2022) assessed verbal and non-verbal skills at age 5 in Ireland and whilst they found a gap in verbal skills according to migration background, there was no difference in non-verbal skills. Backus & Yagmur (2019) emphasise the importance of supporting first language development in relation to socio-pragmatic skills, which they theorise will then support second language skills and cognitive development. Finally, Grainger et al. (2003) reported that the enthusiasm for writing reported by children in ECEC was diminished as children progressed through primary school and were given less opportunities for autonomous and creative writing.

3.4. Policies, gaps and solutions

3.4.1 POLICY APPROACHES TARGETING LINGUISTICS

Policy-making in education happens at many different levels including in national, regional and local administrations, in addition to the policies created and enacted at a micro level in schools and educational settings.



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This review does not differentiate, nor recommend specific policies but rather the academic research provides areas for policy consideration.

It has become clear through this review that policy development needs to be informed by children's views and narratives about their own learning and enable children to participate in policy creation (Jonker 2006). Policies that can encourage critical pedagogies which prioritise pupil choice, the co-creation of learning and curricula, the use of multi-modal resources and facilitative instruction styles have the potential to ensure children become and remain motivated and engaged with learning and prevent them dropping out (Grainger et al 2003; Garrido and Moore 2016; Karpati et al 2014; Lamb 2009; MacMaoilir and McGillicuddy 2022). Training for teachers and guidance counsellors in intercultural education and social inequalities and recruiting teachers who are speakers of migrant languages can facilitate an inclusive educational experience for children (Martinez-Usarralde et al 2017; Borgna et al 2022; Neophytou 2018).

The research also offers compelling critique of current policies towards the education of children with a minority first language. Policies which encourage ethnic minorities and migrants to abandon their first language in favour of the domestic language have been criticised. Furthermore, policies promoting bilingual education can have the unintended consequence of re-enforcing inequalities for bilingual students, particularly when they do not privilege migrant languages (Rojo 2013). Policies which encourage tracking and segregation on the basis of language should also be discouraged (Agirdag and Vanlaar 2018).

Policies that can support schools to deliver equity and inclusion and values of social justice, involving supporting professional knowledge to be able to enact this are seen to be fruitful in preventing ESL (Ellis and Rowe 2020). Murphy (2010) calls for policy to consider, in particular, the impact of gender on participation and achievement and there is an argument to also consider policies that encourage the development of social skills alongside academic success (Hamilton 2013).

3.4.4 GAPS IDENTIFIED IN EXISTING RESEARCH

A systematic review is by its nature selective in the research evidence that it provides. In this review, we have utilised strict criteria to discover the state of the art in European research. We know, however, that there are bodies of literature existing outside this framing that can inform thinking around issues such as what a culturally sensitive transformative pedagogy that fully utilises and celebrates linguistic diversity might look like (see, for example the work of Smith and Robertson 2020 on translanguage-to-learn). Much of the literature about translanguageing has been undertaken outside Europe, but could offer insight into effective ways of educating Roma (and other) children. In addition, our review uncovered themes of learner agency and voice, not terms that were searched for originally, but on which a large body of research exists that could be explored further in relation to linguistics.

Further, there appear to be gaps in the prevalence of research in particular areas. There is little attempt by research to explore the theories of change and the associated mechanisms that might interact to prevent ESL and underachievement in respect to linguistic factors. Many studies look at snapshots of time, and specific variables such as motivation, stereotypes, autonomy, teacher practices, and so on, without a firm theorisation of how these variables might interact and/or form causal chains of impact throughout a school career. It would seem sensible to encourage future research to test potential causal links, underpinned by clear theories of change. This would indicate



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the need for studying children's trajectories over time, supplemented with qualitative exploration of what made a difference and why in their journey (or not) towards ESL and/or underachievement.

We also know very little about the situation in early years. While 3 studies involved pre-school children, they were not well connected in their objectives. While research suggests that migrants are likely to have better educational outcomes if they attend early years' settings rather than arrive later in their school days (Lamonica et al 2020), and some disparities have been noted at age 5 (Sprong and Skopek 2022) we could hypothesise that just as economic disadvantages affect child development, language skills and attainment from a very early age (see, e.g. Gregg and Goodman 2010), linguistic disadvantages may start in the early years too. In addition, the identified research underexplores the role of parents in their children's education and the linguistic issues that may be involved to facilitate or challenge their role.

Another area that is underexplored in the studies identified in this review is the linguistic implications concerning school resources, such as textbooks and digital technology.

3.4.5 POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS FOR REDUCING THE IMPACT OF LINGUISTICS ON UNDERACHIEVEMENT

A number of solutions are suggested in the literature reviewed as follows:

- **Assessment:** Utilising differential diagnoses of culturally and linguistically diverse students (Tzouriadou et al 2021)
- **Curriculum:** greater emphasis on language development within school curriculum to support children learning the prevailing domestic language (Burgoyne et al 2009). Writing speed and fluency seem to underpin achievement and may need more emphasis in the curriculum (Montgomery 2008). Explicit teaching of cross-curricular vocabulary in schools (Spencer et al 2017). Development of intercultural and inclusive, multi-modal curricula and resources (Karpati et al 2014). Co-creation of curricula with students (Grainger et al 2003; Karpati et al 2014).
- **Voice:** Developing structures for enabling students' views to be expressed and heard and acted on in classrooms (Lamb 2009; Jonker 2006)
- **Attitudes:** Framing linguistic diversity positively and recognising the benefits it can bring to learning (Vanlaar 2018). Developing anti-bullying strategies (Manna et al 2019)
- **Teacher training and development:** To increase intercultural awareness, encourage understanding of equity and inclusive values and attitudes, and encourage supportive language practices and pedagogies (Martinez-Usarralde et al 2017; Hamilton 2013; Ellis & Rowe 2020; Baten et al 2020)
- **Pedagogy:** Using and supporting critical pedagogies in the classroom to equalise power and enable students to engage (MacMaoilir & McGillicuddy 2022). Intercultural and inclusive pedagogies (Karpati et al 2014; Ellis and Rowe 2020). Enabling student choice in their own learning (Garrido & Moore 2016)
- **Recruitment:** Recruiting teachers speaking migrant languages (Martinez-Usarralde et al 2017)
- **Families:** Support parent involvement (Martinez-Usarralde et al 2017)



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4.0 Key takeaways from the systematic review

- Stereotypes and bias both implicit and explicit in the systems and practices of educational settings in relation to the languages children speak and their cultural background, and the ways in which they communicate and use language service to re-enforce existing inequalities in society and reproduce disadvantage which results in ESL and underachievement.
- Intercultural awareness, supportive teacher practices and innovative pedagogies can support children and families. Teacher development opportunities are fruitful to be able to share knowledge (both theoretical and practical) about these.
- Curricula should be culturally relevant and accessible in multi-modal form.
- Children should be supported to take control of their own learning, be able to express their views and be part of the process of curriculum design and educational policymaking to ensure education is relevant and engaging for them, motivating them to persevere and succeed.

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Title

Work Package	WP 1. Analysing causes and social determinants of underachievement
Identifier	
Task	Task 1.1 – Systematic Review on Social Determinants – [Psycho-emotional: engagement and well-being]
Lead Beneficiary (for sub report)	University of Helsinki
Authors	Sanna Ulmanen, Auli Toom and Kirsi Pyhältö
Due Date	[End of April 2022]
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Systematic Review on Social Determinants: well-being and engagement in early childhood education and school



1.0 Introduction

We carried out a systematic literature review on literature reviews and meta-analyses published between 2000-2023 on (study) engagement among children attending in early childhood education or primary- and lower secondary school. The reason to focus on engagement is that it is a multifaceted phenomenon indicating individual's well-being and motivation to educational institution, and both individual and collective factors contribute to the development of engagement. We also utilised an extensive systematic review on studies focusing on well-being and mental health in schools published in the 2021 in the research project funded by the EC. The reasons for these specification decisions and strategy to focus on reviewing reviews were the versatility of close phenomena related to well-being and engagement. We found in the literature search, that the amount of research articles on well-being and engagement was extensive (over 500 000 articles during the agreed search period), so it would have been impossible to do screening and analysis of all of them or even within this timeframe. By reviewing the reviews, we are able to summarise an extensive amount of research information for the purposes of our project.

2.0 Methodology. systematic review of well-being and engagement in early childhood education and school

2.1 Keywords utilised in the literature search

We used the following *keywords* for the search: "study engagement" OR "school engagement" OR "student engagement" OR "academic engagement" AND "early childhood education" OR "primary school*" OR "secondary school*" OR "comprehensive school" OR "elementary school*" AND pupil* OR student* AND "systematic literature review" OR "systematic review". We performed the *systematic literature review* by applying all the instructions provided by the SCIREARLY Malta team, and in practice, this meant following the PRISMA statement guidelines (Moher et al. 2009). The following electronic databases were used: PsycINFO, Scopus, and Web of Science databases. The search was carried out in February 2023. The detailed definitions of engagement and well-being utilised in the single reviewed articles are presented in our summary excel table.

2.2 Inclusion criteria for the articles

As agreed in the SCIREARLY project, we applied the following inclusion criteria for the articles: (i) written in the English; (ii) published in scientific peer-reviewed journals; (iii) included a sample of children attending ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) or comprehensive school, with ages ranging between 3 and 19 years old (all ethnicities, socio-economic statuses, and genders were considered); (vi) were published between 2000-2/2023; and (vii) was systematic literature review or systematic review related to students' study engagement (or academic engagement or school engagement) in the ECEC or school context. Conversely, articles were excluded when they did not fulfill the above criteria or when they focused on other variables unrelated to the school context.

Primary search resulted in 28 articles (14 from Web of Science, 9 from Scopus and 5 from PsychInfo). After excluding the duplicates (n=9), titles and abstracts of potentially relevant articles were sorted in the identification and screening phases. Articles not focusing on ECEC or comprehensive school (n=2) and not examining students' study engagement (n=3) were excluded. This resulted in 14 articles for full-text review. In the eligibility phase, all full-text articles were independently examined by two reviewers to check the inclusion criteria. In addition, a recent a systemic, whole-school approach to mental health and well-being in schools in the EU: executive summary" and Harbour's and his colleagues brief review (2015) of effective teaching practices that maximize student engagement were included in the analysis. Finally, a total of 16 articles or reviews fulfilled the inclusion criteria and were then included. We performed the whole screening and analysis process in the Covidence program, which is a program especially meant for conducting systematic literature reviews.

3.0 Findings of the systematic review

3.1 General overview of the reviewed articles

The included articles were published between the years 2015 and 2022. In 13 of the selected articles, the widely applied guidelines of systematic literature review (e.g. Cochrane Collaboration, Higgings et al., 2019; the Prisma Statement, Moher et al., 2009) were followed. The total number of articles included in all the literature reviews was 466 and it ranged from 5 articles to 102 articles for a selected article. Three of the selected articles were study syntheses from the literature on school engagement and did not specify the article search process or the number of reviewed studies. The studies included in the selected review articles were conducted across the globe: USA, Canada, Australia, New Zeland, Europe (Spain, Finland, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Turkey, Portugal, Romania, Italy, Germany), South-America (Argentina, Chile, Peru, Trinidad and Tobago), Africa (Mauritius, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda), Asia (Hong Kong, Israel, Iran, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, China, Japan, South Korea). Three of the selected articles addressed only intervention studies aimed at promoting study engagement. 12 of the selected articles reviewed the empirical studies with a wider scope (also including interventions, but not limited in interventions). One article focused on reviewing systematic literature reviews. META-analyses were applied in 5 of the selected articles with the aim to conduct a statistical combination of multiple studies (Xiao & Watson, 2019). Altogether 11 of the selected studies presented a descriptive review with the aim of examining the state of the literature in the selected theme (Xiao & Watson, 2019).

Detailed description of participants was provided in ten of the reviews. Participants consisted of students, teachers or other school staff members, and students' family members. Students' ages ranged from 3 to 19. The number of students in the studies ranged from 70 to 376611 students. Most of the selected articles (14 out of 16) focused on exploring the general student population without determining ethnicity and socio-economic status. However, one of the included articles compared differences between students from Western countries and East Asian countries (Wang et al., 2020) and in other at least 15% of the participants were students with minority background (Khalfaoui et al., 2021). Other studies focused on exploring the general student population without setting requirements for students' ethnicity. In two out of all studies included both general population students and students at risk of academic failure (Allen et al., 2022; Greenwood et al., 2019). Moreover, one article focused on examining students with diagnosis (Busacca et al., 2015).

Selected articles included reviews focused on following scopes: engagement (n=9), school climate (n=2), emotional regulation (n=2), mental health (n=2), and learning (n=1). *Engagement reviews* included an examination of studies regarding the factors influencing on students' school engagement covering emotional, behavioural and cognitive engagement, (Fabian et al., 2016; Kristin et al., 2015; Martins et al., 2022; Quin et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2022), examination of the sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2022; Leanne & Kelly, 2019), and achievement motivation (Wang et al., 2020). In addition, it included one study evaluating the effects of family-school engagement interventions on parent-teacher relationships (Smith et al., 2022). One of the reviews on *school climate* examined the factors contributing positive classroom climate in multicultural early childhood education (Khalfaoui et al., 2021) while another focused on topics related to measurement, data collection, analysis, as well as prevention and promotion planning (Bradshaw et al., 2021). First of the *emotional regulation reviews* focused on making a synthesis on how primary school children regulate their emotions and how the school environment influences on children's emotional regulation (Schleiser et al. 2019), the other one focused on self-management interventions studies targeting to tackle problem behaviours of primary school students (with diagnosis) in general education setting (Busacca et al., 2015). *The mental health reviews* focused on the factors contributing students' mental health in a school environment and the characters of the effective mental health programs.

Even if the focuses of the articles varied across the studies, their content strongly overlapped and were intertwined with each other. Facilitating school engagement was not only seen as a goal but it was considered as an important way to promote the students' mental health and positive school climate. Similarly, strengthening the students' sense of belonging as part of students' emotional engagement as a way to reduce mental health problems and to promote overall school engagement and learning. Emotional regulation skills were identified as a basis of students' school engagement and mental health.

3.2 Nested factors related to students' psycho-emotional well-being at ECEC and at school

We applied Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model in structuring the reviews results on the factors contributing children's psycho-emotional wellbeing (Figure 1). The model emphasizes the nested ecology of children's wellbeing. At the core of the model is an *individual child* with his or her experiences and individual characteristics. The *micro level involves the* surrounding relationships and interactions between the child and their immediate family members, peers, teachers, and other significant people in their life. The *meso level* includes the broader environmental factors and educational institutions that indirectly affect the child's development such as the school community resources and practices. Finally, the macro level encompasses the larger cultural and societal values and beliefs and influencing factors on the societal level.

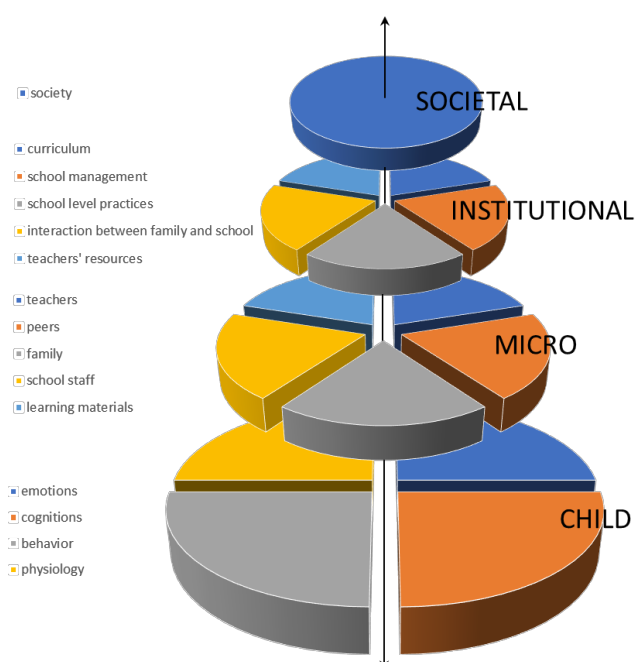


Figure 1. General presentation of the review results in Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological framework.

3.2.1. INDIVIDUAL CHILD LEVEL ASPECTS RELATED TO STUDENT WELLBEING AND ENGAGEMENT

Individual level factors related to children's well-being included intra-individual factors such as students' emotions (i.e., affect and sense of belonging), behaviours (i.e., attention in class and individual work), cognitions (i.e. perceived competence, autonomy, control, emotional regulation) and physiological characteristics. The individual attributes of wellbeing were explicated in the 9 of selected studies. *Cognitive skills*, i.e. perceiving autonomy, believing in own capacity, and having advanced emotional regulation skills (e.g. resilience, persistence), have been found to associate with prosocial behavior (empathy, seek out support and use adaptive coping strategies) and to respond successfully to daily or significant challenges (coping strategies). Moreover, cognitive skills have been found to be associated with positive emotions such as enjoyment, happiness, and interest. In turn, positive emotions have been found to increase preference for problem solving and willingness to seek out support from teachers and peers. Interpersonal skills such as the ability to communicate effectively, to develop and maintain positive relationships, to resist negative peer influences and to seek support when needed, are essential to performing adequately at home, at school or in the community. Being able to take others' perspectives, be empathic towards others, identify group and contextual norms, recognize demands, and profit from opportunities, were also reported to be critical in navigating in significant life contexts. Durlak et al. (2011) show that prosocial attitudes, interpersonal relationships, as well as problem-solving and conflict resolution skills, functioned as a mechanism for the prevention of aggression. Physical activity was also found to be associated with lower odds for developing of mental health illnesses (i.e. stress, negative affect, depression, and total psychological distress) and higher levels of well-being (i.e. self-image, satisfaction with life, happiness, and psychological well-being). The results indicated that the individual attributes of student wellbeing were intertwined.

Individual-level skills related to emotional, cognitive, and behavioural functioning form the basis of wellbeing of individual as well as of a school community. They associated for example with students' school engagement, which further have been found to have influence on inter-individual determinants of student wellbeing and further social wellbeing at the institutional level such as on a school climate.

3.2.2. MICRO LEVEL ASPECTS INFLUENCING STUDENTS' WELLBEING AND ENGAGEMENT

Micro level aspects influencing students' wellbeing included students' relationships with teachers, peer(s), school staff and with family. The importance of **students' relationships with teachers** as a building block for students' wellbeing was highlighted in the 12 selected studies (out of 16; 1,2,4,5,6,7,8,10,11,12,13,16). In the studies, teachers' procedures during classroom instruction and teachers' way and role to create positive learning environments that promote active participation were discussed. For example, teachers' way to treat students, regard their perspectives, conceptualize the learning contents, and set rules, standards and expectations for students' behavior were found as critical elements for effective pedagogy supporting students' school engagement. We categorized key findings of teacher-student interaction into three categories: emotional support, instructional support, and classroom organization. In addition to that, concrete strategies/pedagogical practices, and interventions supporting the realization of these dimensions are described. The key findings of the results are presented in Table [see interventions in our excel table].

Teacher-student interaction characterized by *emotional support* emerged as a key result in promoting students' study wellbeing in 9 selected articles (1,2,4,6,8,10,11,12,16). This involved teachers' respectful attitudes towards the students, encouragement, and fair treatment of students, teacher-student closeness, and teachers' way to regard for student perspective and emotional needs and an ability to adapt one's actions accordingly. *Instructional teacher support* was highlighted as a key for enhancing students' school engagement in nine selected articles (1,4,5,6,7,8,10,11,16). Instructional support typically involved cultivating higher-order thinking and deep learning, for example by conceptualizing the contents of learning and providing feedback. Teacher feedback included both verbal and nonverbal feedback on students' academic or behavioral performance, indicating teacher's approval or correctness of response, or teacher's disapproval and incorrectness in responses. It was directed to guide students' development of specific skills and knowledge. Nine articles (1,4,5,6,8,10,11,13,16) identified aspects of *classroom organization, including classroom structure* i.e. instructional strategies used and the group management as crucial in determining teacher-student relationships and further students' study wellbeing in the school.

A few articles, the importance of **relationships between students and other school staff** were examined (1,2,6,9). In them, emotionally supportive relationships with school staff were found to promote students' school engagement. The practices to increase positive interaction between school staff and students included consistency, persistence, rapport building and developing trust. They also emphasized students' opportunities for building teacher and staff connection, for example "an open-door policy", humorous, assertive, engaging, enthusiastic and happy staff, who are transparent in their approaches to students. Practical support provided by other school staff, for example, taking students to nurses' appointments, providing them with food, and allowing a student to wash their school uniform at school, and emotional support were mentioned, while reprimanding students publicly contributed to their disengagement.

In five of selected articles, the **factors regarding students' peer relationships** were found as central in influencing students' school engagement (1,4,6,8,9,10,11). Peer culture at a school level (i.e., school-wide peer behaviors and the nature of peer relationships across diverse groups of students) and at a classroom level was a determinant of students' school engagement. Two mechanisms by which peer relationships influence school attachment were identified. Firstly, the quality of peer relationships associated with

emotional support shared among peers. Emotional support shared among peers associated with an emotionally safe and accepting atmosphere among peers facilitating students' participation in lessons and positive attitudes towards studying was suggested to contribute to study engagement. Secondly, peer relationships that encourage students to share study-related support (informational support) was seen as an important for students' school engagement. Through shared support students ventured to keep trying when faced with challenges. The possibility to share study-related support was found to facilitate students' sense of importance in a group and further school engagement. Additionally, it was found that students are likely to identify with the values of peer group. A peer group in which shared values are favorable to studying appeared to be favorable for school engagement as well.

Some articles reported **students' relatedness with family** as an element contributing to student engagement (2,6, 10, 11,14). The support provided by the family members, parents, or guardians was found essential. Students' close relationships with parents were found to have positive effects on engagement. On the contrary, parental school-related support, for example parents' overinvolvement in students' learning and excessive parental control outside of school were found to have negative effects.

The reviewed studies also included **interventions (n=131)**. Most of them targeted facilitating students' wellbeing through promoting the quality of teacher-student interaction. The key findings of that kind of intervention based on the available information in the review articles are presented in a condensed way in Table 1.

Table 1. The key results of the intervention studies focusing on enhancing student well-being through teacher-student interaction reported in the reviewed articles.

Teacher-student interaction	References (see article numbers the reference list and in our table of reviewed articles)
<i>Emotional support</i>	
1) <i>teachers' respectful, encouraging and fair treatment of students</i> - addressing the student with a moderate tone of voice and avoiding a negative tone - handling respectfully student-teacher conflict - offering for students a chance to start again following a transition and treating each day as a new start - accepting mistakes and negative affect - displaying patience toward teaching and students - showing trust in the students' competence and maintaining high expectations with all students; avoiding low-level tasks that underestimates students' ability - role-modelling of social and emotional competences, are the building blocks of both academic learning and social and emotional competences and well-being - the way to control students' adaptation to the hidden curriculum (i.e. values, norms, and beliefs), publicly reprimanding of students contributed disengagement - avoiding of unequal or unfair treatment - coercive classroom management based on fear and punishment undue pressures on students to achieve, leading to stress and anxiety 2) <i>teacher-student closeness</i>	1,2,4,6,8,10,11,12,16

- knowing the name of each child in the classroom - showing positive affects towards students 3) <i>teachers' way to regard for student perspective and emotional needs and an ability to adapt one's actions accordingly</i> - teachers' sensitivity to recognize students' emotional needs - detecting and nurturing kids' needs, interests, and preferences, as well as providing chances in the classroom for students to use their motivations to direct their learning and activities - instructional behaviors such as taking the students' perspective (e.g., teaching students' preferred ways), and respecting their opinions - providing support in a person-centred way, bespoke to each pupil: particularly when they experience transition to a new school (use of induction calendars, welcome letters and welcome assemblies) - showing interest towards students - providing tasks adjusted to students learning skills, utilizing proactive instructional protocol (i.e., more complete instructions given before children start a task). - Practices such as deliver long and low difficulty of the task had a detrimental influence on students' motivation, - the use of performance-oriented goal practices undermining students' engagement in class - culturally responsive and inclusive practices - relevance; student-centered learning methodology i.e. participants were able to have input into what was being learned, how it was being learned or how it was related to their personal world view (e.g. allows participants to have an input into the learning process such that their learning was personalized and informed the program content; allows student participants to determine their own wellbeing strategies and actively reflect on their own thoughts, feelings and behaviors as part of the program)	
<i>Instructional support</i>	
1) <i>Providing clear explanations of concepts</i> - demonstrating a desired skill or behavior while in simultaneously describing the actions and decisions being made throughout the process - modeling problem-solving - invitational language, - providing explanatory rationales 2) <i>Offering constructive feedback</i> - offering feedback tailored to each situation and each child, asking questions, asking for further information, repeating student contributions - helping students reflect on their disruptive behavior and providing feedback and praise - allowing students to control and self-rate their on-task behaviors in class while working independently - avoiding providing unclear and ineffective feedback 3) <i>Maintaining discussion between teacher and students</i>	1,4,5,6,7,8,10,11,16

- opportunities to respond (OTR): An OTR is defined as an academic question, prompt, or task presented by a teacher and eliciting active student response - a dialogic discourse that is structured, purposeful, interactive, and cumulative as well as guiding dialogic discourse	
<i>Classroom organization</i>	
1) (Autonomy supportive) classroom structure - setting clear rules that provide security and ensure students' needs and demands are met; - providing an opportunity for student choice - showing clear standards or expectations for student's efforts - monitoring students' participation and scaffolding: to monitor/assess openly and clearly students' participation and development - classroom practices; positive reinforcement and rewards, providing pupils with opportunities for success, making lessons active - the use of the social reinforcement procedures: teachers' positive reinforcement: the cycle of impulsive action by students and concomitant negative attention by teachers should be avoided. - utilizing engaging element, such as using visual content (paints, maps, or pictures) 2) Guiding group - instructional and restorative behavior management - classroom organization in small groups - providing of collective moments (dialogues open to the whole class) - community materials that invites peer-to-peer sharing - the use of students in audience role assignments and in checking other students' schoolwork - teachers utilizes different group size of students depending on the task characteristics in instruction (e.g. small groups, whole-class group work, individualized work settings) - seating arrangements (students' task engagement sitting in rows was higher than students sitting in groups, also students with a tendency to disruptive behavior)	1,4,5,6,8,10,11,13,16

3.2.3. MESO-LEVEL ASPECTS RELATED TO WELL-BEING AND ENGAGEMENT

Meso level aspects, especially institutional factors related to ECEC and school contributed to child well-being and engagement. These were much less emphasized in the studies compared to individual child and micro level factors. Meso-level attributes contributing to study engagement/student wellbeing involved *curricula, school management and school climate, school-level practices, family-school interactions, and teachers' resources* (see Figure 1). The factors were intertwined with each other. The articles suggested several various research-based strategies and programs to develop and improve these aspects in ECEC and school.

Curricula and related aspects were especially mentioned via the general school level goals (Greenwood & Kelly, 2019; Martins et al., 2022) or pedagogical approach, methods and practices teachers use in their classrooms. On school level, it has been found important to hold high expectations for students and believe that every child could learn and succeed (Greenwood & Kelly, 2019). Developing school-wide interventions in which the formal curriculum and

pedagogy can facilitate and optimise both mental health and academic outcomes was suggested (Cefai et al., 2021). Use of quality learning materials and culturally relevant picture books was also mentioned (Khalfaoui et al., 2021). *School management and school climate* included psychological, social and physiological aspects and factors and safety in them (Bradshaw et al. 2021). Staff concerns regarding school climate and safety were associated with students' reduced willingness to intervene to help other students being victimized. Also interestingly, in schools where staff indicated that they felt supported by their administration to address violence in their classrooms, youth reported less violence (Bradshaw et al. 2021). A strong network of staff, who all feel connected to one another was found important (Greenwood & Kelly, 2019). School climate was found to be important since students adopt the behavior patterns in the group: among peers, in classroom and school norm level (Bradshaw et al. 2021). The design, use, and supervision of school space were found as the major sources of vulnerability in relation to the safety dimensions of school climate (Bradshaw et al. 2021). Also, the suggested research-based strategies and programs for improving school climate included psychological, social and physiological aspects and factors, and promoting safety in them. Emphasized components in the school climate promotion and prevention programs included SEL (Social and Emotional Learning) curriculum, clean and inviting school buildings and grounds, partnerships with the outside community, incorporating school climate into school policy and mission, and social events and groups (Bradshaw et al. 2021). It was also suggested that schools should engage in developing school climate intervention, that would include (a) careful assessment, (b) selecting and implementing effective interventions, and (c) monitoring implementation and evaluating progress in collaboration with students, parents, and staff in the process of understanding the findings, prioritizing improvement goals and, where appropriate, thinking concretely about how students, parents, and colleagues can and need to actively support given school improvement goals (Bradshaw et al. 2021). Collaborative and inclusive leading strategies in school improvement were suggested since they have been found to contribute to sustainable school change (Bradshaw et al. 2021; Greenwood & Kelly, 2019).

The *school-level practices* included a variety of factors, with which to promote children or students' engagement and well-being (Greenwood & Kelly, 2019). For example, students' sense of school identity can be supported with photos and school uniforms, sharing everyday information openly with students, and enacting zero tolerance bullying procedures. The whole-school level interventions that have been designed to change the school environment and improve well-being by addressing the school rules and expectations related to student behavior were suggested for the improvements (Bradshaw et al. 2021; Cefai et al. 2021). Practical engagement of students, parents, professionals, and broader community members, and collaboration and joint learning in the improvements were emphasized (Bradshaw et al. 2021; Cefai et al. 2021). Two extensive and school-level interventive programs were mentioned as examples: the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (Olweus et al., 2007) focusing on preventing bullying and enhancing safety on the school level, and the comprehensive PBIS focusing on reducing risk for challenging behaviors, improving behavioral and academic outcomes for students, enhancing school climate and school safety, and optimizing conditions for learning that benefits all students (www.pbis.org/about/about) (Bradshaw et al. 2021). School-based intersectoral support for students organized together with health services, mental health agencies, social services, and other related services, was suggested to guarantee the required support for students (Cefai et al. 2021).

The relationships between communities, families, parents, schools, and teachers were emphasized as essential in relation to engagement (Smith et al., 2022). For example, constructive attitudes among school personnel and school welcoming practices have been found to be essential factors that help to foster parent-teacher relationships. School leaders and teachers (Smith et al., 2022) seem to play a crucial role in establishing school policies and creating welcoming school cultures that are conducive to effective family-school engagement (Auerbach, 2010; Sanders & Sheldon, 2009). Principal collegial leadership (i.e., practices emphasizing trusting and supporting relationships; creating a sense of community) have been found to be associated with increased family-school

engagement (Smith, Reinke, et al., 2021b). Effective joint practices of family-school engagement in which parents, guardians and teachers together act supportively to promote children's academic and social-behavioral functioning were emphasized (Smith et al., 2022). These include building trust, creating joint perspectives, providing encouragement, showing respect, and resolving conflicts as well as versatile and continuous communications between teachers and parents (Smith et al., 2022; Khalfaoui et al., 2021; Greenwood & Kelly, 2019). Also "improved school assets" were mentioned protecting against low engagement especially for students with lower levels of family support and promoted high engagement especially among students with higher levels of family support (Quin, 2017). Importance of empowering parents in home education and supporting them in taking care of their own well-being as well as involving parents and the local community in interventions for students' mental health and wellbeing were emphasised (Cefai et al., 2021).

Teachers' versatile resources were identified as important for children and students' well-being and engagement (Martins et al. 2022). Teachers' wellbeing, relationships with parents, possibilities to extend their support to more students in the classroom, and possibility for professional development were found crucial (Martins et al. 2022; Khalfaoui et al. 2021; Cefai et al. 2021). Also, teachers' teaching skills were found essential (Scholz et al. 2022). It was suggested that teacher's professional development is important to focus explicitly on action strategies for managing primary school children's emotion regulation in positive ways (Schlesier et al., 2019) as well as promote prosocial behaviors and limit disruptive behaviors (Khalfaoui et al. 2021). In one article, it was emphasized that teachers should be involved in interventions and training by psychologists or using facilitation handbooks designed by psychologists (Scholz et al. 2022). However, no clear pattern emerged as to the most effective program length, session frequency, and duration (Scholz et al. 2022).

3.2.4 BROAD SOCIETAL MACRO LEVEL ASPECTS RELATED TO WELL-BEING AND ENGAGEMENT

The broad societal macro level aspects and factors related to student well-being and engagement were less present in the articles. But still very importantly, they were reflected on either as empirical results or as recommendations based on empirical evidence. The empirical macro-level results were related to psychological, physical, material, cultural or relational aspects.

Yang and colleagues (2022) approached this from the broadest perspective and emphasized the differences between collectivistic (eastern) cultures and individualistic (western) cultures). They pointed out that conditions where students become highly motivated are culturally dependent. Students from collectivist cultures are more likely to value such activities that are also valued in the broader social group, whereas students from individualistic cultures value activities meeting their personal needs (Yang et al., 2022). They also mention that in comparison of American and Chinese children, the decline in American children motivational behavior (i.e., self-regulated learning and engagement) during early adolescence was found, whereas Chinese children continued to sustain their motivational behavior.

Some studies found that concrete material housing and nutrition related factors have influence on students' well-being and engagement. Students' material hardship and challenges, for example insufficient housing, insufficient food, or lack of school supplies and household food insecurity have been found to have negative effects on their school engagement (Martins et al., 2022).

Cefai and colleagues (2021) recommend in their extensive report the importance of developing an European level mental health curriculum for school children that would include social and emotional education, resilience building, and mental health literacy, and that would be adapted to the schools' context and needs, and integrating

it into other existing and related curricular areas and initiatives such as social and emotional education. It is suggested that school success metrics should be adapted to prioritize students' and teachers' mental health and well-being: common indicator of school effectiveness and success instead of traditional assessments, rankings and comparisons (Cefai et al., 2021).

In the societal macro level, the role of pre-and in-service teacher education, mentoring programmes and networks were found important in being able to promote well-being and engagement (Cefai et al., 2021). Through their education, teachers should have versatile competencies to enhance well-being and be educated to utilize relational, child-centred, collaborative and construtivist pedagogies relevant for well-being (Cefai et al., 2021).

4.0 conclusions: Key takeaways from the systematic review

We structured our review by utilising the Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model, which we perceived as a beneficial tool to elaborate the results related to well-being and engagement on various systemic levels. The results focusing on individual and micro-level aspects were mostly emphasised in the reviewed articles, whereas the meso and macro levels were less emphasised. On macro level, the empirical results were few, and the focus was more on suggesting good practices and recommendations than presenting empirical results and evidence. It is understandable, since it is easier to investigate well-being and engagement on individual and macro levels and receive results of the factors contributing to them. On meso and macro levels, the number of various factors and their relationships and contribution to well-being and engagement is more extensive and complexity increases, and thus, it becomes more complex to investigate these phenomena. This was a very interesting broad finding from our literature review.

To conclude, on *individual child and student level* the key aspects regarding well-being and engagement included intra-individual factors contributing to student's self, such as students' emotions, behaviours, cognitions, and physiological characteristics. On *micro level*, the key aspects influencing students' wellbeing included students' versatile relationships with teachers, peer(s), school staff and with family. Essential *meso level factors* included curricula, school management and school climate, school-level practices, family-school interactions, and teachers' resources, which were tightly intertwined with each other. The empirical *macro level factors* and results were related to psychological, physical, material, cultural or relational aspects.

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Appendix 2

Mapping successful and less successful policies to tackle underachievement

National Reports



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Version 1.0

REVIEW OF LOCAL, REGIONAL AND/OR NATIONAL POLICIES TO TACKLES EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING – IRELAND

Reduce early school leaving and underachievement

Policy Analysis - Ireland

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Reducing early school leaving (ESL) is a critical goal for educational systems worldwide, including Europe where 3.2 million young people leave education and training early (European Commission, 2022a). ESL, as defined by the European Commission and Eurostat, pertains to individuals in the age group of 18 to 24 years old who completed education up to the lower secondary level or below and are presently not enrolled in any educational or training programmes (Eurostat, 2023). Early school leaving poses significant challenges for individuals, communities, and the overall society, affecting not only educational outcomes but also long-term prospects for individuals' personal and professional development. At individual level, ESL results in higher risks of unemployment, health issues, poverty, and social exclusion (Bayón-Calvo et al., 2021; Borgna & Struffolino, 2017, Fleming & Harford, 2021; O'Connell & Freeney, 2011). Likewise, ESL can have significant impact at community level, such as increased social costs to maintain unemployed population, strained social services, and higher rates of delinquency (Smyth & McCoy, 2009; Traag & van der Velden, 2011). While at the national level these consequences get multiplied and achieve larger dimensions. As reducing the human capital, ESL negatively impacts the economic productivity of a country, increases the public expenditure on social welfare, health care and justice systems emanating because of unemployment, health issues and crime and can disrupt the social fabric by causing a tension between haves and have nots, through marginalisation and social exclusion (Fehérvári, 2020).

Several reports by the European Commission (Eurydice, 2014; European Commission, 2013, 2015, 2023) iterate that ESL is often the outcome of various interconnected factors encompassing personal, social, economic, cultural, educational, gender-related, and family-related dimensions (Drăghicescu et al., 2021). It is associated with cumulative disadvantage, which frequently originates in early childhood. Certain groups, particularly those with low socioeconomic status such as children with migrant backgrounds, including newly arrived migrants and foreign-born children, Roma children, and children with special educational needs, experience disproportionately high rates of early school leaving (Gómez-González et al., 2022). In conjunction with these family and individual related reasons education systems by virtue of their design and quality play a crucial role in students' engagement and academic performance. Systemic factors within the education system can have a negative impact on learning progress. Adverse school climate, incidents of violence and bullying, an unsupportive learning environment where learners do not feel valued or respected, inappropriate teaching methods and curricula, inadequate learner support, limited career education and guidance, and poor teacher-student relationships can contribute to early school leaving (de Castro & Pereira, 2019).

Given the increasing diversity in European societies, an urgent need for inclusive and coordinated responses from both educational and non-educational stakeholders are deemed necessary. It is also insisted that these responses should promote common values such as tolerance, mutual respect, equal opportunities, and non-discrimination and foster social integration, intercultural understanding, and a sense of belonging among students (European Commission, 2015). Provision of equal access to quality and inclusive education for every young person, regardless of individual, family related, or gender-related factors, socioeconomic status, or life experiences, is essential to prevent marginalisation, social exclusion, and the risks of extremism and radicalisation. At least completing upper secondary education or vocational education is often considered as the minimum requirement for a successful transition from education to the labour market and for further educational opportunities. Investing in the support and educational achievement of young people can help break the cycle of deprivation, as well as intergenerational transmission of poverty and inequality (European Commission, 2022a).

Recognizing the significance of the issue and its multifarious nature, European countries adopted a staggered approach to gradually lower the percentage of early school leavers firstly to 10% by 2020 and then to under 9% by



2030 (European Commission, 2022a). During the period 2010 – 2021, the ESL rates have been reduced to 3.9 percentage points. However, the European countries still show a broad spectrum of ESL rates with some countries never having ESL rates more than 5% (e.g., Croatia, Slovenia) and while others have it consistently 10% or more (e.g., Spain, Romania). Among these there are some countries that have considerably lowered the rates of ESL and have achieved the desired less than 9% goal and Ireland is one among those countries that have successfully managed the issue with the current ESL rate as low as 3.3% (Eurostat, 2023). Ireland has implemented a range of policies and initiatives aimed at reducing early school leaving rates and ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to thrive academically.

Academic underachievement and ESL are closely intertwined concepts, quite often used interchangeably. In the EU, ESL is defined as the percentage of individuals aged 18 – 24 who have completed at the most a lower secondary education and are not currently engaged in further formal or non-formal education (Eurostat, 2023). Conversely, underachievement pertains to a scenario in which a student is unable to perform where a student is not able to perform at the level expected, indicating a failure to meet academic or performance standards typically associated with their age, grade or ability. The etiological factors contributing to both underachievement and ESL are not very different, and policy measures and strategies designed to combat underachievement are intended to also address the issue of ESL.

Various policy measures and strategies undertaken in Ireland to effectively tackle the early school leaving and underachievement include Delivering Equality in Education (DEIS) Plan, Education (Welfare) Act 2000 and TUSLA Education and Support Services, Further Education and Training Strategy 2020 – 2024, yearly Education Action Plans, Guidance Counselling provision in second level schools under Section 9 (c) of the Education Act 1998, financial support mechanisms and an array of youth training and employment schemes (European Commission, 2022b).

This policy review is being conducted as part of the SCIREARLY Horizon Europe Project, which aims to identify the policies across the EU that have yielded the most favorable outcomes in reaching the desired goal, as well as those that have shown limited advancement in making significant strides towards it. The objective of this review to explore and analyze the key policies and strategies employed in Ireland to address early school leaving, examining their effectiveness, impact, and potential areas for improvement. It is a part of series of policy reviews conducted under this project to analyze the scientific evidence, research, and theoretical foundations that underlie the most effective policies. The goal is to gain a deeper understanding of these policies and offer recommendations for creating an inclusive and supportive educational environment for all students in the form of a conclusive report titled, *Policy approaches based on scientific evidence and research to address underachievement*.

Section 2 of this report highlights the context and background in which the policy measures to tackle ESL are undertaken, providing an overview of each policy or strategy. Section 3 examines what academic literature says about the effectiveness of the policies under review, as well as a review of policies in light of EC recommendations (prevention, intervention, compensation, and the whole school approach). It also identifies gaps in the policies and provides recommendations.

2.0 POLICY/POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

In Ireland, early school leaving is defined as non-participation in school before reaching the age of 16 years or before completing 3 years of post-primary education, whichever occurs later. Additionally, a more precise categorisation



of early school leavers encompasses individuals who leave the education system without obtaining a minimum of 5 passes in the leaving Certificate or an equivalent qualification (Cedefop, 2017; Lally, 2012). According to a definition provided by the Central Statistics Office (2019), early school leavers are persons between the ages of 18 and 24 who have achieved a maximum of International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) level 2, indicating that their highest level of education attained is lower secondary or below. Additionally, these individuals have not participated in any education or form of training during the four weeks preceding the Quarterly National Household Survey. However, Lally's (2012) report cautions against employing term 'drop out,' as it carries derogatory connotations because a significant number of individuals leave school purposefully to opt for alternative educational and training paths, such as technical and vocational routes or apprenticeships.

Ireland stands as one of the sixteen European Union (EU) member states that have effectively achieved a reduction in ESL rates below the EU-wide target of 9% set for 2030. Notably, Ireland experienced a substantial decline in the percentage of early school leavers from 9.9% to 3.3% during the period from 2012 to 2021. This achievement positions Ireland at the fourth rank, following Croatia (2.4%), Slovenia (3.1%) and Greece (3.2%), with respect to meeting the EU's aspiration of attaining ESL rates below 9% by 2030 (European Commission, 2022). This milestone is indebted to several policies measures and strategies that were introduced, implemented, evaluated and modified over the number of years to ensure quality, equity, inclusiveness and success for every individual in education and training.

The policy measures taken to address inequity and resultant early school leaving include: DEIS Plan, Education Welfare Act 2000, TUSLA Education Support Services, Further Education and Training Strategy 2020 – 2024, yearly Education Action Plans, Guidance Counselling provision in second level schools under Section 9 (c) of the Education Act 1998, financial support mechanisms and Youth Training and Employment Schemes. In the subsequent sub-sections, a comprehensive examination of each of these measures will be presented in a succinct manner.

2.1 Education (Welfare) Act 2000¹ and Tusla – Child and Education Agency

The Education Act 2000 stresses the significance of school attendance, participation and retention. This legislation marked the inception of the National Welfare Board, presently known as the Educational Welfare Services of Tusla (the Child and Family Agency). One of the core obligations of the agency is to 'ensure that every child attends a recognised school or otherwise receives a specified minimum level of education' (Tusla, 2023). Moreover, it is mandated to foster and cultivate an environment within recognised schools that actively encourages student attendance and full participation in school life.

The Education Act establishes legally binding responsibilities for parents, school boards of management, principals, and Education Welfare Board in relation to student attendance and the attainment of minimum education standards. In accordance with this Act, the minimum age for leaving school is set at 16 years or upon completion of three years of secondary-level education.

Parents

Parents are legally obligated to ensure their child's regular attendance at a recognised school or any other appropriate education service on each school day. They must notify the school's principal and provide an explanation if the child cannot attend school. Parents and guardians have a legal obligation to ensure their child's school attendance.

¹ Government of Ireland



School

The Board of Management of a recognised school is obliged to consider all applications for student admission, unless the refusal aligns with the published policy of the school. It is the responsibility of the school principal to maintain accurate records of student enrolment, including registering students on their first day and removing them from the register upon transfer or registration with National Education Welfare Board. Furthermore, a principal is tasked with keeping a comprehensive record of attendance and reasons for any absences, identifying students who may be at risk of attendance issues, fostering closer relationship between the school and families, and sharing relevant information with schools when students transfer. She is also expected to provide an annual report to Parents Association regarding overall attendance and ensure the maintenance of the up-to-date Roll Books and Pupil registers.

Education Welfare Board (Tusla Education Support Service-TESS)

A section of the same Act specifies several functions of the National Education Welfare Board (known as TUSLA since 2014) aimed at promoting and ensuring student attendance and engagement in the educational process and engagement in the education process. These functions include promoting and fostering an understanding of the various benefits of education, encompassing physical, intellectual, emotional, social, cultural, and moral development, as well as the social and economic advantages derived from it. Additionally, the board works towards creating an encouraging environment that motivates children to attend school regularly and actively participate in school activities. To address the issue of nonattendance, the board conducts research, develops strategies, and implements programmes to tackle the underlying reasons and prevent student absences.

It also reviews teacher training and practices related to school attendance and student behaviour, providing guidance and advice to the Minister of Education in these areas. The board disseminates research findings on nonattendance prevention and student conduct to recognised schools while offering advice on these matters. Moreover, it supports, monitors, and evaluates the effectiveness of strategies and programmes implemented in recognised schools to prevent nonattendance. Lastly, the board provides valuable advice to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), specifically on aspects of the school curriculum that may impact attendance levels and student participation. Through these collective efforts, National Welfare Board actively contributes to the promotion and maintenance of student attendance and active engagement in education.

TESS work is organised around three components, the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL), School Completion Programme (SCP) and Educational Welfare Service (EWS) and these strands are aligned with the same national outcomes, which include improved attendance, participation and retention (Department of Education & Inspectorate, 2015; TUSLA, 2023). The primary objective of the HSCL Coordinator Programme is to augment children's academic outcomes through the provision of support to parents or guardians. The HSCL Coordinators, who are teachers in the local schools, engage in home visits to parents, arrange educational and recreational courses for them, disseminate information pertaining to diverse local resources available to families, and offer guidance to parents on facilitating their children's education so the family and children have continued interest. Similarly, SCP is a focused support initiative designed for primary and post-primary children and adolescents who may be at risk of early school leaving or who are currently not attending school and have not smoothly transitioned into an alternative learning path or employment. Its primary goal is to ensure their sustained engagement in the education system until they obtain their leaving certificate, an equivalent qualification, or reach an appropriate level of educational achievement, thereby facilitating a seamless transition into further education, training, or employment opportunities. Under the umbrella of this programme, students are offered a comprehensive array of supports encompassing social and personal development, after-school and out-of-school activities, including sports and leisure, along with interventions addressing the young person's home and community life (Tusla, 2004). This is an intervention programme that works in collaboration with community, youth and sporting organisations and with local representatives of local statutory bodies such as Community Guards, Juvenile Liaison Officer, Social Workers, Health Board personnel and other local partnerships (Tusla, 2004b).



The EWS is mainly focused on maintaining children's attendance in schools through close tracking of attendance and communication with parents. While its primary focus is maintaining and improving attendance, non-compliance with a legal notice issued by an Educational Welfare Officer (EWO) may result in prosecution in the District Court, leading to potential fines of up to 1000 euros, imprisonment for up to one month, or both. In cases of repeated absence, the District Court has the authority to impose fines of up to 200 euros per day or additional imprisonment.

In addition to School Support Programme (SSP) and EWS, Tusla conducts inspections of early years services to ensure the safety and quality of care and support provided by those registered with Tusla. Tusla is also responsible for providing child welfare and protection services, as well as alternative care and psychological welfare services for children (Ibid).

2.2 Early Childhood Education and Care

Quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) has a strong and established connection to early school leaving. High-quality ECEC programmes lay a solid foundation for children's learning, fostering essential cognitive, language, and social-emotional skills. It addresses potential risk factors like socio-economic disadvantages, language barriers, and learning difficulties, promoting a positive attitude towards education and motivation for academic success. A smooth transition from ECEC to primary education ensures a child's readiness for school, reducing the likelihood of early school dropout. Investing in quality ECEC creates a lifelong learning base and diminishes the risk of early school leaving, fostering a positive outlook on education (Dumclaus et al., 2014).

In Ireland, universal preschool provision is available for children two years before primary school. Participation rates are high, with almost all children aged 3 to 5 (not enrolled in primary education) attending Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in 2018, surpassing the OECD average (Curristan et al., 2023). The country offers integrated ECEC programmes that encompass both education and childcare services, managed predominantly by private entities. Children aged over 3 and not older than 5 and a half years are eligible for the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme, which provides a free pre-school service for 3 hours a day, 5 days a week². The overall governance is managed at national level and the responsibilities encompass the financing system, setting minimum standards, curriculum development, and monitoring of ECEC. A comprehensive national curriculum framework, titled "Aistear in Action," is in place for the entire ECEC age group, emphasizing play as a fundamental aspect of children's development. The majority of staff in regulated settings hold International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) Level 4 qualifications (post-secondary), with an increasing percentage of staff possessing ISCED Level 6 qualifications (bachelor's degree). Efforts have been made by the government to enhance the quality of initial education programmes for ECEC staff, including practical components in the curriculum. Monitoring and inspections of ECEC settings and programmes are conducted by three institutions: Tusla, responsible for regulatory compliance and registration; the Department of Education Inspectorate, conducting education-focused inspections of publicly funded pre-primary programmes; and Pobal³, monitoring administrative and financial aspects with government funding (Curristan et al., 2023; OECD, 2017; OECD, 2022).

² <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/education/pre-school-education-and-childcare/early-childhood-care-and-education-scheme/>

³ Pobal is a state sponsored organisation that supports communities and local agencies toward achieving social inclusion and development



2.3 DEIS Plan

Delivering Equality Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) is a national programme to support the learning and achievement of children and young people from disadvantaged communities. The Department of Education introduced the DEIS action plan in 2005 based on the recommendations put forth by the Educational Disadvantage Committee. The programme is driven by a core principle that every child and young person has an equal opportunity to access, engage in, and derive benefits from education regardless of their background. Initially, the programme had six themes – attendance, retention and progression (to the next level of education), literacy and numeracy and partnerships with parents and with the community (Department of Education and Inspectorate, 2015). As part of this programme, schools identified as DEIS schools were tasked with formulating action plans, implementing them, conducting periodic reviews, and making necessary adjustments in response to the evaluations and evolving education needs of the students. The programme underwent several evaluations and reviews by Educational Research Centre and School inspectorate and was revised in 2017. The revised programme has an improved and objective system of DEIS school identification through the use of socio-economic demographic data. The data sources included in the identification process include: the Department of Education's Primary Online Database, Post-Primary Online Database and Central Statistics Office data from the National Census of Population as reflected in the Pobal HP Deprivation Index for Small Areas (Department of Education, 2017). The DEIS schools are provided differentiated support and funding depending upon the level of disadvantage, geographical location and age group of students. DEIS schools are differentiated as Band 1 and Band 2 DEIS primary schools, post-primary DEIS schools and rural DEIS schools. The themes against which schools are evaluated have not changed significantly. According to the DEIS 2017 plan, primary schools focus mainly on the areas related to DEIS themes, including attendance, literacy, numeracy, and partnership with parents. While post-primary schools engage in effective planning for attendance, retention and progression, literacy, and partnership with parents and others. The following three integrated themes were introduced as new DEIS themes: Leadership, Continuous Professional Development, and wellbeing. While these integrated themes do not require a separate section each like the main DEIS themes, consideration should be given to how they can be integrated into the main themes, with relevant targets and actions set out as appropriate. In the most recent Circular 0034/2023 it is stated that the DEIS Action Plan for Improvement should have a separate section for the main DEIS themes, which are as follows: attendance, retention, literacy, numeracy, supporting educational transitions, partnership with parents and others and examination attainment (post-primary only).

Notably, schools that have adopted a whole school, evidence-based approach especially the primary school have been successful in achieving positive outcomes of students. The goals of DEIS Plan are:

- To implement a more robust and responsive Assessment Framework for identification of schools and effective resource allocation
- To improve the learning experience and outcomes of pupils in DEIS schools
- To improve the capacity of school leaders and teachers to engage, plan and deploy resources to their best advantage.
- To support and foster best practice in schools through inter-agency collaboration
- To support the work of schools by providing the research, information, evaluation and feedback to achieve the goals of the Plan (DoE, 2017)

DEIS schools receive a range of resources and support. They are provided with additional grant aid based on the level of disadvantage they face. They also benefit from an enhanced rate of funding under the School Books Grant



Scheme. DEIS schools have access to Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) services, except for rural schools. Priority access to the Schools Meals Programme is given to all four types of DEIS schools. They can access a variety of supports under the School Completion Programme. All DEIS primary schools also have access to a literacy/numeracy support service that includes specific measures tailored to their needs. All DEIS schools receive priority access to the Centre for School Leadership for all the resources and CPD opportunities. National Educational Psychological Service is expanded in DEIS schools. The Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management Programme⁴ and Friends Programme⁵ are rolled out to all DEIS schools; however, the former programme is not offered to post-primary schools. DEIS schools have priority access to a range of professional development support for their teaching and leadership staff. Primary DEIS Band 2 schools receive an allocation of an Administrative Principal based on lower enrolment and staffing figures⁶ compared to general primary schools. Primary DEIS Band 1 schools benefit from reduced class sizes through a staffing schedule⁷. They also receive an allocation of an Administrative Principal based on lower enrolment and staffing figures⁸. While Post-primary DEIS schools receive an enhanced guidance allocation and have access to the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (LCA) (DoE, 2017). DEIS schools exclusively have access to the JCSP as it is a programme designed to retain students in the school system who are identified of early school leaving.

‘For many of these students their experience of school is one of disengagement and alienation. While these difficulties may, in part, be rooted in the disadvantage they have experienced they may also have to do with the culture of schooling, school organisation and the learning experienced. The JCSP is designed to address some of these difficulties. It enables students to re-engage with their learning. It builds their basic skills of literacy and numeracy and their personal and social skills. It aims to ensure that each student benefits from their time in school and enjoys an experience of success. It does this by offering schools and teachers a more flexible approach to meeting the diverse needs of students and achieves this within the context of the Junior Cycle qualification’ (NCCA, Programme Statement, p.8).

Schools and classroom teachers are directly supported with bespoke resources and funded initiatives focused on supporting the issues that impact on early school leaving. A literacy and numeracy strategy is in place to support teachers along with the JCSP Demonstration Library Project where librarians and librarians trained in supporting literacy development in the context of educational disadvantage are in place in the thirty schools with the highest concentration of disadvantage. The joint committee for the Oireachtas recently called for its expansion to become a national priority based on the positive research outcomes (Joint Committee on Education, Oireachtas, 2023; Henefer, 2008; Nua Research Services, 2005).

The allocation of resource and assessment process are guided by the context and size of the school. For instance, if a school has an over-representation of students whose mother tongue is different from the language of instruction, specific resources are earmarked for English as an Additional Language (EAL) provision.

⁴ Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management Programme is a prevention programme to strengthen teacher classroom management strategies, and promote children’s prosocial behavior and school readiness.
<https://incredibleyears.com/programmes/teacher/classroom-mgt-curriculum/>

⁵ Friends Programme helps students to develop resilience by teaching them effective strategies to cope with, problem solve and manage all kinds of emotional distress, including worry, stress, change and anxiety.
<https://assets.gov.ie/41216/fc1f9f7ae6df4749924eea240b9f3b98.pdf>

⁶ 144 in Band 2

⁷ 20:1 at junior classes and 24:1 at senior classes

⁸ 116 in Band 1



Several Government funded and non-governmental agencies are working with schools to support the schools, students and families to address disadvantage. A programme steering group is formed to oversee the implementation of the programme. The agencies collaborating under this programme include The Department of Social Protection with responsibility for the School Meals Programme to meet the nutritional needs of students and ensuring that they do not leave school before the home time. As previously mentioned, TUSLA assumes responsibility for diverse range of services, combining the functions of SCP, EWS and HSCL. This integration aims to enhance school attendance, promote active participation and progression, and prevent early school leaving. Other agencies, such as National Education Psychological Service (NEPS), the Department of Health, the Department of Housing, Planning, Community, and Local Government, and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, provide an array of supports to children and families from disadvantaged backgrounds to ensure that children remain in education without any barriers or hindrances.

Schools participating in the DEIS programme are required to support and implement prevention and early intervention initiatives that are tailored to meet specific needs of their students. These initiatives should align with evidence-informed practices that have been well evaluated and demonstrate measurable improvements in the outcomes sought for the students. Efforts are also made to align HSCL clusters with school networking and clustering as part of the new SSP and in coordination with the SCP clustering arrangements. Schools are further assisted in establishing connections with relevant services to enhance and facilitate parental involvement in their children's education. School planning involves identifying and establishing formal and informal connections between early years' settings, school, parents, families, and communities. This collaborative effort aims to provide comprehensive support to children during transitions across the educational continuum.

2.4 Education Action Plans

Almost every year the Department of Education publishes an action plan. The Action Plans 2016 – 2023 are available on the Department of Education's website. The website also has the review reports of the previous action plans. The action plans for 2016 - 2019 have similar goals and the Goal 2 is about 'improving learning experience, learning outcomes and progression for those at risk of educational disadvantage.' This includes addressing the early school leaving rates, facilitating a transition to work, and providing additional supports to stakeholding groups working with early school leavers. One of the indicators that would enable them to monitor school retention rates would be the number of early school leavers who started 5th year but did not sit for Leaving Cert (Department of Education, 2019). However, in the Annual Statement of Priorities 2023, the development goals have a broader perspective and early school leaving is addressed under Goal 2 'Special Education and Inclusion.' These action plans are comprehensive with regard to measures propose, steps to be taken, the departments that are responsible for taking actions, indicators of success and proposed timelines.

2.5 National Travellers and Roma Inclusion Strategy

Since 2017, an exclusive strategy has been implemented under the National Travellers and Roma Inclusion Strategy to ensure the education and well-being of Travellers and Roma children and youth. Special funding is allocated and disbursed for pilot programmes aimed at improving attendance, participation, and school completion rates in counties with the highest population density of Traveller and Roma communities. The teams involved in these pilot programmes collaborate with parents, children, youth, schools, and service providers to address and overcome the obstacles that hinder their educational progress (Government of Ireland, 2021). Various government departments and agencies, including the Department of Education, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, TUSLA, SOLAS, and the Teaching Council, have implemented proactive measures to enhance educational welfare and support for Traveller and Roma communities. These initiatives focus on improving attendance, participation, and engagement of Traveller and Roma children in the education system, with the aim of ensuring their retention until the Leaving Certificate or an equivalent qualification. Efforts are also being made to promote parental engagement, increase



school readiness, and provide free pre-school access for all children from the age of three until they begin formal schooling. Additionally, inclusive education programmes have been introduced for teachers, addressing the teaching and learning needs of students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Training and education opportunities are being provided by SOLAS and the Education and Training Boards to develop essential skills, such as literacy, numeracy, and soft skills, for Traveller men and women in line with the Further Education and Training (FET) strategy. The Department of Justice and Equality, in collaboration with Traveller and Roma organisations and employer bodies, is working towards increasing participation of these communities in apprenticeships and traineeships (Ibid).

2.6 Back to Education Initiative (BTEI)

The Part-Time Further Education Programme, known as the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI), offers educational courses primarily to young individuals and adults who have not attained a Leaving Certificate or a comparable qualification. This initiative allows learners to conveniently integrate their education with familial, professional, and other responsibilities. Although anyone who has discontinued full-time education can participate in a course, preference is given to those who lack a Leaving Certificate. The BTEI specifically provides part-time courses aimed at addressing the educational needs of adults and individuals aged over 16 who possess limited formal qualifications or face challenges with literacy. Within these target groups, individuals experiencing significant educational disadvantages are given priority. These courses being funded by the Government are free of charge (Government of Ireland, 2022a).

2.6.1 YOUTHREACH

The Youthreach initiative offers a comprehensive two-year programme that combines education, training, and practical work experience for unemployed individuals who left school early and lack qualifications or vocational training. This programme caters to young people between the ages of 15 and 20. Its curriculum encompasses basic skills training, hands-on work experience, and a broad range of general education subjects, with a strong integration of modern technology throughout. The programme places significant emphasis on personal development and the development of core skills such as literacy, numeracy, communication, and information technology. Participants have the opportunity to choose from various vocational options and engage in a work experience component. The Youthreach centres, which are designated as educational centres, are managed by Education and Training Boards (ETBs). Participants in the Youthreach programme are eligible to receive training allowances, and additional allowances for meals, travel, and accommodation (Government of Ireland, 2022b).

2.6.2 VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING OPTIONS (VTOS)

The Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) is an educational and training initiative that offers a fresh start for individuals who are currently unemployed. This programme provides a range of courses designed to enhance skills and employability. To qualify for the VTOS, applicants must meet certain criteria, including being over 21 years old, having been unemployed for a minimum of six months (equivalent to 156 days), and receiving specific social welfare benefits. The courses offered under VTOS are completely tuition-free, and participants may also be eligible for meal and travel allowances. These full-time courses typically span up to two years, requiring a weekly attendance commitment of 30 hours. The VTOS serves as a valuable opportunity for individuals seeking to upgrade their skills and improve their chances of securing gainful employment (Government of Ireland, 2022c).

2.7 Guidance and Counselling

The provision of guidance and counselling services is indeed the statutory responsibility of schools in Ireland, as stated in Section 9 of the Education Act 1998. The goal of the guidance and counselling process in schools is to



support students in developing self-awareness, exploring opportunities, taking responsibility for their choices, and making informed decisions about their lives. This process includes personal, educational, and career counselling. The school guidance service plays a vital role in preventing early school leaving by providing additional support and resources to at-risk students. The allocation of guidance resources is done through initiatives like the Guidance Enhancement Initiative (GEI) and the School Completion Programme (SCP) to increase retention rates and combat early school leaving. Schools with significant numbers of non-national students are expected to be aware of the specific needs and supports required for students from diverse cultural backgrounds and need to provide them with targeted guidance and counselling service.

The guidance and counselling service is responsible for early identification and support of students at risk, promoting school attendance strategies, creating awareness of the consequences of early school leaving, and providing information about further education, training, and employment options. School leaders and guidance counsellors have to facilitate transitions between different levels of schooling through effective communication structures and support for students with special educational needs. The guidance counsellors are expected to be knowledgeable about senior cycle options and support students in their transition to further education, training, or employment. The school's guidance plan should have a broad scope and incorporate the needs of all students, including those with special educational needs, minority ethnic groups, Traveller community, and those enrolled in Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) or Vocational Training Opportunities Schemes (VTOS). The planning process should involve the expertise of management, guidance counsellors, staff, students, parents, and other stakeholders to ensure a comprehensive and inclusive approach (Department of Education, 2005).

2.8 Parents involvement

Parents as partners approach is acknowledged and followed in all national schools and in ECEC settings. The DoE circular 24/91 stresses the significance of actively engaging parents with schools and educators. Collaboration between parents and schools fosters a supportive learning environment that benefits the child's overall academic and personal development. The circular recognises parental interest and attitudes towards school, books, and education as having a profound impact as the primary factor influencing a child's learning experience. Parents can participate in school decision-making processes, attend parent-teacher conferences, and join Parents Associations and National Parents Council to voice their perspectives and contribute to school improvement (DoE, 1991). Additionally, parents and students' role in school decision-making is also recognised by ensuring their participation in the school self-evaluation and improvement process. School self-evaluation is 'an inclusive, participatory' and 'a rights respecting process – acknowledging the role of these stakeholders and actively facilitating their participation in the process' (DoE, 2022, p.3).

3.0 POLICY REVIEW

3.1 Policy Review as in academic literature

Academic research extensively critiques the DEIS programme and the integration of three education welfare services (HSCL, SCP, and Statutory Educational Welfare Officers) offered under Tusla. These services collaborate to support children and families in accessing education, promoting school attendance, participation, and retention, alongside the Youthreach Programme. According to a European Commission report 2019, Ireland is among the European countries that have adopted the EU policy framework within a broader set of policy measures rather than implementing a separate strategy for ESL. Prior to 2011, Ireland had already initiated a series of policies and



initiatives that later aligned with the measures outlined in the 2011 Council Recommendations. The revision of the DEIS National Action Plan in Ireland in 2017, a significant initiative to address educational disadvantage and ESL, also reflects alignment with the EU policy framework (p. 84).

The DEIS plan has been subject to regular evaluations conducted by the Education Research Centre on behalf of the Department of Education to monitor its implementation and assess its impact on students, families, schools, and communities at both primary and post-primary levels. These evaluations aim to comprehensively assess various aspects of the programme and ensure its effective implementation. Thus far, the evaluations have not identified any significant implementation failures at the school level. On the contrary, schools have responded to the initiative with an overwhelmingly positive reception (Kavanagh et al., 2017). In addition to the Education Research Centre, the school inspectorate has also been involved in inspecting the DEIS programme. The evaluations carried out by both the DES Inspectorate and the Educational Research Centre (ERC) provide compelling evidence of the positive influence of the DEIS programme. These evaluations indicate a notable improvement in literacy and numeracy rates, increased school retention, and enhanced progression to further and higher education (DEI, 2015).

When evaluating the effectiveness of programmes designed to address disadvantage and ESL, such as the DEIS, academic literature emphasizes two primary indicators: academic achievement and high retention rates (Caroll, 2022). In comparing retention rates to the Leaving Certificate, DEIS schools exhibited an 86.1% rate for the 2015 entry cohort, up from 84.8% in the previous year, while the gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools decreased to 7.6%, down from 8.6% in 2020 (DES, 2023). However, Gilleece et al. (2020) found significant disparities in student achievement between DEIS and non-DEIS schools based on their analysis of academic performance data from the PISA study (2018). Specifically, students in DEIS schools scored notably lower in reading, mathematics, and science literacies. The study also revealed a substantially higher proportion of students in DEIS schools performing below Level 2, the minimum proficiency level required for independent functioning, across all three subject areas as defined by the OECD. Conversely, DEIS schools showed a substantially lower percentage of students achieving Level 5 or above, highlighting the proficiency gap compared to non-DEIS schools. Although Weir and Kavanagh (2018) reported that the gaps between DEIS and non-DEIS schools' achievement and retention levels are gradually closing based on their ongoing assessment of the DEIS programme, Kavanagh et al. (2017) noticed an increase in students' educational expectations and aspirations in DEIS schools as part of their evaluation. Harford et al. (2023), however, criticize the measurability of the impact of the DEIS programme due to the lack of a control group, making it difficult to determine if students in DEIS schools have genuinely improved their literacy and numeracy.

It is acknowledged that the Department of Education and Skills continues to fund literacy at second level under the National Literacy strategy through the JCSP literacy strategy, for example, by providing funds to schools for literacy interventions. A significant literacy resource was placed at the centre of 30 of the most disadvantaged second level schools under the DEIS plan and outlined by O'Brien et al. (2023) as part of the JCSP Demonstration Library Project with initially 11 libraries, and extended to 30 in 2007. The success of these fully resourced libraries with librarians who received specialist literacy training to support literacy across the curriculum is well documented (Nua Research Services (2005) & Henefer J. (2008). According to O'Brien et al (2023) A commitment to extend inclusion to 50 schools has not been met (Department of Education and Science, 2005; School Libraries Group of the Library Association of Ireland, 2022).

According to the Libraries association of Ireland (2022) 'the extra support that school libraries and school librarians can offer to students in DEIS schools are now more important than ever. While the Government stalls on the promised expansion of the JCSP Demonstration Library Project, most fee-paying secondary schools have libraries that are staffed with fully qualified librarians. Not acting on the promised roll-out of libraries for more DEIS schools widens the educational advantage gap even further.'

Numerous studies (e.g., Downes et al., 2020; Fleming & Harford, 2021; Harford et al., 2023; Smyth & Banks, 2021) have recognised the significant impact of the DEIS programme in reducing ESL rates and/or improving academic achievement among underprivileged and disadvantaged students in light of scientific evidence. However, the academic literature highlights several critical issues that must be addressed to further enhance the programme's effectiveness. For instance, the current approach places the responsibility of addressing educational disadvantage primarily on the Department of Education (DoE) and individual schools, rather than treating it as a complex policy-level concern that requires the involvement of multidisciplinary teams (Downes, 2018; Harford et al., 2023). It is essential to address the diverse needs of specific student groups through tailored interventions (Downes, Pike & Murphy, 2020). Additionally, proper allocation and availability of resources based on the school population are vital for the programme's success (Fleming, 2017; Downes et al., 2020).

Downes et al. (2020) propose enhancing DEIS school funding provisions to accommodate additional schools without excluding existing DEIS schools that might not meet the new DEIS school identification criteria. Furthermore, they recommend providing clear policy objectives for the proposed tool to assess the need for a school's DEIS status designation. Fleming (2017) also questions whether the available resources adequately address the diverse and significant needs of students, families, communities, and schools facing socio-economic disadvantages. Specifically, the commitment to expand the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) Inclusion Service in DEIS 2017 necessitates sufficient resourcing to support children with complex needs through multidisciplinary teams comprising emotional counsellors/therapists, occupational therapists, and speech and language therapists (Downes et al., 2020, p.17). Improving interagency cooperation between schools and external actors is also identified as an area requiring attention (European Commission, 2019).

Downes et al. (2020) and the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) (2018) strongly criticize the funding reduction of the guidance enhancement initiative, arguing that guidance counsellors play a vital role in supporting students at risk of early school leaving. They highlight that pupils and parents in DEIS schools heavily rely on school-based guidance to access information about post-school pathways to further and higher education, making the reduction in guidance allocation in the 2012 budget disproportionately impact disadvantaged students. This lack of proper resources for career guidance leaves pupils in DEIS schools with limited alternatives (Fleming & Harford, 2021, p.14).

Downes et al. (2020) also emphasize the importance of having emotional counsellors/therapists available for students, providing ongoing individual therapeutic support for trauma and complex emotional needs that may not be effectively addressed by NEPS (National Educational Psychology Service) or Career Guidance services (p.4).

Harford et al. (2023, p.15) call for an urgent introduction of a more realistic, restructured, and adequately resourced DEIS programme that takes into consideration the varying degrees of disadvantage among DEIS schools. Salmivalli et al. (2012) promote a differentiated approach that accounts for the contextual factors, suggesting that researchers should move beyond assessing whether a programme works or not, and instead focus on understanding what works, for whom, and under what circumstances.

In line with this, Downes et al. (2020) propose a model based on the public health three-tiered approach to recognize differentiated needs. The model includes universal prevention strategies aimed at reforming mainstream schools at the school, classroom, and community-wide levels to benefit all students. Selected prevention targets specialised group systems for students at risk of early school leaving, including those with strong potential for reentry to



education. Lastly, indicated prevention strategies engage specialised, individualised systems for students with a high risk of early school leaving, chronic need, or multiple risk factors.

According to O' Flynn (2020). The Education (Welfare) Act 2000 in Ireland was designed to improve student attendance includes penalties for non-school attendance. Although the Act stipulates the appointment of Education Welfare officers (EWOs) by the National Educational Welfare Board, their specific role remains ambiguous. However, EWO's responsibilities have evolved to address the underlying social issues contributing to school absenteeism. The punitive approach expressed in the Act poses challenges for the EWOs work, indicating a need for alternative approaches to address the complex issues associated with absenteeism.

At present, HSCL support is exclusively available to families with children attending DEIS schools, and SCP primarily operates within DEIS schools. However, it is not uncommon for an educationally disadvantaged child to transfer to a non-DEIS post-primary school, which poses a critical challenge as they and their families lose the support and guidance provided by both HSCL and SCP during this crucial transition period. To break the cycle of marginalisation through education, the Tusla EWS recommends an extension of the current DEIS model to ensure that all children at risk of ESL receive support throughout their journey from primary to post-primary education, and even into the senior cycle and further education (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2019, p.4).

TUSLA, as an organisation, has successfully brought various agencies responsible for delivering services to children, such as early childhood care, education, youth justice, child welfare, and protection, into closer collaboration with other government departments, including the Department of Education (DoE), Department of Social Protection, and Department of Justice and Equality. Empowered to lead the development of a high-quality integrated service for children and young people, TUSLA established the Education Welfare Service, now known as TESS (Tusla Education Support Service) since late 2019. This service holds a unique role within the organisation, requiring active engagement with key agencies to ensure that children optimize their attendance, participation, and retention in the education system (O' Flynn, 2020).

Regarding transitions, the SCP places significant emphasis on providing social and emotional support. However, there are limited opportunities to implement pedagogical approaches that offer additional support, as mainstream teachers retain the primary responsibility for student learning. The SCP predominantly focuses on non-pedagogical activities, though it can provide supplementary learning support. Consequently, day-to-day teaching and learning in mainstream classrooms remain largely unaffected. Notably, SCP staff are not part of the school staff; they are employed by a cluster of schools and often do not actively participate in broader school planning related to the DEIS programme. As a result, the SCP provision may become isolated or confined within the school setting (Banks & Smyth, 2021). Banks and Smyth suggest that SCP coordinators should have a role in school DEIS planning across the cluster to enhance coordination and integration.

In case of the Youthreach Programme, the report from the TUI highly commends its effectiveness in supporting early school leavers. The programme provides young individuals with access to high-quality educational opportunities, enabling them to pursue recognised qualifications. It shares common objectives with second-chance/alternative education initiatives found in various European Union countries. Its primary aim is to offer individuals who have left school prematurely, and might not thrive in traditional school environments, an alternative setting to acquire education and qualifications. However, Banks and Smyth (2021) argue that although Youthreach provides comprehensive learning and socio-emotional support, it often operates independently from mainstream education, leading to a sense of isolation. While innovative practices are evident at the centre level, there is a lack



of mechanisms to disseminate and implement these practices across the broader education system (Banks & Smyth, 2021).

The Youthreach Programme has evolved to become more academically focused than originally intended, and this aspect requires a thorough review. Currently, funding for the programme is outcome-based, with the expected result for participants to obtain a QQI level 4, equivalent to a basic Leaving Cert standard. However, there is a need to return to a person-centered approach, where the programme is tailored to meet the individual needs of each young person (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2019, p.5).

The provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Ireland is predominantly managed by private institutions, leading to ECEC staff's working conditions being largely unregulated. This situation contributes to a high turnover rate among ECEC staff, and nearly half of the settings reported challenges in recruiting staff in 2018-19, partly due to relatively poor working conditions. The government aims to address this issue through a new funding model and a workforce development plan currently under development in 2021 (OECD, 2022, p.4).

Continuing professional development for ECEC staff lacks proper regulation, and they do not have protected time for training. Although financial incentives are available for teachers and assistants participating in formal training to enhance their qualifications, the lack of protected time and available funding poses barriers to their engagement in professional development. Various training programmes are offered, including one focusing on curriculum framework knowledge (Aistear and Play) and several others under the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), targeting children with disabilities to ensure access to the ECCE programme. However, the complexity of the professional development landscape, involving various institutions and programmes, creates challenges for both ECEC staff to identify suitable opportunities and for the government to monitor participation and quality effectively.

Furthermore, consistent utilisation of play-based pedagogy to support children's learning and development by ECEC staff remains an area of concern (OECD, 2022).

3.2 Comparative Analysis of successful and less effective policies

3.2.1 POLICY ANALYSIS IN THE LIGHT OF EUROPEAN COMMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2011 Council Recommendation on policies to combat Early School Leaving (ESL) calls for Member States to adopt comprehensive approaches that address the underlying causes of ESL and ensure sustained reduction in ESL rates. In addition to suggesting specific policy measures and strategies to tackle ESL, the EU working group also proposed the establishment of a governance structure, cross-sectoral cooperation, adequate funding, and regular monitoring and evaluation of policies and measures to facilitate further progress. To effectively develop and implement targeted policies against ESL, it is essential to have a precise understanding of the scope and reasons contributing to ESL. Therefore, the recommendation emphasizes an evidence-based approach that involves collecting and analyzing real-time data. The 2011 Council recommendations encompass three sets of strategies: prevention, intervention, and compensation measures, which cover various aspects of the education spectrum (European Commission, 2013). Notably, the policy measures undertaken in Ireland to address ESL are closely aligned with the Council's recommendations. Unlike some EU countries, for example Norway, Malta, Romania and Hungary, that have adopted and implemented a national strategy to address ESL, Ireland has undertaken several measures even before the EU 2011 recommendations which correspond to the EU policy framework (European Commission, 2019).



Over the past decade, Ireland has achieved significant progress in reducing early school leaving rates compared to other European Union countries, surpassing both national and EU targets (ET2020 8% and EU target 9%). Particularly, DEIS schools have demonstrated notable success, witnessing improvements in key educational indicators, such as reduced early school leaving rates, improved attendance, and enhanced reading and mathematics scores (Downes et al., 2020). Mapping Ireland's measures against the three pillars of prevention, intervention, and compensation reveals that all three areas have been focal points in tackling ESL. Noteworthy initiatives include revised DEIS plan, enhancements in ECEC provision, revisions to the primary curriculum to engage diverse student groups, flexible pathways in Junior Certificate School and Leaving Certificate Applied programmes, availability of vocational education and training, and provision of professional development opportunities for school staff. In their assessment report on the implementation of the 2011 Council Recommendation on Policies to reduce ESL, Donlevy et al. (2019) acknowledge that Ireland has taken significant steps to address ESL through various alternative curriculum programmes. For instance, the Junior Certificate School programme caters to lower secondary students at risk of ESL, while the Leaving Certificate Applied offers an alternative curriculum with a vocational focus. Moreover, the educational system provides alternatives for students with special educational needs, and additional out-of-school supports are available for those facing challenges within the mainstream education system. Legislation also involves parents as partners in their children's education. Both parents and students have a role in school's decision-making through a prescribed system of school self-evaluation. To promote students' comprehension of the business environment and cultivate vital life skills for future education and employment, Ireland's policy objectives include fostering connections with local businesses. The Ballyfermot Chapelizod partnership serves as a prime instance of this approach, constituting an educational network involving local employers. Furthermore, all post-primary students have access to guidance counselling services. Education Action Plans, Languages Connect, National Travellers and Roma Inclusion Strategy are some of the measures among many aimed at promoting inclusive education.

The School Completion Programme (SCP) was introduced by the Department of Education in 2002 as an intervention strategy to significantly enhance student retention rates in both primary and post-primary education. Later on, it became integrated into the DEIS programme, alongside HSCL and EWS. The SCP offers targeted supports at three distinct levels, utilizing the SCP Intake framework to identify students at higher risk of early school leaving. A primary activity of the SCP involves monitoring and tracking student attendance, facilitating the early identification of signs of ESL or other challenges students may encounter in their academic and home environments. The SCP manages a diverse range of supports and activities, fostering collaboration among various services and departments to ensure the availability of comprehensive assistance to students (Tusla, 2004a, 2004b). SCP, HSCL, and EWO work closely together and actively involve parents, families, and communities in promoting children's education. As can be seen, the SCP seems to encompass most of the intervention measures outlined in the EU's 2011 recommendations.

Regarding compensation measures, various initiatives are implemented to provide second chance opportunities and alternative pathways for youth who discontinue their education prematurely. These programmes offer essential support, including counselling, emotional assistance, and continuous engagement with learning. The staff members, both teachers and resources staff, are dedicated to sustaining learner motivation and active involvement in educational tasks. Additionally, these initiatives facilitate work experience opportunities and enable progression to further education. The programmes are individually tailored to cater to the specific needs of the learners. Moreover, participants receive financial support and attain recognised qualifications (DoE, 2020).

Each policy or strategy discussed in Section 2 emphasizes the significance of inter-agency collaboration, whether it pertains to the DEIS Plan, Youthreach, Back to Education, or Travellers and Roma Inclusion. The approach adopted



is one of inclusivity, encouraging schools, departments, local communities, authorities, NGOs, and businesses to engage in collaborative efforts. The Education Action Plan delineates clear responsibilities for specific departments to undertake particular actions. Consequently, Ireland's policy discourse aligns effectively with the EU ESL policy recommendations. However, it is important to acknowledge that discrepancies may arise between policy formulation and its actual implementation, an aspect that will be explored further in the subsequent section.

3.3 Policies, gaps and solutions

The remarkable achievement of Ireland in surpassing the ESL EU target, reducing it to an impressive 3.3%, serves as compelling evidence that the policies and measures implemented have been successful. Academic literature and reports from the European Commission, such as those by Donlevy et al. (2019) and Downes et al. (2020), acknowledge the effectiveness of these initiatives. However, it is essential to recognize that despite these successes, there are still gaps between policy formulation and actual implementation. These reports shed light on the need for further examination and improvement in the alignment and execution of policies to ensure continued progress in combating early school leaving effectively.

3.3.1 GAPS IDENTIFIED IN EXISTING POLICIES

Donlevy et al. (2019) assessed Ireland's compliance with the 2011 council recommendations and found that the country has comprehensive policies or legislation covering most aspects of prevention and compensation measures. However, there are two notable gaps in the implementation of intervention measures. Firstly, measures to strengthen links between schools and local labour markets, such as providing access to high-quality work experience and promoting employer engagement in schools, have not been fully implemented. Secondly, local or regional governance arrangements to support at-risk learners, including school clusters or networks, specialist resource centres, and multidisciplinary teams or hubs around schools, as well as access to targeted individual support for learners facing academic, social, emotional, or personal difficulties through one-to-one academic tutoring, coaching or mentoring programs, and psychological support, have been recognised but not effectively put into practice.

In Ireland, the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector primarily operates under private management, resulting in a lack of specific regulations concerning ECEC staff's working conditions and limited government policy influence (OECD, 2023). The OECD report highlights the negative impact of high staff turnover in ECEC centres on early education quality. Additionally, ECEC staff do not receive paid time off for state-funded professional development programmes, hindering their effectiveness. To address these challenges and enhance the overall quality of early education provision, a comprehensive policy supporting and retaining ECEC staff is essential.

O'Flynn (2020) discusses punitive measures for prolonged student absenteeism from school, but also recognises the courts' role in directing parents to appropriate social services through Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs) acting as social workers, community workers, counsellors, or youth workers. However, she believes the Education Welfare Act 2000 needs re-evaluation to address the complexity of absenteeism issues.

Managing transitions is crucial for students moving from DEIS primary schools to non-DEIS post-primary schools, as they may lose necessary support, risking early school leaving (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2019).



Regarding DEIS school funding, Downes et al. (2020) propose expanding the provision without penalizing schools that perform well and recommend not cutting funding for those with improved student composition.

Banks and Smyth's (2021) interviews with SCP coordinators, students, and staff highlight the focus on non-pedagogical activities, contributing minimally to teaching and learning. SCP's limited role in DEIS plans within school clusters hinders sharing best practices. The Youthreach programme's shift towards academics neglects its original focus on holistic development (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2019).

Gilleece et al. (2020) found significant disparities in student achievement between DEIS and non-DEIS schools based on their analysis of academic performance data from the PISA study (2018). Specifically, students in DEIS schools scored notably lower in reading, mathematics, and science literacies. The study also revealed a substantially higher proportion of students in DEIS schools performing below Level 2, the minimum proficiency level required for independent functioning, across all three subject areas as defined by the OECD. Further investment needs to be put into literacy at all levels and as part of that programme for improvement the Oireachtas report, (2022 & 2023) states that a priority should be to 'expand both the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) Demonstration Library Project and JCSP Digital Library Service as an urgent national priority'.

Guidance and counselling are vital for disadvantaged students, yet funding for this service has been reduced in practice (Downes et al., 2020; TUI, 2018). Insufficient resources exist to address care needs, especially for students with anxiety, anger, and trauma, impacting mental health and wellbeing in schools (Harford et al., 2023).

Despite the emphasis on interagency cooperation in policies and services, a report on the implementation of the 2011 Council recommendation reveals weak interagency cooperation in ESL measures in Ireland (Donlevy et al., 2019).

3.3.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY APPROACHES BASED ON SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE AND RESEARCH TO ADDRESS UNDERACHIEVEMENT

- A need to put forth a comprehensive policy to support and retain ECEC staff.
- A refined monitoring and evaluation process is essential for the DEIS programme to gauge its true impact (Harford et al., 2023).
- A strong governance structure that encourages and supports cross-sectoral cooperation.
- Expand both the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) Demonstration Library Project and JCSP Digital Library Service. (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2022 & 2023).
- Enhanced Guidance and Counselling services required for both primary and post-primary students (Downes et al., 2020; Harford et al., 2023).
- Extend the DEIS model's increased resources to early years programmes in DEIS communities.
- Student focused system to support transitions from primary to post-primary, to senior cycle, and further education (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2019).
- Ensure emotional counselling/therapists' availability in every DEIS primary and DEIS post-primary school (Downes et al. 2020).
- Extend the tiered approach, such as DEIS band 1 and DEIS band 2, to DEIS post-primary schools (Downes et al., 2020).

4.0 KEY TAKEAWAYS

Ireland has demonstrated significant progress in reducing Early School Leaving (ESL) well below the EU 2030 target of less than 9%. As evident from European Commission (EC) reviews, reports, and academic literature, the Irish policy discourse largely covers most of the policy areas recommended by the EC to address ESL. However, the main challenges lie not in the formulation of policies but in their effective implementation. Section 3.3.2 emphasizes the crucial need for a robust and inclusive governance structure that facilitates collaboration among various stakeholders to effectively address ESL. Such collaboration is essential for sustaining efforts in this regard. Furthermore, there is a requirement for policy development in the ECEC sector to support staff professional development and retention while ensuring high-quality services. Although the DEIS plan has significantly supported children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, it should be expanded to reach all those in need.

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Version 1.0

REVIEW OF LOCAL, REGIONAL AND/OR NATIONAL POLICIES TO TACKLES EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING – MALTA

Reduce early school leaving and underachievement

Policy Analysis - Malta

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Early school leaving (ESL) is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has garnered attention on both national and international levels. Tackling early school leaving (ESL) is of paramount importance as it has significant implications at the individual, community, and national levels (European Commission, 2022; Eurydice, 2014). At the individual level, early school leaving can lead to limited job opportunities and lower earning potential, perpetuating a cycle of socio-economic disadvantage. It may also hinder personal growth, leading to reduced motivation, self-esteem and confidence (Borgna & Strufflino, 2017; O'Connell & Freeney, 2011). On a community level, high rates of ESL can contribute to a less skilled workforce, affecting the overall productivity and competitiveness of the region. Communities with high ESL rates may also experience social challenges, including higher rates of unemployment and crime (Smyth & McCoy, 2009; Traag & van der Velden, 2011). Nationally, ESL can strain the economy by diminishing the pool of skilled workers and leading to increased reliance on social welfare programmes. Moreover, a nation's long-term economic growth and development are closely linked to the educational attainment of its population (Fehérvári, 2020). Therefore, addressing ESL is crucial for fostering individual well-being, building strong and resilient communities, and securing the prosperity of the nation as a whole.

ESL, as a multidimensional issue, arises from a gradual process of disengagement that unfolds over time (Lyche, 2010; European Commission, 2013). Although the reasons for ESL vary significantly on an individual basis, at a broader social level, it tends to follow specific patterns (European Parliament, 2011). Existing research suggests that approximately 80% of the variation in student achievement can be attributed to student and family characteristics, with the remaining 20% influenced by the characteristics of the schools they attend (Rumberger and Lim, 2008).

Numerous studies have proposed frameworks for understanding the factors contributing to ESL, including endogenous factors inherent within the education system and exogenous factors beyond the purview of the education system, encompassing individual, familial, or societal aspects (European Commission, 2014). Bitsakos (2021) further organizes these factors under three categories: social factors, financial factors, and educational factors. Additionally, González-Rodríguez et al. (2019) developed a model that considers variables at the micro-level (individual/student) and meso-levels (family, friendship, classmates, teacher, and school). They argue that each student's trajectory is influenced by specific contextual factors and the interactions of variables at the macro-level. Notably, certain groups, such as children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, including migrants, refugees, and children with special needs, are more susceptible to early school leaving (Gomez-González et al., 2022). Understanding the intricate interplay of these factors and their impacts on ESL is crucial for developing effective interventions to address this complex educational challenge.

The Eurostat indicator ESL was first mentioned in 2000 within the horizontal objectives of the European Employment Strategy, during a special meeting of the European Council held in Lisbon, when strategic goals were set for the EU to enhance employment, economic reform, and social cohesion as part of the knowledge-based economy. This recognition emphasized the importance of addressing early school leaving as a significant challenge for promoting a skilled and knowledgeable workforce and fostering societal cohesion within the European Union (Estêvão & Álvares, 2014, European Parliament, 2000).

According to data from Eurostat (2023), the indicator for early school leavers refers to the proportion of the population aged 18-24 years who have at most completed lower secondary education and are not engaged in any

further formal or non-formal education or training within the four weeks preceding the Labour Force Survey¹. Since 2021 Eurostat has been using the term 'early leaving from education and training' (ELET) that takes into account the mainstream academic as well as vocational pathways (Gal, 2022; MEYR, 2023). While the percentage of young individuals leaving education and training early has shown a steady decline in the European Union over the past decade, decreasing from 13% in 2012 to 10% in 2022, there is still progress needed to achieve the target of reducing the rates of early school leavers at the EU level to below 9% by the year 2030. Across the European Union, there is a wide range of percentages regarding early school leavers from education and training. In 2022, the EU's average for early school leavers was 9.6%. However, significant variations exist among Member States, with several countries having already achieved the EU-level target for 2030. Countries such as Romania, Spain, Italy, Germany, and Malta reported higher rates of early school leaving, with figures at 15.6%, 14%, 12%, 12%, and 10.10%, respectively. On the other hand, Croatia, Ireland, Greece, and Lithuania had lower percentages, with rates at 2%, 4%, 4%, and 4%, respectively (Eurostat, 2023).

Malta stands among European countries historically characterized by significantly high rates of early school leaving (ESL). Less than two decades ago, the ESL rate in Malta was recorded at 33% in December 2005. However, over the years, the country has been successful in making a substantial reduction, with the ESL rate reaching 10.10% in December 2022 (Eurostat, 2023; MEYR, 2023). As one of the eight EU member states directly influenced by the European Council's recommendations in 2011 to address ESL, Malta adopted an exclusive strategy dedicated to tackling this issue post-2011. The inaugural National Strategy was introduced in 2014 and has been actively implemented since then. In a recent development in July 2023, the Ministry of Education, Sports, Youth, Research, and Innovation announced the new initiative "A Way Forward" aimed at addressing early school leaving from 2023 to 2030 (Donlevy, et al., 2019; MEYR, 2023).

This policy analysis forms an integral component of the SCIREARLY Horizon Europe Project, which seeks to identify successful policies across the European Union that have effectively addressed early school leaving, as well as those that have demonstrated limited progress in achieving the desired outcomes. The primary objective of this assessment is to investigate and analyze the key strategies implemented in Malta to combat early school leaving, thoroughly assessing their effectiveness, impact, and potential areas for enhancement. This review is part of a comprehensive series of policy evaluations conducted under the project, aiming to scrutinize the scientific evidence, research, and theoretical frameworks supporting the most efficacious policies. Ultimately, the endeavor seeks to provide a comprehensive report titled "Policy Approaches Based on Scientific Evidence and Research to Address Underachievement," offering insightful recommendations for fostering an inclusive and supportive educational environment to benefit all students.

The subsequent section offers an elucidation of the contextual factors and historical background that precipitated the formulation of two pivotal strategies: the Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving in Malta 2014 – 2023 and the Early Leaving from Education and Training Strategy: The Way Forward 2023 – 2030. This part of the study provides a comprehensive overview of the aforementioned strategies. Moving on to Section 3, the focus shifts to a critical analysis of the national strategy, drawing insights from scholarly literature that evaluates its efficacy. Furthermore, a detailed scrutiny of the strategy measures is conducted in light of the recommendations issued by the European Commission, encompassing prevention, intervention, compensation, and the whole school approach. By identifying existing gaps, this section proffers recommendations for augmenting the potency of the early school leaving (ESL) measures.

¹ The Labour Force Survey is a household survey designed to collect information on the labor market and related matters through a series of individual interviews.

2.0 POLICY/POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

Malta is among those European countries that have traditionally very high ESL rates. As mentioned previously, the ESL rates were as high as 33% at the end of 2005 but over the years with steady improvement the percentage is brought as low as 10.10% in 2022 (ref. Table 1). Adhering to the EU definition of early school leavers along with ESL, Early Leaving from Education and Training (ELET) is more commonly used in Malta encompassing the mainstream academic as well as the vocational pathways (MEYR, 2023).

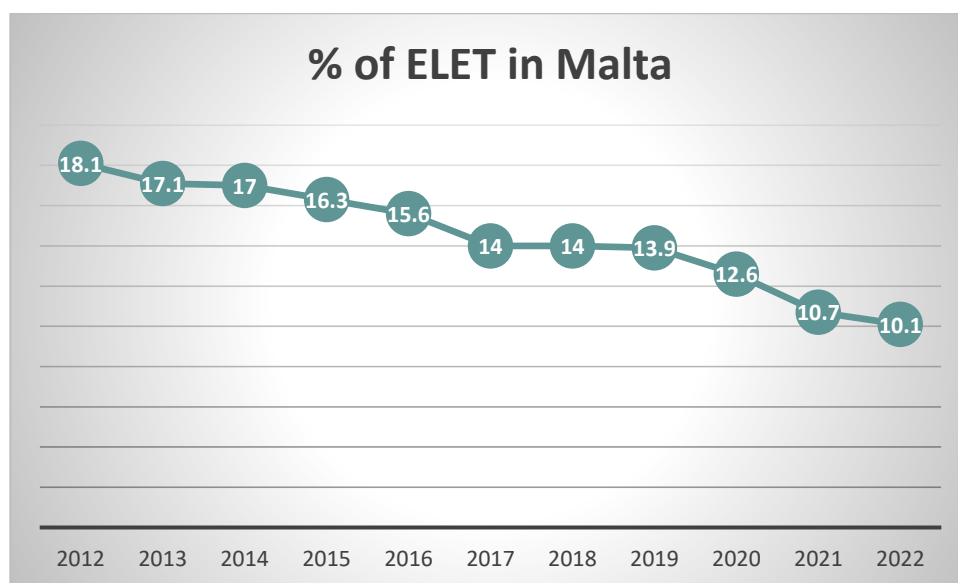


Table 1: Eurostat (2023) Early School Leavers from Education and Training in Malta

Recognizing the gravity of this concern, the Ministry of Education formulated a dedicated Strategic Plan spanning the period of 2014 to 2020, aimed at confronting this challenge. Subsequently, a comprehensive Early Leaving from Education and Training Strategy, based on the evaluation of the previous strategic plan, titled "The Way Forward 2023 – 2030," was developed to address this substantial undertaking. In the forthcoming sections, we will furnish a comprehensive summary of both of these policy documents.

2.1 Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving In Malta 2014 – 2020²

The formulation of the Strategic Plan involved extensive consultations with a diverse array of stakeholders and underwent iterative revisions before its eventual implementation. Its primary objective is to facilitate targeted initiatives that bolster students' educational experience from early childhood through the conclusion of compulsory schooling and beyond. The aim is to empower students to realize their potential as individuals,

² Ministry for Education and Employment (2014). *A STRATEGIC PLAN FOR THE PREVENTION OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IN MALTA 2014*. Available at: <https://docplayer.net/8777437-A-strategic-plan-for-the-prevention-of-early-school-leaving-in-malta.html>

citizens, and contributors to the economic realm. Additionally, the plan aligns with the overarching Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024.

Recognizing the pivotal roles played by a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including policymakers, school administrators, educators, parents, trade unions, employers, and researchers, in addressing ESL comprehensively and sustainably, the plan delineates a well-defined governance structure. Various committees have been established, among which is an Inter-Ministerial Committee, convened to tackle ESL across governmental sectors and ministries. This committee, chaired by the Director for Early School Leavers under the aegis of the Permanent Secretary within the Ministry of Education (MEDE), comprises senior officials from relevant government ministries. Furthermore, an ESL Unit has been instituted under the supervision of the Office of the Permanent Secretary of MEDE, entrusted with the responsibility of overseeing and guiding responses to the challenge of ESL. This unit's mandate encompasses establishing a comprehensive data framework to collate ESL-related information from diverse departments and agencies both within and outside of MEDE, facilitating rigorous analysis and monitoring of undertaken measures and their outcomes. The ESL Unit also conducts ongoing assessments of strategies, policies, and programmes, evaluating the efficacy of these interventions and furnishing evidence-based recommendations for enhancement. This unit aids schools in crafting and implementing preventive strategies, supervises educational provisions for at-risk students, fosters the skill development of educators and institutions to address educational disparities, and fosters collaborative efforts among parents, schools, communities, non-governmental organizations, and businesses to address the challenges posed by ESL. Lastly, a 'Working group within the MEDE' has been established to assemble diverse entities collectively striving to mitigate ESL.

Following the Council's 2011 recommendations strategic actions were planned in accordance with the three pillars: prevention, intervention and compensation.

Prevention Measures

The strategy's preventive measures encompass various actions aimed at making education more meaningful and enhancing students' engagement within the educational system. The strategy identifies seven principal areas for implementing preventive measures, each encompassing an array of strategic actions.

Firstly, within the realm of early childhood education and care, the strategy underscores the provision of free childcare services as a means to support parents' employment while fostering children's developmental journey. The initiative extends free kindergarten classes, available from age 2 years and 9 months to 5 years, supplemented by an intent to offer free childcare services for the age group of 0 to 3 years. The intention is to aid young parents, primarily mothers, in their workforce participation. The strategy calls for oversight from the Ministry of Education (MEDE) to ensure the quality of this service for staff, children, and parents. This initiative seeks to facilitate equal access to children, including those from migrant and disadvantaged backgrounds, thereby aiding language acquisition (both Maltese and English) and a seamless transition to Kindergarten.

Secondly, the strategy underscores the imperative of making schools pertinent and meaningful for every student. This entails embracing diversity in education, attending to the needs of high-achieving students, and establishing middle schools to cultivate supportive and caring educational environments. The National Curriculum Framework is anchored in diversity and inclusivity principles, accommodating a spectrum of dimensions including ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, abilities, and more. Schools are encouraged to incorporate this ethos into their development plans, facilitating the integration of migrant parents and students within the school community. By implementing student-centered learning approaches, high-achieving students will receive the necessary challenges

to prevent disengagement. Schools will be encouraged to forge community connections to enrich educational programmes. To address the unique needs of distinct student populations, the establishment of separate middle schools, particularly within larger secondary schools, is proposed. This structure aims to provide personalized support and guidance, mitigating potential bullying concerns. Smaller schools, fostering intimate student-teacher relationships and enhanced parental involvement, are deemed conducive to sustained engagement. Adequate professional development opportunities will be extended to teachers to adeptly navigate these diverse conditions.

Thirdly, the strategy emphasizes bolstering at-risk students through innovative pedagogical approaches and community-linked solutions. This includes the development of e-Learning resources tailored to diverse learning needs and the integration of mobile technology for heightened student engagement. Additionally, funding will be allocated for a school-based approach to reduce ESL. The Maltese government has worked to equip schools with interactive whiteboards and tablets to enhance teaching infrastructure. E-learning content is being curated by the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education to augment pedagogical resources for various subjects. Teachers receive training to adeptly deploy these tools and facilitate enriching learning experiences, particularly for students at risk of not achieving. Parental involvement is actively encouraged in this initiative. Recognizing the unique characteristics of each school, preventive actions tailored to specific contexts will be pursued. Under this framework, funding will be decentralized to enable locality-specific ESL prevention strategies.

Fourthly, to provide an alternative educational pathway, the strategy advocates for the reintegration of vocational education within secondary schools. With a substantial enrolment in vocational further education (nearly 49%), the proposal underscores the introduction of a well-structured Vocational Education and Training pathway within mainstream secondary schools. This pathway, equivalent in status and academic level to mainstream education in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), seeks to accommodate diverse learning needs and aspirations. Its design aims to establish flexible progression routes from secondary education to various further and higher education institutions.

Fifthly, a comprehensive approach to transition processes is endorsed, encompassing flexible pathways and comprehensive career guidance services across primary and secondary schools. The envisioned career guidance service is intended to broaden students' horizons beyond traditional stereotypes, encouraging them to explore diverse learning pathways and career avenues. Particular attention is directed towards students with learning difficulties or disadvantaged backgrounds, assisting them in navigating education system opportunities aligned with their abilities and employment prospects. A clear distinction between counselling and career guidance is outlined, facilitated by the provision of dedicated counsellors, career advisors, and trainee career advisors within schools. The strategy emphasizes the role of the Early School Leaving Working Group (ESLWG) in enhancing transition programmes, fostering connections across education cycles and sectors, and facilitating engagement with civil society and the economic sector for contemporary insights. Additionally, the integration of national and international qualifications frameworks into the National Curriculum Framework is highlighted, with the Secondary School Certificate and Profile (SSCP) serving as a comprehensive record of students' formal, informal, and non-formal learning over the five-year secondary school cycle. This record acts as a tool to facilitate potential early school leavers' entry into further and higher education, enhancing their prospects.

Sixthly, acknowledging parents as vital partners in their children's education, schools are encouraged to foster parental involvement as a means to combat ESL. This entails empowering parents to actively contribute to their children's education both within the school environment and at home. By extending efforts to reach parents from low socio-economic backgrounds, the strategy aims to alleviate ESL and promote social mobility.

Lastly, recognizing teachers' pivotal role in addressing ESL, the strategy highlights the importance of supporting teachers in developing methodologies tailored to individual students' educational needs. Adequate Continuous Professional Development (CPD) opportunities are recommended, fostering collaboration among teachers to exchange effective practices in tackling ESL within diverse local contexts. Proposals include the establishment of an Institute for Teacher CPD under the aegis of the Council for the Teaching Profession and in collaboration with the University of Malta, Faculty of Education. Additionally, ESLE is poised to encourage schools to seek Erasmus+ funding for teacher training, tapping into countries with significantly lower ESL rates than Malta. Furthermore, a comprehensive review of support services, including Learning Support Assistants, peripatetic teachers, Literacy and Numeracy support teachers, and complementary teachers, is envisaged to provide teachers with more targeted and impactful support.

Intervention Measures to Support At-Risk Students:

Intervention measures are strategically devised and executed to provide necessary assistance to students encountering learning challenges, personal difficulties, or unmet needs within the school environment. These measures aim to prevent early dropouts by offering tailored support and fostering an environment conducive to academic, social, and emotional growth. The strategy encompasses two significant dimensions: implementation of early warning systems and establishing robust support networks for at-risk students, each characterized by a range of targeted actions to cater to the needs of at-risk students.

A fundamental approach to intervention entails the establishment and operation of early warning systems designed to detect potential challenges and enable timely interventions. An illustrative instance is the Directorate of Educational Services' creation of a nationwide electronic platform, termed as E1 Platform. This platform serves as a comprehensive tool to record and track student attendance across all state schools, spanning kindergarten to Form 5. Schools contribute daily attendance data, facilitating the identification of patterns of absenteeism. Once detected, these patterns trigger collaboration with psychosocial professionals from the Directorate of Student Services (DSS) for thorough investigation and the formulation of early remedial measures. Notably, the E1 Platform's utilization is poised for expansion beyond state schools to encompass church and independent schools. This broader usage will yield a richer dataset that includes student achievement and socio-economic background information, thereby informing nuanced policy formulation and the implementation of prevention and intervention strategies at individual, school, and national levels.

The second dimension of intervention measures focuses on optimizing existing support services within the educational system. This dimension emphasizes collaboration among these services to cater comprehensively to students in need. A pivotal vision within this strategy involves cultivating a cohesive support network comprising various professionals, including youth workers, social workers, support social workers, counsellors, and psychosocial experts from diverse Ministries and agencies. Collaborative efforts are directed towards services like Aġenzija Appoġġ, Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ, the Foundation of Educational Services (FES), and DSS. This inclusive approach not only reinforces school-based support services but also seeks to enhance interdisciplinary cooperation through facilitation by the Inter-Ministerial committee and ESLWG.

Several existing measures and recommended expansions are integral to this approach, such as leveraging the assistance of Youth Workers for older students through initiatives like Youth Cafes and Youth Hubs organized by Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ and FES. Other aspects encompass empowering students facing social, emotional, or behavioural difficulties through offerings like Nurture Groups and Learning Support Zones, both administered by DSS. Additionally, initiatives like supporting teenage mothers to remain engaged in education and training,

provided by DSS, form part of the multi-faceted approach. Further extensions involve after-school support programmes facilitated by FES, aimed at supporting both students and parents. The strategy also calls for addressing the needs of at-risk students within secondary schools, where diverse approaches include broadening subject options through practical, applied, and alternative learning programmes that align with the core curriculum.

Compensation Measures

Within the overarching strategy, compensation measures are strategically designed to address the needs of students who prematurely leave compulsory schooling without acquiring the essential qualifications. These measures are fundamentally oriented towards the reintegration of these students into mainstream education, accomplished through dynamic second chance education programmes. These initiatives blend conventional classroom instruction with hands-on experiential learning, aiming to provide comprehensive educational opportunities to those previously disengaged. A pivotal element of the compensation measures involves forging strategic partnerships to facilitate a robust and effective second chance education framework tailored for at-risk students. This entails ensuring the availability of quality second chance education for individuals with disabilities, thereby enhancing their prospects for a more promising future. Additionally, the implementation of the Youth Guarantee Scheme constitutes a vital component to reach out to young individuals facing heightened vulnerabilities.

Several institutions, including the Malta College for Art, Science and Technology, FES, the Institute for Tourism Studies, and the Employment and Training Corporation, undertake significant efforts in providing second chance education initiatives across Malta. These initiatives primarily target students lacking the necessary qualifications to access academic or vocational education programmes from Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF) level 1 to level 3. The spectrum of offerings spans from comprehensive full-time programmes to more flexible part-time options, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility. Collaborative efforts within ESLWG are pivotal in coordinating and synergizing both full-time and part-time second chance education offerings, thereby enriching the array of choices and preventing redundancy.

Second chance education programmes aim to provide participants with a well-rounded learning experience encompassing fundamental skills, life skills, and a diverse range of practical, employment-oriented learning avenues. Participants enrolled in full-time programmes upon completing compulsory schooling are entitled to a stipend contingent upon consistent attendance. Furthermore, the compensation measures extend to fostering second chance programmes for individuals with disabilities. The ESLU, in conjunction with associated agencies, bears the responsibility of identifying and addressing the educational and training needs of young persons with disabilities, fostering their integration into the labour market and broader society.

Within the purview of the Ministry of Education (MEDE), data profiling is undertaken for youths aged 15 to 24 who neither partake in employment nor engage in education or training endeavours. This information is pivotal for the implementation of the 'Youth Guarantee Scheme,' a directive stemming from council recommendations. The scheme aims to provide every individual under the age of 25 with a quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship, or traineeship within a four-month period of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education. The scheme encompasses five distinct target groups³, each addressing specific vulnerabilities. Pilot

³Target Group (TG) 1: single unmarried parents, mostly women, living on social benefits. TG2: disabled youths in receipt of a disability pension. TG3: unemployed youths who have been registering with the Public Employment Service for more than 6 months and in receipt of

initiatives, catering particularly to target groups 4 and 5, are planned to be executed in collaboration with various stakeholding entities. This entails the seamless integration of public and private sectors, engendering partnerships that facilitate the provision of holistic education, training, and practical job exposure opportunities.

2.2 Early School Leaving from Education and Training Strategy: The Way Forward 2023 – 2030⁴

This comprehensive strategic plan finds its foundation in a series of evaluation reports⁵ stemming from the previous strategic plan of 2014-2020, managed by the Early Leaving from Education and Training Unit (ELETU), formerly known as ESLU. Aligned with European Council recommendations, which specifically target the ELET ET2030 targets for school success pathways, and informed by national research, this strategy is designed to both consolidate and advance strategic endeavours. These endeavours are specifically tailored to counteract the reduction of ELET instances in Malta. Rooted in research, the plan focuses on the creation of research-based prevention, intervention, and compensation measures. These measures are meticulously crafted to address students most susceptible to ELET.

The strategy's scope is not limited to mere oversight by ELETU, it encompasses continuous engagement with stakeholders who are directly engaged in the execution of each strategic action. This includes educators, educational institutions, families, guardians, communities, policymakers, employers, trade unions, and civil society entities. This engagement aligns with the dynamic socio-economic landscape. ELETU plays a pivotal role in collaborating with these stakeholders to ensure the effective implementation and monitoring of each strategic pillar. The new strategy has two overarching aims:

- a. Developing an Early Warning System (EWS) to monitor and target ELET risk indicators
- b. Fostering a whole-school approach (WSA) to tackle ELET.

ELETU has identified five key indicators for assessing students at risk: achievement, behaviour and well-being, chronic absenteeism, disability and learning difficulties, engagement, and socio-economic disadvantage.

Strategic Actions for Prevention, Intervention, and Compensation:

unemployment assistance. TG4: unemployed youths who have been registering with the Public Employment Service for less than 6 months. TG5: unemployed youths who are captured in the Labour Force Survey but are not registering for work with the Public Employment Service.

⁴ Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation (MYER). (2023). *A HOLISTIC AND INCLUSIVE APPROACH TO TACKLE EARLY LEAVING FROM EDUCATION AND TRAINING (ELET) IN MALTA THE WAY FORWARD 2023–2030*. Available at: <https://cdn-others.timesofmalta.com/996da8d0bf8ba1730139eab8d4dad8934272e193.pdf>

⁵ ESLU, MFED. (2019). Centralised Monitoring and Early Identification of Students at Risk of Early School Leaving (ESL): Approaches to ESL prevention. (The project was commissioned by the European Commission's Structural Reform Support Service (SRSS) and awarded to the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). The report was written by Dr. Eemer Eivers on behalf of IEA.)

ESLU, MFED. (2020). Students Dropping out from Post-Secondary Institutions. Second Study. (Unpublished).

ESLU, MFED. (2020). Recommendations emerging from annual implementation report and evaluative review of strategy. (Unpublished).

ESLU, MFED. (2019). Feedback emerging from an international three-day symposium, 'ELET, The Way Forward'.

The strategy outlines fifteen strategic actions, with five assigned to each pillar. These actions are formulated through in-depth research projects, as previously mentioned. ELETU, under the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability (DRLE), commits to regular review and evaluation of these actions through an annual implementation report. This iterative process involves consistent consultation with all stakeholders. Feedback garnered from multiple stakeholders is strategically integrated to refine and enhance the strategies, ensuring continuous progress and successful execution of each measure.

Prevention Strategic Actions:

- A1. Adopt a whole-school approach to parental engagement
- A2. Allocation of funds and other learning needs according to school and area social context ELET risk factors
- A3. Target literacy access measures for SES families and other students presenting ELET risk indicators
- A4. Extend free FCS to all children
- A5. Target aspirations of students at risk of ELET (p.25)

Intervention Strategic Actions:

- B1. Monitor, review, follow up, and intervene in the progress of the strategic actions
- B2. Increase reading instruction in schools
- B3. Adopt a whole-school approach to addressing ELET risk factors
- B4. Eliminate barriers in SEC examinations
- B5. Work in line with the inclusion policy and strategy (p. 37)

Compensation Strategic Actions:

- C1. Review post-secondary strategies for student retention and achievement
- C2. Increase student enrolment and retention in post-compulsory education
- C3. Track and monitor holistically students who exhibit high-risk ESL factors, namely, chronic absenteeism, low achievement, poor engagement, and disability/learning difficulties
- C4. Make learning more accessible to all
- C5. Re-think and develop a strategy for second chance education (p. 49)

Each strategic action is accompanied by meticulous recommendations. These include mandatory measures, short, medium, and long-term strategic actions, and a comprehensive list of primary stakeholders, in collaboration with ELETU. This strategy reinforces many initiatives mentioned in the previous strategy and focused on promoting social integration at all levels.

Navigating Towards ELET Reduction:

The efficacy of this revised strategic plan is pivotal in charting the path towards reducing ELET. This journey is fortified by a rigorous monitoring system, aimed at data collection and analysis. This serves as a driving force to propel the implementation of the outlined strategic actions. The collection of ELET data, sourced from various departments within and outside MEYR, serves as a compass for future strategy formulation and implementation at local, college⁶, and national levels. This dynamic process ensures constant vigilance for progress and effectiveness, while fostering enhanced collaboration and precision in combating ELET. The accessibility of data to ELETU, coupled with expanded human resources, is anticipated to foster more impactful data collection and early

⁶ In Malta, state primary and secondary schools are organised in clusters, known as colleges.

identification strategies. As a result, a systematic approach is poised to enhance stakeholder coordination, cooperation, and ultimately the successful realisation of the strategic measures.

3.0 POLICY REVIEW

3.1 Policy Review as in academic literature

Over the past two decades, Malta has demonstrated substantial advancements in the reduction of Early School Leaving (ESL), achieving a remarkable decline in the ESL rate from 54.2% in 2000 to 10.10% in 2022. The European Commission has specifically called upon Malta to address the issue of early school leaving (Cumura & Barbanti, 2020; MEYR, 2023). The strategic plan against ESL, which has been in effect since 2014 has been subject to multiple evaluations initiated or organized by ESLU. These evaluations, as mentioned in the recent ESL plan titled "ELET Strategy: The Way Forward 2023 – 2030," have provided the foundation for revisions in the new plan.

Among these evaluations, one was commissioned by the European Commission's Structural Reform Support Service (SRSS) and carried out by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). This comprehensive evaluation, involving a wide array of stakeholders, identified gaps within policy discourse and implementation. It also presented recommendations informed by effective practices from other jurisdictions. The report particularly accentuated potential avenues for the prevention of ESL in Malta, either through approaches not yet employed in the country or currently implemented on a limited scale. Given the primary aim of the project being the early identification of ESL risk, the report predominantly accentuated prevention and intervention strategies, rather than focusing on compensatory measures. This emphasis underscores the importance of proactive measures to address ESL and its associated challenges.

Utilizing the Education Endowment Toolkit, the analysis indicates that in the context of Malta, prevailing trends prioritize interventions with higher cost yet lower efficacy. In contrast to the global trend, where interventions characterized by greater intensity and financial investment are typically directed specifically at individuals with heightened requirements, such as those from low socio-economic backgrounds or demonstrating lower academic attainment, Malta follows a different pattern.

In particular, the report has brought to light the fact that specific segments of the student population, especially those whose parents are not socio-economically active or in education, are ineligible for enrollment in the Free Childcare Scheme. Furthermore, their allocated hours of participation in initiatives such as Klabb 3-16 and Skolasajf are limited, despite their heightened requirement for additional support and their potential to derive substantial benefits from such assistance. Notably, there is a discernible absence of a policy directive aimed at offering smaller class sizes to students with high-needs. Teaching strategies that enable students to monitor and evaluate their own learning are gradually being introduced by reducing reliance on summative assessments. Deficiencies within the Maltese educational landscape are evident in areas such as systematic approaches to peer tutoring, tailored instructional strategies, initiatives to foster parental engagement, and potentially, comprehensive phonics instruction.

Furthermore, the adoption of whole school approach to address ESL appears to be limited. The concept of whole school approaches seems to be relatively underrepresented within the policies and practices of educational institutions. Remarkably, a considerable proportion of the attention is directed toward the individual characteristics of students, while the familial context is comparatively overlooked. Monitoring individual-level

attendance and performance is emphasized, albeit without a universally standardized metric of achievement for reference. Nevertheless, unlike in various European counterparts where strategies targeting at-risk families play a pivotal role in combating ESL, Malta seems to allocate relatively minimal emphasis on familial attributes.

Despite a phased reintegration of Vocational Education and Training (VET) options, the introduction of middle schools set up, and the implementation of transition support mechanisms, the prevalence of socio-economic segregation within schools persists. This is compounded by the scarcity of targeted compensatory interventions akin to those observed in several other European Union nations (Eivers, 2020).

In another study authored by the same researcher⁷, titled "Identification of Students at Risk of Early School Leaving in Malta: Report for the Ministry of Education and Employment 2020," it is indicated that the effective implementation of an Early School Leaving (ESL) monitoring system faces challenges due to the absence of real-time student data. The report highlights the existence of multiple data-collecting entities within various departments and agencies, resulting in redundant data collection and minimal collaboration across agencies to facilitate both horizontal and vertical data flow.

In light of these concerns, the report offers recommendations for the Ministry of Education and Employment. Specifically, it suggests the development of a comprehensive legal framework that enables the systematic collection and sharing of data essential for the functioning of any ESL monitoring system. This framework should encompass provisions for the regulated collection and dissemination of data by designated agencies for specific purposes. It should also entail provisions mandating schools to furnish stipulated data, addressing the requirements for both vertical and horizontal data exchange, addressing privacy concerns in line with GDPR regulations, and assigning responsibilities for data collection, analysis, and dissemination.

Furthermore, the report underscores the necessity of overcoming the current isolated data approach in some state agencies and the scarcity of student-level data for a significant portion of students. It emphasizes that without access to student-level data, effective student-level monitoring is not possible. As a remedy, the report proposes the implementation of a unified school management system that spans all schools across Malta. This system would incorporate high-level dashboards, selective data extraction functions (for standardized forms), and a limited set of specified ESL indicators as mandatory fields. The proposed system should be complemented by two non-integrated components: the ability to import data from Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings and the option to export/import data for Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) registrations. The report concludes by highlighting that the availability of real-time data, facilitated through these recommended measures, not only streamlines ESL monitoring processes but also significantly enhances the decision-making process within the educational context.

In a report for European Commission, Downes and Cefai (2016) argue that psychosocial well-being constitutes a significant predictor of Early School Leaving (ESL). While Malta has a designated national strategy titled 'Addressing Bullying Behaviour in Schools 2014' for preventing bullying within educational settings, this strategy's direct inclusion in the ESL Strategy 2014 is lacking. However, it should be noted that the aforementioned national anti-bullying strategy is an integral component of the broader 'Respect for All Framework.' This overarching policy framework is designed to cultivate positive behaviors and healthy relationships within schools, with a specific focus on bolstering the educational attainment of all students, including those belonging to vulnerable and marginalized groups.

⁷ Eemer Eivers Dublin City University

Donlevy et al. (2019), in their report titled 'Assessment of the Implementation of the 2011 Council Recommendation on Policies to Reduce Early School Leaving' acknowledges the concerted efforts made by the country to combat ESL. Their assessment specifically focuses on the first policy document '2014 – 2020.' According to the report, Malta's ESL intervention programme is primarily prevention oriented. The report acknowledges Malta's multifaceted approach to addressing the issue of ELET. Notably, Malta stands out as one of the countries offering linguistic and cultural programmes tailored to migrant, refugee children, and others with varying mother tongues. To bolster educational quality, the Ministry for Education and Employment has established the Institute for Education (IFE), which focuses on enhancing teacher professional development for more effective instruction.

In alignment with its commitment to combat ELET, Malta has implemented various financial support mechanisms designed to incentivize learners to successfully complete their studies. To facilitate re-engagement of early school leavers without formal qualifications, Malta has streamlined access to Vocational Education and Training, complemented by adaptable learning pathways. This commitment extends to fostering inclusivity within vocational training programmes and providing specialized assistance to students with unique educational needs. Additionally, Malta extends free revision classes to students who have encountered challenges in certain subjects during examinations, aimed at aiding the attainment of the School Leaving Certificate.

3.2 Comparative Analysis of successful and less effective policies

3.2.1 POLICY ANALYSIS IN THE LIGHT OF EUROPEAN COMMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS

The policy documents discussed in section 2.0 have been developed in alignment with the Council's 2011 recommendations. As a result, nearly all the recommendations pertaining to the three pillars and the whole-school strategy have been incorporated into the policy discourse. Additionally, efforts have been made to establish a governance structure that oversees and ensures the implementation processes. This is exemplified by the establishment of the ELET Unit, the ELET Working Group, and Inter-Ministerial Committee to name a few. The consistent reduction in ELET rates suggests that these policy measures have contributed to a decline in the percentage of early school leaving.

However, evaluations of the ESL policy and its implementation by both the IEA and the European Commission have highlighted gaps within the policy formulation and implementation processes. By addressing these gaps, the effectiveness of the strategies can be further enhanced.

Regarding the policy discourse, it is evident that all measures, spanning prevention, intervention, and compensation, are addressed in a more comprehensive manner within the recent policy document outlining the period from 2023 to 2030. This updated policy framework encompasses various facets, including the establishment of a robust governance structure, the integration of real-time data availability, and the incorporation of periodic monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. These advancements signify notable amendments from the preceding strategic plan.

However, the ultimate efficacy of the policy will manifest in its practical implementation and subsequent evaluation. The alignment of policy measures with real-world outcomes will determine the tangible impact and success of the policy's objectives.

3.3 Policies, gaps and solutions

Despite Malta's commendable achievements in substantially diminishing early school leaving (ESL) rates throughout the past two decades, the percentages of ESL still remain among the highest within the European Union. The reports issued by the European Commission have drawn attention to various deficiencies inherent in the Strategic Plan spanning from 2014 to 2020. As the new ESL policy has just launched, our review will concentrate on the gaps discerned within the context of the previously implemented Strategic Plan from 2014 to 2020.

3.3.1 GAPS IDENTIFIED IN EXISTING POLICIES

The IEA report has pinpointed four primary issues within the scope of the Strategic Plan 2014 – 2020. These include the restrictive nature of the Free Childcare Scheme, confined exclusively to children of working mothers. Consequently, children hailing from marginalized or low socio-economic backgrounds, who are in dire need of such services, remain largely excluded from its benefits. Lyche (2010) refers to longitudinal analyses since 1986 that found that students who participated in preschool had graduation rates 10% higher than non-participants. Recognizing the importance of Early Childhood Education and Care, a similar observation is conveyed in Donlevy et al.'s (2019) report.

In the Secondary Education Certificate examinations, the majority of subjects are conducted in English, aiming to cultivate students' proficiency in the language before they reach post-secondary levels. This approach assumes all students follow an academic trajectory, whereas in reality, many students perceive SEC as a culmination of their schooling. Moreover, English might not serve as the primary medium of instruction for some students. This discrepancy creates an uneven playing field, favouring those instructed in English. To rectify this imbalance, introducing an option to complete SEC papers in Maltese is imperative. The current mandate for examinations to be undertaken solely in English constitutes an unnecessary barrier to certification, particularly for students with weaker language skills or those primarily instructed in Maltese. Hence, offering students the flexibility to choose their preferred examination language for each SEC paper is advocated.

A shift toward Whole school approach for ESL prevention and overall student engagement improvement is warranted. Presently, supplementary support is predominantly directed at individual students, operating in a reactive rather than proactive manner. This system necessitates students to exhibit issues before assistance is extended. To ensure comprehensive literacy and numeracy skills are nurtured among all students, a paradigm shift toward school-wide measures is pivotal. This is particularly crucial for students requiring additional support, such as language assistance for migrants who learn in a language different from their native tongue. Establishing a pervasive anti-bullying culture within schools is imperative for nurturing student well-being. School-wide initiatives that accommodate parental engagement should be contextualized within the school or college environment. Enhancing parental involvement in their children's education is essential, given the current limited level of parental engagement as noted in Eivers' report (2020).

The perturbing implications of bullying on students' social and emotional well-being, as well as its linkage to ESL, have been documented by Downes and Cefai (2016). Despite the existence of a National Anti-bullying Policy, its it is not integrated into the ESL Strategic Plan. This omission essentially underestimates the significant impact of psychosocial well-being on ESL outcomes.

Donlevy et al.'s report (2019) further accentuates concerns within the Maltese education system, highlighting that student attendance data collection at the national level lacks crucial variables. Moreover, the organized collaboration between schools and external entities is relatively underdeveloped, relying heavily on the individual initiatives of schools to actively engage local communities in educational pursuits.

The data collection gaps unveiled by Eivers' Report (2020) titled "Identification of Students at Risk of Early School Leaving in Malta: Report for the Ministry of Education and Employment 2020" have already been discussed extensively in section 3.1 of this report.

3.3.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY APPROACHES BASED ON SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE AND RESEARCH TO ADDRESS UNDERACHIEVEMENT

- Ensure the provision of Free Childcare to all children in the target age group, irrespective of parents' employment or education status.
- Offer the option to complete SEC papers in both English and Maltese languages.
- Introduce comprehensive whole school approaches to prevent ESL and enhance overall student engagement.
- Revise the allocation of Learning Support Educators, shifting towards class-level support rather than individual or specific group support, aligning with their subject expertise.
- Transition to a whole school approach to address attendance concerns, collecting and analyzing attendance data to identify patterns and inform school-wide responses.
- Allocate targeted funding to schools considering their social context, especially the socio-economic profile of the student population.
- Implement measures that facilitate meaningful parental engagement in school routines and their children's learning processes.
- Incorporate the National Anti-bullying Policy into the National ESL Strategy to mitigate bullying levels and ensure students' social and emotional well-being.
- Given the significant number of students with migration backgrounds, schools should strategize integration efforts.
- Establish an effective system for collecting and sharing student-level data across departments to enhance monitoring and evaluation of ESL measures.
- Explore the development of an area-based deprivation indicator by the National Statistics Office, aiding targeted funding and interventions.
- Develop and implement a unified school management system spanning all schools in Malta.
- Prioritize activities fostering links between the University of Malta and schools with low-SES intakes, including on-campus initiatives to familiarize students with facilities and future educational possibilities.
- Address barriers faced by asylum-seekers in accessing third-level education.
- Enhance formalized and structured collaboration between schools and external agencies to proactively prevent ESL.

4.0 Key takeaways

Malta has displayed consistent commitment in grappling with the challenges posed by ESL, attaining some success in reducing rates from a 13% in 2012 to 10% in 2022. Although the Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving in Malta for the period 2014 to 2020 was formulated with due consideration to the recommendations outlined by the European Commission in 2011, assessments conducted have pinpointed several gaps existing within the policy framework and its execution. Most notably, these include the lack of a comprehensive whole-school approach to ESL prevention and the enhancement of student engagement, as well as deficiencies in the collection, management, and dissemination of student-level data, alongside the need for targeted funding and support mechanisms for educational institutions. The newly introduced plan endeavours to redress these identified shortcomings. Freshly launched, this plan endeavours to encompass an all-encompassing spectrum of preventive, intervention, and compensatory measures. While the policy documents provide prescriptive guidelines, the effective enactment of these measures remains pivotal in realizing the objective of achieving an ESL target of below 9% by the year 2030.

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Version 1.01

REVIEW OF LOCAL, REGIONAL AND/OR NATIONAL POLICIES TO TACKLE EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING – [SPAIN]

Reducing early school leaving and underachievement



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Acronyms

ACPI	<i>Alto Comisión contra la Pobreza Infantil</i>
EC	European Commission
ESL	Early school leaving
ESO	Compulsory Secondary Education (Educación Secundaria Obligatoria)
FP	<i>Formación Profesional</i>
LOE	Organic Law of Education (<i>Ley Orgánica de Educación</i>)
LOIFP	Organic Law on VET (<i>Ley Orgánica 3/2022, de 31 de marzo, de Ordenación e Integración de la Formación Profesional</i>)
LOMCE	Organic Law for the Improvement of Educational Quality (<i>Ley Orgánica para la Mejora de la Calidad Educativa</i>)
LOMLOE	Organic Law of 2/2006, 3rd of May, of Education (<i>Ley Orgánica 2/2006, de 3 de mayo, de Educación</i>)
MECD	Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sports (<i>Ministerio de Educación, Cultura, y Deporte</i>)
MEFP	Ministry of Education and VET (<i>Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional</i>)
NUTS	Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics
OECD	The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PAE	Programme for School Guidance (<i>Programa de Acompañamiento Escolar</i>)
PAR	Programme for Support and Reinforcement (<i>Programa de Apoyo y Refuerzo</i>)
PDC	<i>Programas de Diversificación Curricular</i>
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PMAR	<i>Programas de Mejora de Rendimiento y del Aprendizaje</i>
PROA	<i>Programa de Refuerzo, Orientación y Apoyo</i>
PROA+	<i>Programa para la orientación, avance y enriquecimiento educativo</i>
PRTR	Recovery, Transformation, and Resilience Plan
SEA	Successful Educational Actions
UAO	<i>Unidades de Acompañamiento y Orientación 2021-2024</i>
VET	Vocational Education and Training

1. Introduction

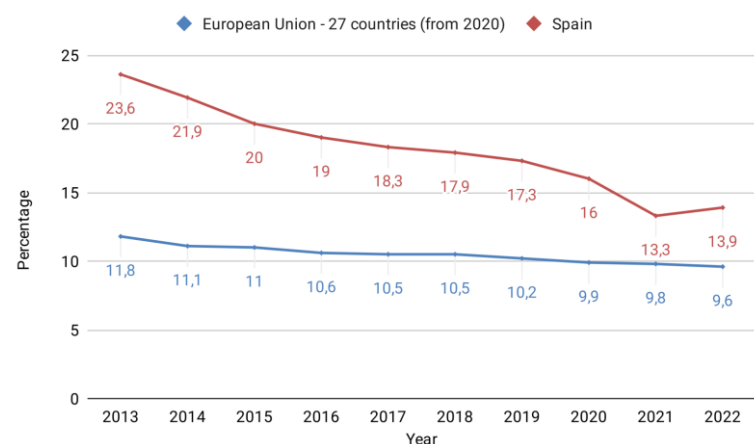
The overall aim of this policy review is to identify the measures taken by the Spanish government and regional authorities towards reducing early school leaving (ESL) and underachievement over the last decade (since 2012) and assess whether they contribute to reducing ESL based on the scientific literature and other sources including European reports, official statistics, and evaluation studies. The features of these policies have also been mapped against the three-step strategy (prevention, intervention, compensation) and “the whole school approach” recommended by the European Union for tackling the issues of ESL across the member states, identifying overlaps as well as gaps.

In the EU, the concept of early school leaving is defined as the percentage of young people between 18 and 24 years old who have completed, at most, the first cycle of Secondary Education (compulsory education) and who are no longer employed nor engaged in any formal learning. The corresponding data for ESL is administered by Eurostat at the EU level and by the National Institute of Statistics in Spain. The rationale behind tackling ESL is to increase the number of students who continue into post-compulsory education, which is the desirable level of education for the 21st century (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2013).

It is important to distinguish the concepts of ESL and underachievement, as in some cases these terms are used interchangeably. Both concepts are widely used in the literature and are strongly linked to each other (García-Martínez et al., 2021). Generally, underachievement is understood as non-attainment of a number of preset goals for a particular age of students, reflected in some negative tendencies such as grade repetition, low motivation, chronic absenteeism and learning difficulties. As a worldwide benchmark for academic performance, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) evaluates young people’s abilities according to the scores on basic academic skills such as reading, mathematics and science. These basic skills are seen as the building blocks of learning and personal development, enabling students to gain specialised skills later on. Their importance is acknowledged by the Education and Training (ET) 2020 Framework, which set the target to reduce the share of 15-year-olds with low levels in reading, mathematics, and science to less than 15% by 2020 (Eurostat, 2015).

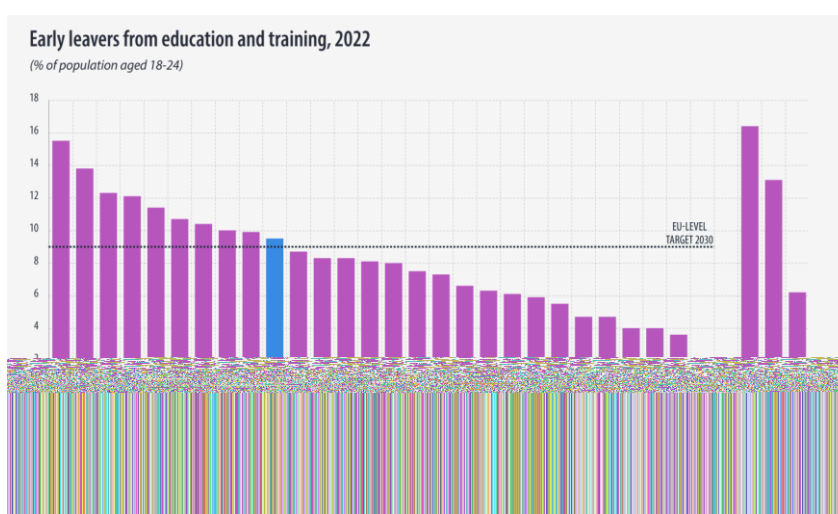
Spain has historically experienced the challenge of ESL. Based on 2013 statistics, around 1 in 4 (23.6%) people between the ages of 18 and 24 in the country were considered early school leavers. In alignment with the broader European strategy, Spain has intensified its policy efforts to address this challenge. In 2012, the Spanish Government set the target to reduce national ESL rates to 15% through its National Reform Plan (*Programa Nacional de Reformas*). Since then, the country has shown significant progress, reducing it by 10.8 percentage points between the period 2012 and 2022 (Eurostat, 2023b). Based on the most recent Eurostat data, the ESL rate in Spain in 2022 is at 13.9% (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Average ESL rates between 2013 and 2022 for European Union Member States and Spain (authors' own elaboration based on Eurostat¹)



Despite Spain's progress in the last decade, the incidence of ESL in the country still remains one of the highest among OECD and EU countries (OECD, 2023) and sits above the EU average (Figure 2). With Spain adopting a decentralized form of governance since the 1970's, some of the decision-making and executive functions are delegated to regional governments, including matters related to education.

Figure 2. ESL rates among European Union Member States, 2023, from Eurostat



Aside from regional differences, ESL and performance gaps remain in the country on the basis of sex, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and immigration background (OECD, 2020). To further address these challenges, policy efforts both at the European and Spanish levels are continuously being implemented. As stipulated in the 2021 Council Resolution, the 2030 EU target is to reduce ESL rates to less than 9% and the share of low-achieving 15-year-olds in basic skills (reading, mathematics, and science) to less than 15% (Council of the European Union, 2021).

The report is structured as follows. Firstly, it will present a description of governmental policies that were launched in Spain to specifically address ESL and underachievement, highlighting their main objectives and features (Section

¹ Link: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/edat_lfse_14/default/table?lang=en

Sociales Europeos, or FSE) from 2014 to 2020 before recovering its share in the national budget as PROA+ under the Recovery, Transformation, and Resilience Plan (PRTR) in 2021.

The PROA had two main initiatives: the Programme for School Guidance (or *Programa de Acompañamiento Escolar*, PAE) and the Programme for Support and Reinforcement (or *Programa de Apoyo y Refuerzo*, PAR). The PAE provides support to students with learning difficulties through targeted support in small groups and after-school activities. Meanwhile, the PAR's main goal is to improve secondary schools overall and involve targeted actions in the school and family contexts (García-Pérez & Hidalgo Hidalgo, 2014).

2.1.2. NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR THE SOCIAL INCLUSION OF ROMA IN SPAIN 2012-2020 (2012)

In 2012, as a part of the first long-term national strategy aimed for social inclusion of the population of Roma, comprehensive measures were taken to improve the quality of life of Roma people in the areas of education, employment, housing and health. The creation of this Strategy was prompted by the 2011 European Commission Communication for an EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies for 2020 (European Commission, 2011c) and developed in alignment with the European Strategy 2020 and the National Reform Plans of each Member State. Spain's National Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Roma in Spain outlined quantifiable objectives to be achieved by 2020 as well as a set of interim goals for 2015 (Spanish Government, n.d.).

Some of the Strategy's main objectives in relation to education include reducing absenteeism in preschools, increasing the rates of young people in post-compulsory education among both males and females, and ensuring that children attend school at the level of education that corresponds to their age. Following an interim evaluation in 2017 (*Ministerio de Sanidad, Servicios Sociales e Igualdad*, 2017), the Operative Plan 2018-2020 was launched, which provided specific measures in various areas for regional governments to adopt. Those relevant to ESL reduction include greater involvement of families, the recruitment of Roma staff in schools, the implementation of reinforcement and support programmes to reduce absenteeism and ESL, and guidance services for transitioning from secondary to higher education, among others. Based on the data collected for the final evaluation of the Strategy in 2020, the development of Roma-specific plans in alignment with the national strategy was noted in 12 regions, while 8 others have alluded to the Strategy (Spanish Government, 2021).

2.1.3. THE PLAN FOR THE REDUCTION OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

The Plan for the Reduction of Early School Leaving 2014-20 (*Plan para la reducción del abandono educativo temprano 2014-20* in Spanish) was a national strategy published in 2015 with the goal of supporting vulnerable students at high risk of ESL by providing funding and coordination mechanisms between institutions and local and regional governments. Actions supported include preventive measures such as external evaluations that can detect learning difficulties and awareness campaigns for students and families, as well as compensation measures supported by adult education institutions and local authorities that aim to reintegrate early school leavers between 16 and 24 years (OECD, 2020).

2.1.4. PROGRAMME FOR GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT TOWARDS ADVANCING EDUCATION

This initiative - also called *Programa de Orientación y Refuerzo al Avance de la Educación* in Spanish - was published in 2019 and aimed to work towards the achievement of the goal to reduce ESL as set out in the 2020 European Strategy. It is geared towards supporting educational institutions and contexts serving vulnerable populations, providing interventions for students from low socio-economic, immigrant, or ethnic minority background as well as special needs; and encouraging greater involvement from the community. This includes launching calls for innovative projects and interventions within schools that specifically target ESL, underachievement, grade

repetition and absenteeism especially for 5th and 6th primary as well as secondary students in public and semi-private schools. It also supports courses and seminars for teaching staff and guidance counselors working with students at risk of ESL on topics such as individualised, active, and flexible methodologies (Spanish Government, 2019). The programme had a budget of more than 80 million euros in 2019, which was divided among the different Spanish regions on the basis of the student size needing intervention (including those with special needs) and the dispersion rates between urban and rural populations (OECD, 2019).

2.1.5. SPAIN'S RECOVERY, TRANSFORMATION, AND RESILIENCE PLAN (PRTR) (2021)

Spain's Recovery, Transformation, and Resilience Plan, or *Plan de Recuperación, Transformación, y Resiliencia* launched in 2021 incorporates specific measures to reduce ESL and grade repetition and provide additional support to vulnerable students through Component 21: Modernization and digitalization of the education system (*Componente 21: Modernización y digitalización del sistema educativo*) (OECD, 2023). More specifically, two measures relevant to ESL have been introduced under Component 21: The PROA+ (*Programa para la orientación, avance y enriquecimiento educativo*) and the UAO (*Unidades de Acompañamiento y Orientación 2021-2024*).

PROA+ seeks to enhance academic achievement and foster student retention among public and semi-private schools that consist of a sizable population of vulnerable students (at least 30%). Vulnerability is understood in a broad sense as those lacking basic needs (such as food and shelter) and educational resources (such as digital equipment, school supplies, and extracurricular activities), those with special needs, and gifted students. PROA+ assigns specific funding to regional communities in Spain based on a number of indicators (such as the educational level of the 25- to 64-year-old population and enrollment rates of 15-year-olds, among others), and regional authorities would then distribute these funds to education centres based on a criteria they set. The funds may be used for acquisition of additional resources, teacher training, or the hiring of additional teaching staff (OECD, 2023, p. 15).

Meanwhile, the UAO promotes guidance and support measures to primary and post-compulsory secondary students, especially among those with high risk of grade repetition and ESL through a concerted effort among stakeholders. This includes providing tutorial sessions and educational-professional guidance and promoting closer collaboration between schools and families through tools and resources that enable their active participation in the education of their children. Like the PROA+, the budget for the UAO programme is distributed to regional communities, who are then responsible for assigning finances to selected schools serving a high number of vulnerable students or those in rural or remote areas. The UAO is financed through the European Union's NextGenerationEU funds with a total budget of 124 million euros for three academic years (2021 to 2024) (OECD, 2023, p. 16).

Lastly, the VET system was also given emphasis through PRTR's Component 20: Strategic Plan for the Promotion of VET, or *Plan Estratégico de Impulso de la Formación Profesional*. It earmarked 2 million euros to invest in reforms to transform and modernize the VET system in the country in order to respond to the evolving needs of the economic sectors, boost employability, and improve companies' productivity and competitiveness. This impetus strives to expand the share of qualified professionals (allotting 60% of the total budget) including the evaluation and accreditation of non-formal learning; the digital transformation of VET including the launch of centres of excellence; and the equitable innovation and internationalization of the VET system (Consejo Económico y Social España, 2023).

2.1.6. SPANISH ASSOCIATION OF SECOND CHANCE SCHOOLS

The Association of Second Chance Schools (O20), or *Asociación Española de Escuelas de Segunda Oportunidad*, was launched in 2015 as a social initiative based on the principles of the European Commission, being also a part of the Youth Guarantee Plan in Spain (Plan de Implantación de la Garantía Juvenil). The programme offers measures to improve employability and increase professional opportunities for unemployed young people (15-29 years old), who have not completed compulsory education due to complex needs (e.g., in poverty, health issues, from remote locations, socially disadvantage, with caring responsibilities), and who lack employability skills (CEDEFOP, n.d.). O20 intends to offer a holistic approach to minimize the risk of social exclusion among young people by providing financial and legal guidance, support with housing and health issues. The schools apply the same multidimensional approach in the curriculum, avoiding the educational practices used in traditional schools and creating a strong sense of community. It also offers personalised learning paths using innovative and participatory pedagogies that combine training and work. At the moment, there are 45 accredited second chance schools in Spain functioning primarily with public and private funding.

2.2 National education laws

2.2.1 THE ORGANIC LAW FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF EDUCATIONAL QUALITY (LOMCE) (2013)

The Organic Law for the Improvement of Educational Quality, or *La Ley Orgánica para la Mejora de la Calidad Educativa* (hereon referred to as LOMCE) was established in 2013 and started its full implementation in the 2016-2017 academic year. It replaced the Organic Law of Education, or *Ley Orgánica de Educación* in 2006 (or LOE) (OECD, 2015).

LOMCE introduced a number of changes with respect to the previous law. For instance, secondary students are awarded different qualifications - with the academic track leading to the compulsory Secondary Education (*Educación Secundaria Obligatoria* hereon referred to as ESO) certificate in Academic Education while the vocational track leading to the ESO certificate in Applied Education. These qualifications give access to different post-compulsory secondary education trajectories: the academic track (Bachillerato) and the vocational track (Applied Education Ciclos Formativos de Grado Medio, or CFGM).

The LOMCE also introduced the Basic VET pathway (Formación Profesional Básica, or FPB), where students in the first cycle of secondary education are given the option to take vocationally oriented courses and eventually access intermediate VET. This led to a Basic VET diploma but not an ESO certificate. Additionally, LOMCE established the *Programas de Mejora de Rendimiento y del Aprendizaje (PMAR)*, which replaced the previous education law LOE's *Programas de Diversificación Curricular (PDC)*. The PMAR is a two-year programme geared towards second and third year secondary students (first cycle of secondary education) experiencing learning difficulties, especially those who have repeated a grade at least once and are not deemed suitable by the education support team to be promoted to the next course. Another main difference is that the LOMCE allowed for grade repetition at any level of compulsory education, whereas this was only possible at the end of each educational cycle in previous years. While LOMCE was framed to reduce ESL, it involved measures such as grade repetition and segregation that were found to have counterproductive results, negatively impacting students' self-esteem and leading to lower levels of equity (OECD, 2018; Eurydice, 2020; Jerrim, Lopez-Agudo, & Marcenaro-Gutierrez, 2022).

2.2.2. THE ORGANIC LAW OF EDUCATION 3/2020 (LOMLOE) (2020)

This law, or *La Ley Orgánica que modifica la Ley Orgánica 2/2006, de 3 de mayo, de Educación* (LOMLOE) in Spanish, revoked LOMCE and aimed to promote modernization and inclusivity in the country's education system. Its full implementation is expected to begin in the 2023/2024 school year (Eurydice, 2021) and highlights several important differences from LOMCE relevant to addressing the ESL challenge.

Firstly, it seeks to make learning pathways even more flexible by eradicating the academic and vocational tracks in the last year of compulsory education and giving way to a singular Secondary Education (ESO) Certificate. As opposed to LOMCE, those who pursue the Basic VET training pathway during their compulsory education are also eligible to receive a secondary education qualification, enabling access to post-compulsory education programmes (Eurydice, 2021).

The LOMLOE also introduced changes for early childhood education and care (ECEC). For instance, it stipulates the development of an ECEC curriculum and aims to define regulations for teacher development and the conditions in schools (Gortazar, 2020). With regard to VET, one of LOMLOE's goals includes raising its attractiveness and social recognition by making it more accessible and expediting the process for incorporating new content into the curriculum. Lastly, the LOMLOE puts forward compensation measures, where special training programmes are offered to young people over the age of 17 without a qualification to gain either a vocational or academic certification (Eurydice, 2023a).

While LOMLOE aimed to rectify the pitfalls of previous laws (for instance, by reintroducing the education cycles in primary education and declaring grade repetition as a final recourse, only allowing a maximum of one grade repetition during primary education and twice throughout the duration of students' compulsory education), it continues to implement placing third and fourth year secondary students in separate groups by reinstating the *Programa de Diversificación Curricular* (PDC). This runs counter to existing evidence showing how segregation practices can exacerbate, rather than mitigate, students' disengagement and ESL.

2.2.3. DUAL VOCATIONAL TRAINING MODEL (2012)

Enhancing the VET system has become the cornerstone of Spain's national strategy in the recent decade, especially as a measure to combat ESL (European Commission, 2017). In 2012, the Dual Vocational Training Model was introduced, which involves a combination of training in VET institutions and employment in companies. The Spanish Ministry for Education, Culture, and Sports (MECD) define the basic requirements while the employers are jointly responsible for the design and implementation of the training offer. The number of students participating in the dual VET system increased almost six-fold four years after its launch (from approximately 4,292 in 2012/13 to 24,000 in 2016/17 based on provisional figures) (OECD, 2020).

2.2.4. ORGANIC LAW 2022 ON VET (LOIFP)

Based on an aspiration to integrate the VET system under one framework as laid out in the Plan to Modernize VET (*El Plan de Modernización de la Formación Profesional*), the Organic Law on VET, or *Ley Orgánica 3/2022, de 31 de marzo, de Ordenación e Integración de la Formación Profesional* (LOIFP) was established (OECD, 2023). The law, which took effect in April 2022, aims to make the training offer for VET as flexible as possible to allow participation from learners from diverse ages and educational backgrounds and accommodate changing interests, expectations, and requirements (Eurydice, 2023a). It strives to create education pathways where learning is accumulative and certifiable, including forms of microtraining, allowing learners to continue education or training at any point. Overall, the law aims to leverage VET through (1) recognition of prior learning and accreditation of professional

competences, (2) allow for greater access to VET and professional guidance support, and (3) the integration of digitalisation, innovation, and entrepreneurship in the Spanish VET system. There are two training modes in LOIFP - intensive and general - with the former being implemented through a training contract with a company. Pursuing a formal mechanism through contracts aims to emphasise the value that the learner contributes to the employer (Consejo Económico y Social España, 2023).

As an additional step, the Royal Decree 272/2022 was published in May 2022, which establishes the Spanish Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning – or MECU in its acronym in Spanish. It aims to define the levels and qualifications of the educational system, thereby allowing for their classification, comparability, and transparency (Eurydice, 2023a).

2.3 Regional policies aimed at reducing ESL and underachievement

As mentioned earlier, the Spanish education system is decentralized which means that the decision-making power and execution of educational policies is shared by the government administration such as *the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training* (MEFP), regional authorities such as *Education Councils* (Consejerías de Educación) as well as municipal governments. Besides, schools have autonomy in the choice of pedagogy and school organization. The Ministry executes general government guidelines and regulates key aspects of the system. On a regional level, educational authorities generate their own legislation based on the government regulations which is later implemented in the education system on the territory of the region. In this manner, the majority of policies on financing, student number per classroom, and school infrastructure are proposed by regional authorities. For example, in 2020, 97% of the public funds on education below the university level were managed by the regional authorities (OECD, 2023).

It is also important to highlight the role of the municipalities in tackling ESL. According to *the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces*, the majority of the initiatives on preventing absenteeism in schools are local. Thus, regions and municipalities in Spain are key contributors in the elaboration of educational policies and programs including those targeting ESL. The decentralized system guarantees that the policies are adapted to the regional and local context and serve the real needs of the population. The following are some examples of regional policies geared towards reducing ESL and underachievement over the last decade.

2.3.1 LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Learning Communities (*comunidades de aprendizaje*), which have originated in Spain, was identified by the European Commission (2011) as a promising school-wide strategy that fosters students' well-being and caters to a diversity of learner profiles. They facilitate the social and cultural transformation of educational centers and the communities around them with the objective of improving academic results and diversity. Learning Communities involve innovative pedagogies and methodologies such as dialogic learning and education for parents, which strives to foster exchanges based on the principles of equality, respect, openness, and solidarity, with the distinctive feature of encouraging schools to open their doors to all members of the community.

The process of becoming a Learning Community involves different phases. Firstly, the stakeholders engage in a joint reflection and brainstorming on the motivation for engaging in a process of change. This is followed by an approval of relevant actors such as the school staff, leadership, and families. Once a decision is made, the stakeholders will collectively decide on how to achieve this change, and a committee formed by representatives of all actors engage in following up the process of implementation and change (European Commission, 2011). The success of the project is measured by improvements in learning-teaching processes, permanence of students in the education system and overall satisfaction of the participants.

Since its first implementation in 2000, Learning Communities have now been adopted at the national level and identified as a recommended action for reducing ESL at the European level (European Commission, 2011b). In Catalonia, CREA (the Centre of Research on Theories and Practices against Inequalities) of the University of Barcelona extended Learning Communities to early childhood education centers, primary and secondary schools. In 1995, the model proposed by CREA was implemented in compulsory education and since then the number of schools recognized as Learning Communities has increased. Currently, Learning Communities are being implemented in a number of regions, such as Andalusia's Network of Learning Communities as stipulated by the Order of the 8th of June in 2012 (Junta de Andalucía & Consejería de Educación, 2014), in the province of Aragon through a Departmental Order in 2003 (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2023), and in other regions such as Castilla-La Mancha, Basque Country, Valencia and in an autonomous city of Ceuta (The Network of Learning Communities, 2023).

One of the distinguished evidence-based projects within the framework of Learning Communities is the project INCLUD-ED (2008), Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from Education (Flecha, 2011; 2015), co-financed by the European Commission. This project was recognized by the European Commission for its high social impact and as the only research project in the field of social sciences among the 10 research stories of success across the globe. The aim of the project was to analyze what kind of educational practices perpetuate social inequalities, and which, in contrast, increase academic success as a result of promoting social cohesion and diversity. The main contribution of INCLUD-ED as a successful measure is characterized by redistribution of the existing school and community resources to facilitate improvement for all students, instead of employing segregation measures based on students' level of ability. Currently, a network of Learning Communities in Catalonia has also been developed (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2023).

2.3.2 COMPREHENSIVE PLAN FOR THE ROMA COMMUNITY IN CATALONIA

Public policies at the European and national level in favour of the Roma Community to develop in 2008 and, more intensively, in 2011, following the official recognition of the Roma people as an ethnic minority in 2005. However, local efforts had already begun in Catalonia in 2001, when two Resolutions were adopted by the Catalan Parliament around the development of a plan for the Roma Community in the region and the recognition of the identity of the Roma people and the value of their cultural heritage (Espinell et al., 2019).

On the basis of these two Resolutions and following a 2003 study on the Roma people's needs by the Department of Family and Well-Being of the Generalitat de Catalunya, the Catalan Government developed its first Comprehensive Plan for the Roma Community (2005-2008), or *Plan Integral del Pueblo Gitano en Catalunya*. Its overarching goal was to comprehensively address the various barriers faced by the Roma Community in Catalonia and achieve a socio-cultural and economic parity with the broader Catalan society of which they are a part. In addition, the Plan sought to foster and acknowledge the cultural traits of the Roma People. This Plan outlined measures such as the promotion of the Romani language, support for the development of awareness programmes in the education system, and dedicated plans for the advancement and training of Roma women, among others. Since then, the Plan has been renewed every few years (Espinell et al., 2019).

In its third edition from 2014-2016, the Plan outlined evidence-based and successful educational actions (SEA) fostering inclusion. These involved interactive groups, dialogic gatherings, training for families, guided libraries, family and community involvement in decision-making as well as in school and extracurricular activities, and the adoption of the dialogic approach through consensus building especially among students. It also outlined the responsible bodies for implementing the Plan, specific objectives, as well as a set of indicators to monitor its

progress. Specifically in the realm of education, the desired results are (1) reduce absenteeism and improve the academic success and competence levels of students from five priority schools, (2) increase the rate of participation in early schooling among children between 3 and 6 years old, (3) enhance the suitability, competence, and motivation of teachers and various educational stakeholders in schools with a significant number of Roma students, and (4) increase the number of students in post-compulsory and higher education. Specific measures that were identified include the promotion of SEA such as interactive groups and dialogic gatherings, guidance for centres, talks about SEA in priority schools, the promotion of Learning Communities, informative sessions with positive role models and expert professionals on early schooling, guidance on aligning teaching staff with the needs of priority schools, training groups for access to higher education, monitoring of students' academic trajectories, and facilitating connections between Roma students with teachers in training, among others.

2.3.3 DIVERSITY IN CEUTA AND MELILLA

In 2010 and later in 2016, *the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports* released the order in support of diversity in the educational centers of Ceuta and Melilla. The school leaders, therefore, were encouraged by the local authorities to propose anti-ESL and inclusive initiatives at the school level, among them being 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, who historically constitute a large proportion of the population in the region. One of these successful initiatives is a project which promotes collaboration of teachers and parents in the framework of Learning Communities. Other projects involve the implementation of pedagogical practices centered on social equality (Jímenez-Gámez, 2019).

2.3.4 PROGRAMME FOR ACADEMIC IMPROVEMENT AND INCLUSION IN EXTREMADURA

Within the European strategic framework of inclusive and quality education for all, the region of Extremadura implements the Programme for Academic Improvement and Inclusion (*Programa de Mejora del Rendimiento y la Inclusión Socioeducativa del Alumnado*) regulated by the Order of 15th of September, 2015 of *the Consejería de Educación y Empleo Junta de Extremadura* and co-financed by the European Social Fund. This initiative emerged as a part of the *Plan of Educational Success and Reduction of Early School Abandonment* in the region of Extremadura 2014-2020 and goes in line with other programs such as IMPULSA, COMUNIC@ (Soler et al., 2021).

The programme aims to increase academic success and decrease the negative effect of socio-economic, cultural and ethnic factors that contribute to academic failure among the students from disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g. absenteeism and dropout). With this purpose, participating primary and secondary schools are required to present an analysis of socio-cultural context where the school is located and carry out interventions in two main areas: with students and with their families following the recommendations of the European Social Fund (García- Martínez, 2021). The programme focuses on reduction of and social exclusion among the students at risk by improving their performance in key skills such as language and mathematics.

3. Policy review

This section outlines what research says about the success or failure of Spain's policies addressing ESL and underachievement, the suggestions made for their improvement, and any recommendations for continuation or discontinuation of these policies. It should be noted, however, that policy impact in general is a slow and gradual process thus requiring caution in the interpretation of the findings (Gortazar, 2020) - especially for more recent reforms.

3.1 Policy review based on academic literature

The policies reviewed and the main features they adopt have yielded varied results based on academic literature. In the case of PROA, García-Perez and Hidalgo Hidalgo's (2014) found that the programme was associated with improved academic performance in reading, based on a study of schools where it had been implemented for at least one academic year and using PISA results from 2012. PROA was also found to yield performance improvement in mathematics in the short-term (through the guidance support initiative PAE) and science in the long-term (through the reinforcement programme PAR). Among the two PROA initiatives, PAE proved more effective in the short term and PAR in the long term. This can be explained by the nature of these programmes: whereas PAE focused on providing additional student support through extracurricular activities, PAR involved other types of material and infrastructure support such as school supplies, libraries, and laboratories, among others. Lastly, the authors pointed to PROA's accumulative effect, where students whose schools had participated in PAE for an additional year showed better academic performance especially in reading and mathematics, while schools where PAR was extended to an additional two years showed even better results, more notably in reading. Indeed, adopting positive discrimination strategies by providing targeted support to disadvantaged schools and students as embodied by the PROA is one of the recommended preventive strategies outlined by the European Commission (2011a; 2011b). However, the impact of PROA in Ceuta was criticized by some educators producing limited effects in the social context of the city (Jímenez-Gámez, 2019), pointing to the importance of taking local realities into account when implementing such interventions.

Positive results were also shown by the Association of Second Chance Schools based on the latest evaluation report (The University of Valencia & The Autonomous University of Barcelona, 2021), which utilised data from 1592 student trajectories, a number of student questionnaires, and interviews with school leadership and professionals from the companies where internships were done. It can be concluded from the report that overall student satisfaction with the school climate and curriculum was high. Most importantly, half of the alumni returned to schooling, and three quarters could find employment months after graduation.

Meanwhile, LOMCE was found to have generated less than favorable outcomes. Despite the downward trend of ESL rates in previous years, Spain's progress slowed down in the years immediately after its implementation (Gortazar, 2020). Following a discourse analysis of policy documents and interviews with government officials, Rambla (2018) concluded that while the reforms in Spain aligns with the overall European framing of the importance of tackling ESL, they operate under different theories of change, with Spain prioritising measures on tracking and the role of school leadership — as exemplified by the LOMCE — while Europe highlights the need to veer away from segregation and promote an engaging curriculum. Earlier assessments on Spanish policies by the OECD also alluded to the use of grade repetition in the Spanish educational system as a counterproductive measure to reducing ESL (OECD 2018; 2020).

The LOMLOE, which revoked the LOMCE in 2020, aimed to mitigate some of the challenges posed by LOMCE. According to Gortazar (2020), under this law, promoting a student to the next grade would rely less on the number of subjects failed or passed – as previous practice would dictate – and more on the collective decision of the education support staff regarding the student's acquired competences. Providing additional individualised support and early diagnosis as well as the reintroduction of primary education's two-year cycles in the LOMLOE could also further reduce ESL rates. Despite these positive elements, Gortazar (2020) identified some of its limitations that should be addressed to tackle Spain's existing educational challenges. For instance, teacher training policies need to be strengthened and a concrete plan of action remains to be seen. Additionally, while the LOMLOE stipulates that all students, regardless of their successful completion of compulsory secondary education, shall receive a certificate outlining the competences achieved, it does not specify the subsequent learning pathway that the student can

access (Gortazar, 2020), thereby lacking the clarity and the direction needed for them to stay in the training and education system. Lastly, while it aimed to reduce grade repetition compared to LOMCE and views it as a last recourse, it is still being implemented in the Spanish education system, which does not fully align with what the scientific evidence dictates on the ineffectiveness of this measure (Jerrim et al., 2022; Högberg & Lindgren, 2023; Longas-Mayayo et al., 2021).

As for VET policies, which have been one of the main strategies in Spain to address ESL, a number of limitations have been identified in literature. Five years after the dual VET was established in the country in 2012, enrollment remained low likely due to the partial rollout in some regions as well as the low relevance of VET offerings in the local economies (European Commission, 2017). A 2016 evaluation provided a number of recommendations to enhance the policy's impact, including enhancing its scale quality, increasing the awareness of the model, fostering stakeholder cooperation, and establishing a framework that will govern its development and implementation (Serrano, Pérez, & Peiro, 2016). A national report on dual VET in 2023 (Consejo Económico y Social España, 2023) also pointed out the need to have a more concrete framework for the training programme and evaluation in collaboration with employers, the implementation of lifelong learning and continuous training for teaching staff of VET centers as stipulated in the LOIFP, improved training and accreditation systems for trainers in companies to be initiated by regional governments, provision of high quality professional guidance and support, and the establishment of minimum and obligatory remuneration for dual VET learners, among others. The report also mentioned that despite the significant financial investments in VET put forward by the PRTR, the strategies identified are too broad and lack concrete guidance to achieve the programme's objectives, thereby limiting its possible achievements.

3.1.2 Regional policies

The early literature on Learning Communities and its effects in school engagement among Spanish students, especially from vulnerable groups, indicated positive outcomes in one of the participating schools of Castilla-La Mancha, where dialogic activities were introduced (Díez-Palomar & Flecha, 2010). Besides, it was found that Learning Communities facilitate creation of mutually enriching relationships between a school and other stakeholders such as universities and volunteers in the province of Catalonia (Aguilera et al, 2010). Another author pointed out that successful learning outcomes in Learning Communities can be achieved without additional investments, but rather with reallocation of existing funds (Guzmán Romero, 2012). In Andalusia, the qualitative study of the *Junta de Andalucía* and *Consejería de Educación* (2014) on the stakeholder perceptions of the Learning Communities demonstrate that the majority (85%) of the school leaders of the Network agree on a high impact of the project. They consider that the majority of teachers, students and the families as well as volunteers react positively to the engagement in the Learning Communities. Furthermore, the study indicates that student performance on basic literacy and numeracy skills is generally higher in the schools pertaining to the Network, although it recognizes the necessity of long-term evaluations to make more affirmative conclusions on this aspect of the program. The educational centers of the Network also score higher than other schools of Andalusia with similar socio-economic status on positive trends in the following indicators: absenteeism and dropout, school climate and sense of community.

As for the outcomes of the Comprehensive Plan for the Roma Community in Catalonia, significant progress was noted at the school or regional level. For instance, Flecha & Soler (2013) found that the use of dialogic learning interactions (as has been adopted in Catalonia through the Comprehensive Plan for the Roma Community) led to significantly improved academic outcomes among Roma children in a primary school in the province of Albacete, including higher average scores in standardised tests, higher enrollment rates, and decreased absenteeism. In García-Carrión and Palomar's (2015) study, positive results were also observed when interactive groups – a type of

SEA – were implemented in a Spanish school serving students with ethnic or immigrant backgrounds. Not only did parents perceive a positive improvement in mathematics among their children but the students observably enhanced their academic performance in the subject. Meanwhile, Espinel and colleagues' (2019) study revealed that the implementation of SEA in a school in Tarragona as part of the Comprehensive Plan for the Roma Community reduced the average rate of absenteeism among Roma students from 46% in 2011 to virtually disappearing completely at less than 1% in 2015. Significant improvement in literacy skills was also noted among early childhood education students, where their ability to identify syllabic sounds went from below 32% in 2011-2012 to more than 92% in 2014-2015. Additionally, similar improvements were noted among third year primary students, where the rate of passing in diagnostic examinations for basic skills increased from 18.18% to 91.66% only after two academic years. Lastly, the Plan's measure to provide training for access to post-compulsory schooling among Roma students showed a progressive increase in the fourfold rate of participation in the programme (from 6 to 24 Roma students) along its five editions, leading to a total of 19 who have successfully passed the university access examinations.

The statistics for the autonomous city of Ceuta point at a dramatic drop in ESL rates from around 40% to around 15% in the last decade (MEFP, 2022). The literature shows that this may be explained by individual efforts of educational centers in promotion of linguistic diversity, experimentation with alternative curriculum as well as emergence of innovative school projects to promote social inclusion.

Extremadura is one of the regions that has shown the most significant drop in ESL rates on its territory. Starting with 32% of abandonment cases in 2012, the region achieved a more than 20% decline in ESL in the last decade amounting to 10.8 % in 2022. The *Council of Education and Employment* (la Consejería de Educación y Empleo, 2017) suggests that this reduction can be primarily linked to the active implementation and the joint effect of the programmes from the series of Educational Success (*Mejora del Éxito Educativo*). This includes the programme for the Improvement of Performance and Inclusion as well as other projects such as REMA, COMUNICA@, IMPULSA, and ÍTACA.

3.2 Comparative analysis of successful and less effective policies

3.2.1 POLICY ANALYSIS IN THE LIGHT OF EUROPEAN COMMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS

The downward pattern in Spain's average ESL rates and its reduction by 10.8 percentage points since 2012 (Eurostat, 2023b) coincide with a slowing down of the Spanish economy over the period (representing a lower opportunity risk for students and thus greater likelihood to stay in school). Nevertheless, a review of Spain's national and regional policies reveals certain features that align with Europe's recommendations on the preventive, intervention, and compensatory strategies that have shown to contribute to reducing ESL and underachievement (see Table 1). Some of the recommended preventive strategies have been incorporated into Spain's policies, especially positive discrimination strategies and provision of targeted support for vulnerable schools (through the PROA and the Programme for Guidance and Support towards Advancing Education) as well as strengthening vocational pathways through recent reforms such as adopting the Dual VET model in 2012 as well as the LOIFP in 2022. According to ReferNet (2014), VET figures as a key factor in Spain's strategy to reduce ESL, especially that students in Spain tend to leave school during secondary education. As for intervention measures, whole school approaches (such as the UAO and Learning Communities), teacher training policies, and tutoring support through a variety of initiatives) have also been noted. Meanwhile, compensation measures in the form of recognition and validation of prior learning, special training programmes to reintegrate youth into education, and second chance schemes have also been implemented.

Table 1. Preventive, intervention, and compensatory features of the policies reviewed in Spain (following the European Commission framework)

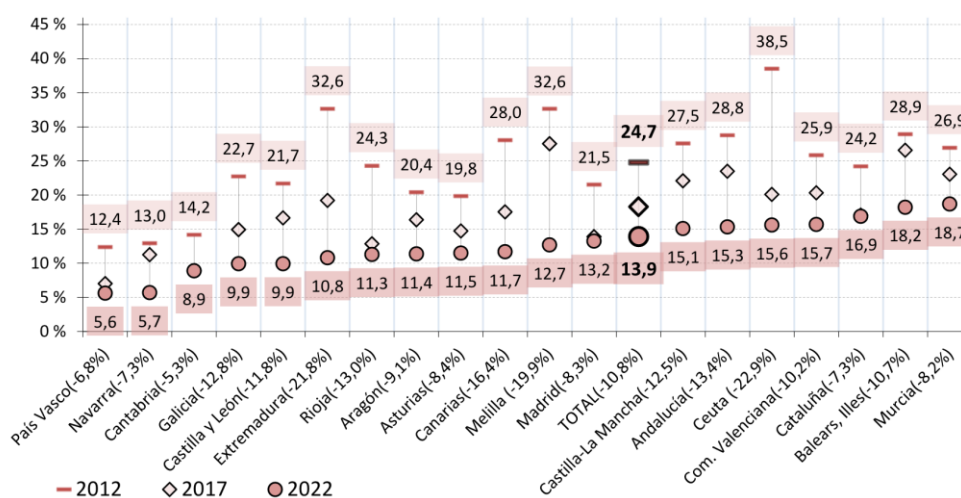
Category	Feature	Policy example
Prevention	Targeted support to schools in disadvantaged areas	PROA; Programme for Guidance and Support towards Advancing Education; PROA+*
	Involvement of pupils and parents in decision-making	Learning Communities; Comprehensive Plan for the Roma Community in Catalonia
	Relevant and engaging curriculum	Learning Communities; LOIFP*
	Systematic language support	Diversity in Ceuta and Melilla
	Strengthening vocational pathways	Dual VET; PRTR*; LOIFP*
	Closer link between education and work	Dual VET; PRTR*; LOIFP*; Spanish Association of Second Chance Schools
	Whole school approaches	UAO*; Learning Communities; Comprehensive Plan for the Roma Community in Catalonia
Intervention	School-wide strategies	Learning Communities; Comprehensive Plan for the Roma Community in Catalonia
	Enhancing the involvement of parents in schools	Learning Communities; Comprehensive Plan for the Roma Community in Catalonia
	Raise parental awareness of ESL	Plan for the Reduction of Early School Leaving; Comprehensive Plan for the Roma Community in Catalonia
	Networking with actors outside the school	Learning Communities; Comprehensive Plan for the Roma Community in Catalonia
	Teacher education, empowerment, and motivation	Programme for Guidance and Support towards Advancing Education; Comprehensive Plan for the Roma Community in Catalonia
	Student-focused strategies (tutoring and mentoring)	PROA; Programme for Guidance and Support towards Advancing Education; Comprehensive Plan for the Roma Community in Catalonia; PROA+*; UAO*;
	Improving guidance	Diversity in Ceuta and Melilla; Comprehensive Plan for the Roma Community in Catalonia
	Extra-curricular and out-of-school activities	PROA; Comprehensive Plan for the Roma Community in Catalonia
Compensation	Recognition and validation of prior learning	LOIFP*
	Support to re-enter mainstream education	Spanish Association of Second Chance Schools; LOMLOE*

*Policies launched in the last three years where results are either partial or not yet available

Taking into account the evolution of ESL rates among regions as depicted in Figure 4, those with historically high ESL rates such as Ceuta and Extremadura have successfully been reduced by almost 20 percentage points to below 15% over the last decade, which could have been influenced by the implementation of policies shown to reduce ESL such as the adoption of Learning Communities in the case of Ceuta and the Programme for Academic Improvement and Inclusion in the case of Extremadura. Andalusia has also shown significant improvement, coinciding with its long-standing participation in PROA as well as participation in Learning Communities.

Figure 4. Evolution of ESL rates in Spanish autonomous communities (source: MEFP, 2022²)

Gráfico 9: Evolución del abandono educativo temprano por comunidad autónoma.



Despite this progress, the 2020 European Semester Country Report noted an increase in ESL rates in 7 out of the 19 Spanish regions in 2018 as well as a slowing down of ESL reduction from 2017 to 2019 (European Commission, 2020; also see Figure 1). This coincides with the implementation of LOMCE, whereby a number of supposedly preventive and intervention measures proved counterproductive. For instance, completing Basic VET during students' secondary education led to a diploma in Basic VET but not a Secondary Education Certificate, which limited students' options for post-compulsory education. Completion rates in Basic VET - which aimed to target those at risk of ESL - also remained low at 50% (European Commission, 2020), and among that do, only 60% continue to pursue intermediate VET (Consejo Económico y Social España, 2023). As for the adoption of the dual VET programme, a recent report shows that while enrollment rates are increasing, this modality still involves a low share of the overall VET participation in Spain at 3.7%, with Andalusia, Catalonia, and Madrid hosting 68% of the total number of dual VET students in the academic year 2020-2021 (Consejo Económico y Social España, 2023).

Looking at the impact of regional policies, progress to reduce ESL has been uneven between the Spanish regions. For instance, according to Eurostat's (2023a) NUTS (Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics) data from 2022, the Eastern territories show the highest ESL rates at 16.6%, compared to the lowest among Northeastern territories at only 7.7%. National data also reveal that there is a significant difference between the highest and lowest performing autonomous community (or comunidad autónoma) in relation to ESL, with the Basque Country's ESL rates at only 5.6% compared to Murcia's at 18.7% - a difference of around 13 percentage points (see Figure 4). The Basque Country's industrial history and strong VET system, coupled with what Bayón-Calvo and colleagues (2020) identify as coordination mechanisms, and measures oriented towards managing diversity and reducing ESL, likely

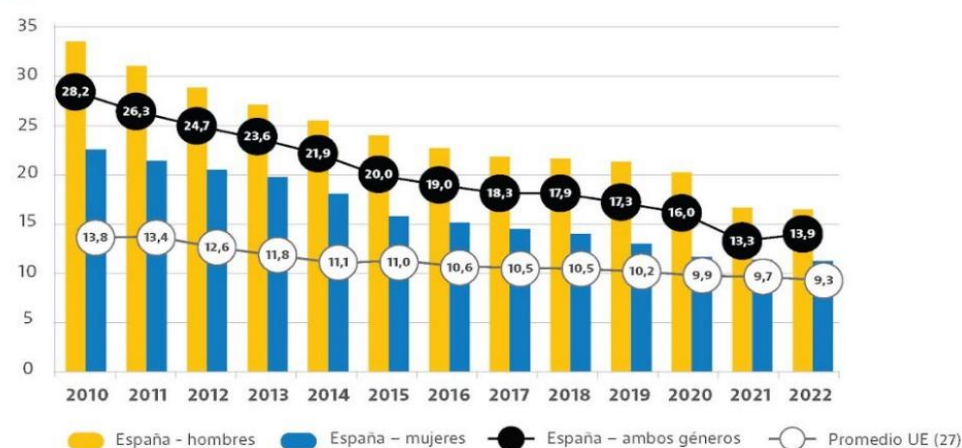
² Some results may have been affected by a small sample size (MEFP, 2022)

have contributed to this trend. Indeed, it was the pioneering region for the implementation of multi-stakeholder policies such as Learning Communities (European Commission, 2011). According to Vidmane & Veldin (2018), these regional differences can also be partly explained by their economic profile, with northern regions such as the Basque Country and Cantabria having a bigger share of industrial sectors – which fosters VET participation and lower ESL rates – as well as a higher investment in education.

With regard to gender, it can be seen from Figure 6 that the overall trend in the past decade for both genders is downward, although males have shown higher rates of dropout compared to females throughout the period. In 2022, the difference in the ESL rates between males (16.5%) and females (11.2%) was still significant (5.3 %), although it was reduced compared to the difference in 2012 (8.4%). However, taking into account the proportions between both genders, the rate for men has decreased almost by half (46.8) from 2012 to 2022. It should be noted though that female rates are at their historically closest point to EU average in 2022 (OECD, 2023). These figures suggest that the policies against ESL have not been sufficient in improving the situation for young males, aside from the gendered labour market participation in low-qualified sectors such as tourism and construction.

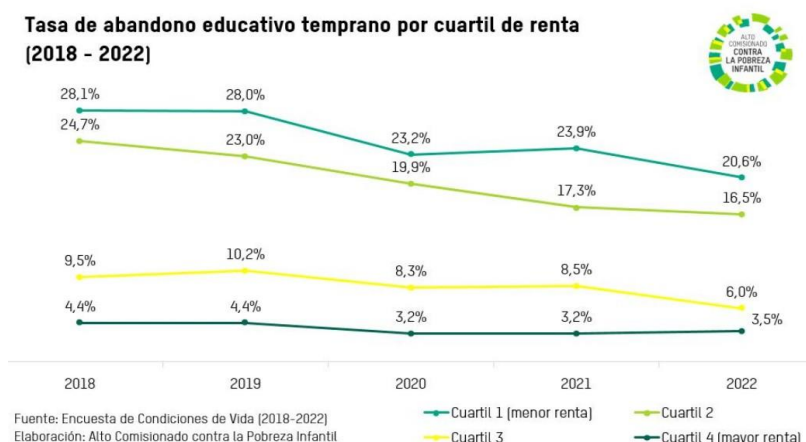
Figure 5. Evolution of Spain's ESL rates by gender (Source: OECD, 2023)

Gráfico 2. Tasas de abandono escolar temprano en España y en la Unión Europea, 2010-2022 (en %)



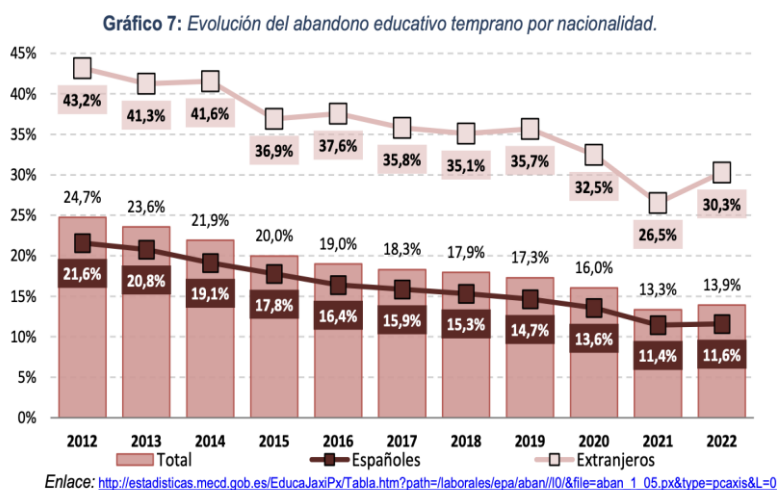
As for socioeconomic status, the *Alto Comisión contra la Pobreza Infantil* (ACPI) reports that Spain has notably reduced its ESL rates among the most poverty-stricken children populations in recent years, a general decrease of 8.5% since 2018 (from 28.1% to 20.6%) (ACPI, 2020). A similar decline was observed for children from low- to medium-income backgrounds, at 16.5 % in 2022. Meanwhile, a more limited progress is observed among children with medium- to high-income families (6%) and high- income families (3.5%) in 2022. It can be concluded that young people with low economic resources are at a higher risk of leaving school early, despite an overall positive trend for all categories of income. Public investments in scholarships and grants, programmes such as PROA+, tutoring, educational leisure activities and investments in VET are recommended by the Commission to continue reducing the ESL rates in Spain.

Figure 6. ESL rates by income quartile (2018-2022) (Source: ACPI, 2020)



Considering the students' nationality, the gap between non-Spanish and Spanish nationals decreased, but not significantly, over the decade (from 22.6% to 19.7%). Based on 2022 data, the ESL rate among the non-Spanish population is more than double of the population with Spanish citizenship (see Figure 7). While there are ad-hoc and regional policies that could aid migrant children overcome cultural and linguistic barriers (Bayón-Calvo et al., 2020, also from the experience of Ceuta and Melilla), coming from a migrant background is still largely treated as one of several educational vulnerabilities at the national level. As such, it lacks targeted and centralised policies - thereby possibly contributing to the slow progress in this regard.

Figure 7. ESL rates in Spain by nationality (Source: MEFP, 2022)



As for ESL reduction among Roma - the largest ethnic minority population in Spain - the Final Report on the National Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Roma 2012-2020 (Spanish Government, 2021) found some progress in enhancing the education outcomes of Roma students during this period, including a reduction in absenteeism at the primary level and higher participation in secondary education especially among males. As discussed in the previous section, significant progress was also noted at the school or regional level (Flecha & Soler, 2013; Espinel et al., 2019); yet progress remains to be seen with a national scope, where ESL rates remain high at 70% while only 20% have a Secondary Education Certificate. These findings point to limited progress in addressing the ESL issue for this

population and the need to further enhance national policy efforts on this front, specifically in terms of providing adequate funding, translation of the Strategy to robust measures, a review of the appropriateness of the implementation strategy, and stronger coordination between the national strategy and regional-local implementation (Spanish Government, 2021). For regional actions such as the Comprehensive Plan for the Roma Community in Catalonia, slow progress in some schools was attributed to the short duration and/or only partial adoption of SEA in the learning settings (Espinell et al., 2019). No Eurostat data was found on the trends in education among the Roma population in Spain.

3.3 Policies, gaps and solutions

3.3.1 GAPS IDENTIFIED IN EXISTING POLICIES

In this section we present the gaps in the Spanish policies targeting ESL and the characteristics that made them less effective in addressing the issue. We will conclude by summarizing the recommendations and potential solutions found in the literature.

Gaps in policy design and implementation

While preventive, intervention, compensation, and whole school policies have been introduced in Spain in recent years, a number of gaps remain. Overall, it can be concluded from the discussion in the previous sections that there are both advantages and challenges to the decentralized structure of educational policies combating ESL and underachievement in Spain, with notable differences in outcomes among the regions. The OECD report (2023) suggests that this may be due to a **dissonance between the national and regional** political priorities. The regions in Spain have autonomy in the implementation of most of the policies regarding ESL, and they tend to be more affected by the changes in the agendas of local governments and to the lack of financing of long-term projects. It is interesting to note that while the majority of prevention programmes are financed by the public sector, a large portion of return policies are developed by social institutions with mixed or private funding (Soler et al., 2021). As a result, many regional programmes fail to apply a comprehensive, whole school approach that would involve families, social services and employers prescribed by the national policy and European objectives for 2020.

Another gap observed in many preventive policies is that while there exists a national strategy for specific populations such as Roma, they lack specific and actionable guidance for budget allocation and implementation. Also, preventive measures such as **anti-segregation policies** in school admissions as well as policies to support **multilingual teaching** are yet to be explicitly included in Spain's top-down or national policies (Donlevy et al., 2019) as the experience for Ceuta shows (Jimenez-Gamez, 2019). Furthermore, Carrasco et al. (2018) refer to the problem of underachievement by low-income immigrant students as an invisible problem in the Spanish education system. They are often more exposed to expulsion from the education system due to lack of professional guidance and support as well as awareness of the key role teachers play in the processes of social inclusion. **ESL among non-national students** is an issue that is often **normalised** and expected.

As ESL is highly concentrated in post-compulsory education or in the transition to this stage and in VET (Carrasco, 2018), many measures target this stage and employment opportunities for the population at this age. However, less effort is put into prevention at early stages such as **early prediction of the risk of ESL** long before the first signs appear based on statistical data for vulnerable groups, followed by **early diagnosis and early intervention schemes** (OECD, 2023). Indeed, it appears that the role of **equitable and high-quality ECEC** as a measure to reduce ESL has not received considerable policy attention in Spain amidst its importance in establishing a strong foundation in early years and developing resilience (European Commission, 2011; 2013a).

Gaps in policy evaluation

Although there is an abundance of publications on national and regional strategic plans and instructions to be implemented on each level and the high levels of policy diffusion (García Martínez et al, 2021), the data on evaluation of the impact of educational policies in Spain is scarce and not publicly available, the same conclusion echoed by Sarceda-Gorgoso (2018) and the OECD (2023). There is also a **lack of indicators** as well as **gaps in statistical information**, especially in Spain's ESL reduction strategy for Roma students (Spanish Government, 2017; 2021) as well as in the dual VET programme (Consejo Económico y Social España, 2023). Furthermore, the literature signals the **lack of systematic, rigorous analysis of the policies** that would permit identifying the main tenets of successful and less effective programmes to create a blueprint for future policies.

Overall, the existing evidence and evaluations on the success of the policies reviewed must also be understood against the **wider socio-economic context**. It has been noted that the incidence of ESL increases with higher economic growth and decreases with reduced economic activity as a result of high opportunity costs for students (Bayón-Calvo, 2020), especially in situations where an improved economic situation for the family or increased independence is desired (European Commission, 2011b). This appears to be the case in Spain where a significant share of economic activity involves low-qualified seasonal sectors such as construction and tourism with limited pathways for career progression (OECD, 2023; García Martínez et al., 2021). Additionally, some critics avert to take caution in interpretation of the figures among smaller regions such as La Rioja, Navarra, Cantabria, and Ceuta and Melilla, as this may be due to **sampling errors**.

3.3.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY APPROACHES BASED ON SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE AND RESEARCH TO ADDRESS UNDERACHIEVEMENT

Recommendations for policy design and implementation

The policy review points to examples of initiatives that national and regional governments can continue to support and scale to further reduce ESL and underachievement. Notably, the adoption of whole school approaches - a key feature of the European strategy for addressing these issues (European Commission, 2015), has shown demonstrable results when responding to the needs of students at risk of ESL. These come in the form of Learning Communities and SEA, rooted in evidence-based interventions, that facilitate the social and cultural transformation of schools and communities by adopting multi-stakeholder participation and principles of equality, respect, openness, and solidarity. Vulnerable groups should be involved in decision-making processes, where the **creation of networks** of educators, schools, and families to share experiences and where the efforts of **individual centers and social initiatives** in effective policy development are valued.

Additionally, drawing from the evidence from the gaps in the policies against ESL in Spain, these include enhancing **access to and affordability of high-quality ECEC programmes among disadvantaged pupils** (Donlevy et al., 2019), promoting **high-quality teacher education** for inclusiveness and support of vulnerable populations (OECD, 2023; Soler et al, 2021) as well as enhancing educators and teachers' capacities for providing professional **guidance** to prevent underachievement and attend to early symptoms of ESL at all levels, and in particular, at transition points. The guidance should also be aimed at **raising awareness** among students about destructive consequences of dropping out as the data suggests a high percentage of people who later regretted their decision (Soler et al, 2021). At the same time, the Spanish education system is encouraged to improve the negative perceptions of the system found among young people most susceptible to ESL by promoting the quality and image of all different educational trajectories – including non-university pathways – and reinforce the idea of VET as a valuable form of

learning. This recommendation should also consider the **regular revision of the curricular contents** to correspond to student needs and to **increase trust** between schools and young people, as well as **creation of spaces enabling the active local participation** of those from disadvantaged populations and minorities (Spanish Government, 2021). Equally as important, Spain should continue to pursue **evidence-informed policymaking** that veers away from ineffective measures such as grade repetition, early tracking, and segregation.

Regarding the return trajectories, it is often the case that young people have passed through various pathways to return to the system of education due to the lack of adequate information students face at the moment of making-decisions (Soler et al, 2021). It is therefore recommended to **establish channels of communication** with young people who want to return to the system, facilitating them to make informed decisions and taking into account the individual circumstances. Besides, government bodies and educational centres should be encouraged to exhaust various means to assist the students at the risk of repetition such as **public grants and financing** from European funds (Spanish Government, 2021). Given the high volume of dropout in the Spanish context, it is necessary to incentivise programmes facilitating the return of young people to the system. For this purpose, it would be of great importance to strengthen return policies by **developing collaborations between public and private sectors** (Soler et al, 2021; García Martínez et al, 2021; Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2013). Related to this, it has been demonstrated that **greater coordination** between the education councils, local administrations, social services and youth institutes is essential in addressing complex issues such as ESL.

Recommendations for policy evaluation

The literature recommends **increasing the number of external evaluations** of public policies as only a few of the programmes promoted by social initiatives have been evaluated externally (Soler et al, 2021). Other sources point at the necessity of including promoting both qualitative and quantitative **monitoring mechanisms** of evolution of the programmes, student itineraries and profiles as well as their family background (Sarceda-Gorgoso, 2018; García Martínez et al, 2021). Furthermore, OECD (2023) suggests identifying **common indicators for vulnerability** of educational centres taking into account regional and local circumstances with consequent testing of the suitability of the indicators. Based on this, a thematic diagnosis of the specific needs and challenges by region, by target group, and by gender would also add to policy assessment. **Establishing indicators a priori** to aid in the systematic data collection and exploring methodological approaches that involve less artificial control groups is also suggested (Serrano & Sóler, n.d.; García Martínez et al., 2021; Spanish Government, 2021).

4. Key takeaways

This report presents the following highlights that summarize the national and regional policies' effectiveness in tackling ESL in Spain.

- Spain has shown a slow but significant progress in reducing ESL rates over the last decade, likely shaped by the economic trends in the country combined with the implementation of policies yielding varied results.
- Spain's policies reflect features that were shown to support the reduction of ESL and underachievement. As for preventive measures, the adoption of whole school approaches - a key feature of the European strategy for addressing these issues, has shown demonstrable results when responding to the needs of students at risk of ESL. These come in the form of Learning Communities and SEA, rooted in evidence-based interventions, that facilitate the social and cultural transformation of schools and communities by adopting multi-stakeholder participation and principles of equality, respect, openness, and solidarity.

Other effective initiatives include positive discrimination measures (including targeted funding and support for students and schools serving disadvantaged populations at high risk of ESL), strengthening the VET pathway through a unified framework, and a closer link with the labour market. Other intervention measures proved to have contributed to reducing ESL and underachievement, including teacher training support, tutoring programmes, and awareness campaigns. Furthermore, compensation measures have been put in place that are likely to re-engage students in education, including the recognition of prior learning and special training programmes to re-engage young people in education.

- In spite of this, some of Spain's national policies feature measures that have been shown to be ineffective in addressing ESL and underachievement, including grade repetition and student segregation. As such, it is recommended that Spain veer away from these policies and instead pursue evidence-backed ones including anti-segregation policies, whole school approaches involving the wider community, language support, and teacher training and support in all levels, including (and especially) ECEC.
- In addition, Spain will need a concrete and targeted long-term strategy to address the imbalances in the ESL situation between regions and among vulnerable populations, paying special attention to the root causes of ESL and how to overcome it especially among those from ethnic minorities, foreign-born students, and populations from low socioeconomic backgrounds.
- The outcomes of the recent policies that aim to mitigate the effects of previous unsuccessful strategies remain to be seen. Moving forward, there is a need to address the current gaps in statistical data collection and have a systematic, rigorous, and long-term approach to policy analysis and evaluation to promote ongoing learning and evidence-informed decision-making.

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Version 1.0

REVIEW OF LOCAL, REGIONAL AND/OR NATIONAL POLICIES TO TACKLE EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING – PORTUGAL

Reduce early school leaving and underachievement



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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Tackling Early School Leaving in Portugal – main actions

The scope of analysis in this report lies in the fundamental transformations that occurred as a result of the national education legislative struggle and programmatic interventions designed to reach, in the first place, full enrolment for all children and youngsters under 18 of age, and later, to accomplish better attainment for all students and reduce early school leaving.

Bearing in mind the time under consideration, between 2012 and 2023, the emphasis was placed on the two major education legislative reforms during that period, which happened in 2012 and 2018, and highlighted some of the most relevant features and tenets in each of them. Some prior measures were sometimes referred to, for their importance and context, and to account for the continuity with the latter. The first Act, DL 176/2012, calls attention to the need for more systematic monitoring of education results. Moreover, it emphasizes that to ensure that the recent extension to 12 years of compulsory education becomes effective and successful, some conditions need to improve (Decreto-Lei n.º 176/2012 de 2 de Agosto, 2012). It meant that teaching practices, methodologies, and curriculum structure had to adapt to the diverse and increasing number of participating students. A critical lack of alternative educational and pedagogical formats was identified as widespread public teaching and seen as driving away many students (Portuguese classroom teaching remains very traditional and relies heavily upon expositive methods). This recognition supported the idea of broadening the range of options in schools, namely creating Vocational and Education Tracks in all public schools from the fifth to ninth grades. Additionally, a main goal, was to develop the process of formative evaluation for students, seeing that, up to that moment, summative assessments were the predominant methodology used. The creation of a more relevant curriculum was another strategy considered to improve attainment and tackle ESL, which was very high at that point in Portugal (alongside the levels of school failure and retention).

The DL 55/2018 Act, named Curricular Autonomy and Flexibility program, represents a further step toward improving the quality of education in Portugal. The main tenets proposed the creation of a people-centered educational system, with greater liberty granted, for adapting curricula and pedagogies and stimulating the use of new work methodologies in schools in an attempt to provide equal and universal access to quality education. Promoting generalized educational success can, consequently, contribute to lower ESL. The foundations of this Act are based on the recognition that, insofar in Portugal, not all students have been granted their right to real learning and achievement (Decreto Lei nr. 55/2018).

More specifically, it intervenes by proposing to change traditional pedagogical practices, grounded in the expositive method of communicating contents and on the individual work of each teacher, alone in the classroom – still common in Portuguese schools. The idea was to shift from a pedagogy based on subject content transmission to a more participatory and collaborative framework, focused on students' acquisition and development of certain skills, competencies, and values throughout the educational path, until the end of the 12^o grade.

This new Act has been a revolutionary proposal, providing the schools with more autonomy and flexibility than ever before, allowing schools to adapt teaching and learning processes to different populations, and especially to those generally standing on the margins of success (and who, until recently, ended up leaving education too early, thus reproducing a string of ingrained inequalities and social injustices). It may be too early to know what may result from it, especially considering how the pandemic disrupted education in the last couple of years.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Portugal has experienced steady yet long and strenuous progress in promoting more education and training for all since the beginning of its democratic period, in 1974.

As a historical factor for Portugal, it is important to consider that the country had a very low starting point in terms of its population's educational attainment and literacy. Portugal was under a dictatorship regime until 1974. In the mid-1970s, a fifth of all 15–64-year-olds were in a situation of illiteracy, and less than 5% had completed upper secondary education (Guichard et al., 2006). This made it difficult to have available qualified teachers when the education system widely expanded in the post-revolution era. The low educational attainment of parents also represented a limitation to the potential achievement of children. Still, great efforts to ensure access to education for all Portuguese made it possible to expand enrolment rapidly.

Year	Total	Males	Females
2012	20,5	26,9	14,0
2013	18,9	23,4	14,3
2014	17,4	20,7	14,1
2015	13,7	16,4	11,0
2016	14,0	17,4	10,5
2017	12,6	15,3	9,7
2018	11,8	14,7	8,7
2019	10,6	13,7	7,4
2020	8,9	12,6	5,1
2021	5,9	7,7	4,1
2022	6,0	7,9	3,9

Table 1. Early School Leaving between 2012 and 2022 in Portugal. Source: Pordata

From 1987 until 2002, educational policies' main goal was to accomplish the 9 years of compulsory education. The focus was on tackling school failure, but mostly, early school leaving. In this period, two moments can be highlighted: until 1995, it was the phase of integrated programs and promotion of school enrolment (Alvares & Calado, 2014). Issues of access and the expansion of the school network were at the heart of the governance decisions. Regarding school failure, the most relevant measures were meant to promote economic support for disadvantaged families, providing free meals at schools and free transport and healthcare. In 1995, 100% attendance of the first 4 grades was completed, and political and educational sectors turned their focus to the learning and teaching process, to a diversifying and adjustment of the educational system to the new demands arising from widespread school attendance (Alvares & Calado, 2014).

From 2003 onwards, a new cycle began, and it went up to 2010, with the new Education Act 85/2009 establishing the expansion of compulsory education until children reached 18 years of age (Alvares & Calado, 2014). Also, the definition of European benchmarks in secondary qualification and the international reports published that systematically placed Portugal in the lowest positions created pressure to reduce ESL, making it a priority in educational policy. EU action plans for the EU-wide reduction of ESL also supported the setting of the agenda in Portugal.

Since 2012, overcoming ESL has become gradual and notorious, demonstrating the positive influence of universal policies in Portugal, systematically focused on the ESL problem, alongside the improvement of quality in education and, thus, better school attainment.

2.0 POLICY/POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

2.1 Education Act 176/2012

Context: Prior to the 176/2012 Act, in 2009, school became compulsory for all students until they reached 18 years of age, and universal and free early childhood education was introduced for all children from the age of five.

The 2012 legislative pack intends to strengthen the achievement of a twelve-year basic and secondary education course, considered fundamental for all Portuguese citizens' social, economic, and cultural progress. This should represent a stable, continuous, and coherent process, ensuring quality and maintaining high teaching and student development standards.

There was a need to create new educational options/tracks and to adapt the curriculum, integrating relevant content and ensuring social inclusion in the school trajectory. Simultaneously, equal opportunity should be ensured by providing adequate and necessary track options and the necessary support to facilitate attainment levels and reconcile quality and equity.

As a preventive measure for tackling school failure and early school leaving, all compulsory education from 6 to 18 years of age is made free and universal. Regarding school failure and school dropout, preventive measures established for elementary education indicated that, as soon as learning difficulties were detected, measures should be adopted, such as the following:

In primary education (in Portuguese classification: first cycle level of elementary education), reinforcement of study support; extra support after school, throughout the school year, the second and third cycles of elementary education (in Portugal, grades 5 to 9); and temporary creation of small homogenous attainment groups in core subjects.

Defining and adopting different school tracks, if exceptional conditions are justifiable, namely alternative curriculum tracks and vocational and educational training.

The choice of a vocational track should result from the assessment of the guidance and supervision teams and be approved by the parents or legal tutors. At the end of each cycle, students should have ways to return to the regular tracks if they apply to the corresponding examination.

For the secondary level, preventive measures for school dropout and early school leaving also focused on detecting and addressing difficulties in student learning. The measures to be considered were:

Redefining students' school paths and guiding students towards different educational tracks according to their profile after the assessment of guidance and support technical teams.

Implementation of adult learning as an alternative to further education for students who are 16 years old or older.

Promotion of the best-suited option, considering the previous path and motivations of the student

Other measures included free school transport until the end of primary and secondary school for underage students in certain conditions.

Retrieved from: <https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/176-2012-179057>

2.2 Education Act 55/2018

Context: This Education Act constitutes a national policy, structuring all public and private, primary, elementary, and secondary education. It was implemented in 2018.

The program of the 21st Constitutional Government made it a priority to implement a people-centered education policy that guaranteed equal access to public schools, promoted educational success and, through it, equal opportunities.

However, the available data from 2018 showed that these objectives had not yet been accomplished, as not all students were guaranteed their right to learning and educational success. After involving teachers, academics, families, social partners, and students in a broad debate, the “Profile of the Student at the End of Compulsory Education” was approved, establishing a matrix of principles, values, and areas of competences. This proposed central measure puts forth a set of principles, values, and competencies that students are expected to acquire and develop throughout their studies. Examples of such principles are inclusion, adaptability and boldness, and sustainability; the competences set is constituted by critical thinking and creativity, reasoning, and problem-solving, among others; examples of values are citizenship and participation, curiosity, reflection, and innovation... To this end, it establishes that the main decisions at the curricular and pedagogical levels are to be taken by schools and teachers.

Knowing that some schools had managed to counteract the main predictors of underachievement by adapting to the contexts and to the specific needs of their students, it becomes essential that the curriculum is seen as an instrument that schools can manage and develop locally. More autonomy was given to schools to achieve this multi-dimensional goal, allowing them to manage the curriculum, adjusting it to specific contexts and the needs of students so that all students achieve the competences set defined in the Profile of Students at the End of Compulsory Education.

In this document, there was a clear intent to increase interdisciplinary work and diversify evaluation strategies and instruments, underlining the value of learning through research, making connections, and developing analysis competences. The purpose was also to enhance students’ abilities to make presentations and debate, as well as promote and develop their capacity to cooperate and work autonomously. This new legal framework intends schools to:

- increase flexibility in curriculum management, allowing for more interdisciplinary cooperation.
- establish citizenship learning as a programmatic subject, thus promoting democratic participation and active citizenship, constituting a field of intercultural exchange and contemporary discussion.
- create new ways for organizing teacher’s schoolwork, for instance, by creating pedagogical teams.
- focus on project methodologies and communicational means, allowing students to express themselves in diverse modes and be the agents in control of their own learning process.
- diversify the evaluation methodologies and instruments by gathering valid and complete information about the work in progress. To this end, a regular monitoring system is expected to be set in place from the beginning and that intervention can start as soon as the first difficulties arise.
- allow secondary students to have a wide choice of subjects within their disciplinary framework.

To attain these changes, several guidelines are offered. Here is a selection of those we considered most significant:

- Improving the quality of teaching and learning using a multi-level approach to curricular intervention and the widespread application of formative assessment. A multilevel approach is a methodological option that allows the curriculum to be adjusted to the potentialities and

difficulties of students, using different levels of intervention and involving *universal*, *selective*, and *additional* measures.

The effective execution of curricular autonomy enables schools to identify successful curricular options appropriate to their specific and unique context. The emphasis placed on curricular autonomy and flexibility is meant to make it possible for schools to manage and enrich the basic and secondary education curriculum, focusing on achieving the competences set out in the Profile of Students at the End of Compulsory Education. This profile is structured around principles, vision, values, and areas of competences, “constitutes the common matrix for all schools, educational and training programs and modalities within the scope of compulsory schooling, namely at curricular level, contributing to the convergence and decisions inherent in the various dimensions of curriculum development: the planning and of teaching and learning, as well as the internal and external assessment and external assessment of student learning” (Decreto-Lei n.º de 6 de julho, p.2930).

- Ensuring an inclusive school that promotes equality and non-discrimination and enables a context where diversity, flexibility, and innovation may effectively respond to the heterogeneity of students in their access to the curriculum and learning, eliminating obstacles and stereotypes.
- Recognizing teachers as administrators in the development of the curriculum, with a key role in its evaluation, in reflecting on the options to be taken, their feasibility, and their adequacy.
- Involving students and their guardians in the school's curricular options.
- Valuing the identity of secondary education as a level of education that offers students different paths which seek to respond to their vocational interests and enable them to complete their compulsory schooling.
- Valuing interdisciplinary and articulated curriculum management, namely through developing projects, bringing together learning from the different disciplines, planned, implemented, and evaluated by a group of teachers.
- Valuing collaborative and interdisciplinary work in planning, carrying out, and evaluating teaching and learning.
- Valuing the pathways and progress made by each student as a basis for success and the accomplishment of their potential.
- Respecting foreign languages as a means for global and multicultural identity, facilitating access to information and technology, as well as promoting the linguistic diversity of students and the community as a valuable expression of identities.
- Acknowledging the importance of external and internal evaluation of schools.

Retrieved from: <https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/55-2018-115652962>

2.3 Policy (Strategy) Programa Escolhas

Escolhas (Choices) is a national program set up in 2001, under the management of the Secretary of State for Equality and Migrations and integrated into the High Commissariat for Migrations. Its mission is to promote social integration and equal opportunities in education and employment, to tackle social discrimination, to encourage civic participation, and to strengthen social cohesion. It is directed at all children and young people, particularly those in socio-economically vulnerable situations.

There have been 8 sequential project stages, each with a duration of about two years, on average. From the initial focus on criminal behavior prevention, an evolution took place towards aiming at social inclusion of minority and immigrant children, in vulnerable contexts, promoting equality, social cohesion, and nondiscrimination. The methodology became decentralized, based upon locally planned and context-adjusted projects created by local institutions, such as schools, NGOs, and training centers, that became responsible for designing, implementing, and evaluating the projects.

In the 8th current stage, there are 105 projects nationwide.

Currently the program is structured in three intervention areas:

1. education; digital inclusion; training and qualification
2. employment and entrepreneurship
3. community dynamization with a focus on health, participation, and citizenship

The program encompasses three measures:

- Measure I – the promotion of school success and reduction of school dropout and early school leaving, as well as the promotion of training, professional qualification, and the development of competences, and specifically digital competences.
- Measure II – aims at promoting employment and work skills, facilitating school-work transition, and supporting entrepreneurship initiatives.
- Measure III – promotion of health, sports and physical practice, artistic and cultural activities, as well as other non-formal education type activities, enhancing participants' personal and social development, and strengthening community and their civil rights and duties.

The program's local projects include direct and indirect participants. The direct participants are those from the priority target groups, children and young people at risk of exclusion. They receive support on a regular basis, according to their individual plan and objectives. More specifically, the program defines that direct participants are children and young people between 6 and 25 years old, belonging to vulnerable contexts, who have dropped out of school or left school early, or who are not working or studying, or who are in the juvenile protection system, or who are victims of discrimination (or belong to groups who are discriminated against), or who demonstrate trouble behaviour or are in the juvenile justice system (see <http://www.programaescolhas.pt/apresentacao>).

Education has always been one of Escolhas' priorities. Since it was created, in 2001, the program has privileged the tackling of ESL, absenteeism, and school failure among children and youth from the most vulnerable communities. After a diagnosis of local needs and problems, the projects are expected to design a diverse set of activities – e.g. after-school support sessions, school mediation, and sessions/workshops – that focus on non-formal education strategies and methodologies, allowing for differentiated pedagogical work with these groups.

Some examples of intervention in current projects include:

- Literacy for the Roma community, developing writing, reading, and calculus skills among the local Roma community. These are intended for the mothers of children participating in the project. It uses ludic-pedagogical tools and digital resources.
- Nomadic Learning: a van traveling through primary schools in rural areas, the team develops activities to improve reading abilities through games, music, painting, and collective stories. Also, some school content is promoted via digital supporting educational sites, helping digital skills acquisition. It also includes a school radio run by the children.
- Educational Tutors and Mentors, using positive role models from the community. Moreover, regular meditation sessions are implemented to improve stress management and self-awareness.
- Another project takes children on regular tours in the forest to work through an open and emerging curriculum, promoting experiential learning and active exploration of nature.

Retrieved from: https://issuu.com/programaescolhas/docs/revista_escolhas_43

3.0 POLICY REVIEW

3.1 Policy Review as in academic literature

EDUCATION ACT 176/2012

In 2009, the situation of educational attainment in Portugal was challenging; only 30% of 25 to 64-year-olds had attained at least secondary education in 2009 (versus an OECD average of 73%) (Santiago et al., 2012). It was the lowest in the OECD area for the working-age population. On top of this, a high percentage of students were leaving the education system too early (Santiago et al., 2012).

The 2012 OECD report by Santiago et al. (2012) illustrates well the challenges the Education Act 176/2012 was responding to. The authors of the report clearly signaled that a strong intervention would be necessary in terms of making formative assessment more widespread and relevant; also increasing the options of educational paths, as well as the academic attainment of students, thus reducing retention, and preventing early school leaving.

Assessment for learning had not systematically been used in Portuguese schools. The same OECD report claimed that “[t]here is little emphasis in assessment practices on providing student feedback and developing teacher-student interactions about student learning. In classroom and schools, the formative seems to be increasingly displaced by the summative and a focus on the generation of summative scores.” (Santiago et al., 2012, p.10). The framework in Portuguese schools for this process did not include discussion or analysis of student work, developmental evaluation, and mutual feedback as elements of formative evaluation and teaching. Moreover, there seemed to be insufficient focus on the quality and effectiveness, plus the pedagogical features, of learning and teaching. Strategies such as direct observation of learning and teaching in the classroom were not part of the process, for instance (Santiago et al. 2012).

Reforms at that stage included new structures in school leadership, the setting of learning goals, the reorganisation of the school network, the generalization of whole-day schools, and the diversification of educational paths (especially through the promotion of vocational/professional programs). This diversification of educational choices, through the promotion of vocational/professional programs increased the proportion of students enrolled in vocational or professional programmes in secondary education from 27% in 1996/97 to 59% in 2009/10 (Ministry of Education, 2011). Another noteworthy initiative concerned the complementing of regular classes with student support activities, whenever possible, provided by the subject’s teacher.

In this new context, several VET alternatives became available. Education and Training Courses (CEF courses) are targeted at young people (15 years old or above), at risk of leaving school or who had left the education system before concluding Grade 9, and lead to a vocational qualification (at levels 1, 2 or 3). Adult Education and Training Courses (EFA courses) are targeted at individuals aged 18 or over who need to improve their schooling qualifications.

Schools were asked to embrace the objectives of improving the learning results of students, reducing grade repetition, and preventing dropouts in their individual educational projects. They were also required to formulate their own targets in accordance with their circumstances and to develop initiatives to contribute to the achievement of the targets. The Education Programme 2015 involves monitoring of the targets at the national, municipal, and school levels. Finally, the re-launch in 2008 of the Educational Territories for Priority Intervention programs (TEIP), aimed at promoting the success of students in socially and economic disadvantaged areas (reaching 104 school clusters in 2009/10) was another policy investment (Santiago et al. 2012).

To better understand the phenomenon of very high ELS rates in Portugal during this period, Alvares (2014) describes several background and explanatory causes for these high ESL levels and explores, through a qualitative study, how several state-implemented programs can account for the success and the positive progression in this parameter. Although not many years had passed since the 2012 reform, the findings are relevant in assessing some positive features that participants considered to have impacted ESL.

Portugal, in 2012, stood as one of the countries where the ESL rate was higher. It reached 19.2%, only lower than Malta (20,9%) and Spain (23,5%). On the other end, the European Union average was 12% (Alvares, 2014). The influence the labour market holds on the ESL phenomenon is very relevant, and in the regions where services and seasonal, low-qualified jobs are more available, the level of ESL is higher.

However, on a more positive side, the evolution of ESL rates in Portuguese territory had been favourable until around 2012 (Alvares, 2014). Some policies and programs had a positive impact in reducing the ESL rate, for example, the New Opportunities program (2005-2013). This intervention operated by identifying the knowledge and skills already acquired by people and validating them through an academic or professional qualification system. Even though it was especially focused on the qualification of adults, it integrated a large portion of youngsters because of the expansion of VET. This can be retraced to the diversification of VET (CNE, 2012:152).

In the 15 years prior to 2014, the state increased the investment in political measures combating ESL, especially as ESL gained relevance and defined social, educational, and economic developmental trends. Using national strategic frameworks and EU funds, it created resources and conditions for effective policies in ESL, especially in the financing of different kinds of VET courses and co-funding the TEIP Program, Educational Territories for Priority Intervention programs (corresponding in the UK to Educational Action Zones). This Program had been initiated in 1996, has had three periods of implementation (1996/2005-TEIP1; 2006/2011- TEIP2; 2012/2021- TEIP3. (https://repositorio.ul.pt/bitstream/10451/54954/1/e-book_REDESCOLA_2022.pdf).

It involves, presently, 136 schools or school clusters, in territories that present social and economic disadvantage, severe poverty and social exclusion characteristics, violence, indiscipline, and dropout at higher levels (<https://www.dge.mec.pt/teip>). It constitutes a compensatory measure to improve educational quality, attainment, and transition to work based on contextual adaptation of teaching, and the integration and involvement of the surrounding community (<https://www.dge.mec.pt/legislacao-6>).

Preventive measures also increased, especially some focusing on students (Alvares, 2014). Besides extending compulsory education to 12 years, participants in Alvares's (2014) study refer to the importance of other preventive measures in tackling ESL, such as TEIP2, the investment in social benefit schemes, measures of positive discrimination, for example, in the context of special education students, tutorial support programs, or the Portuguese language classes for foreigners, an important instrument for the inclusion of immigrants.

The two measures most consensually considered impactful were the mandatory schooling up to the 12th grade, and the introduction and diversification of VET choices in public schools. These were seen as having a high impact on youth's school trajectories, promoting a variety of choices for all students intending to finish secondary level, and providing schools with a larger diversity of educational and formative offers (Alvares, 2014). During this period, the country strongly invested in vocational education and training: if in 2005/06, it represented 11,6% of students in public schools, in 2009/10 it reached 58% (Alvares, 2014). The participants of this study confirmed that having more choices including vocational education in public schools was relevant to keep in school the students with more irregular trajectories, or those who did not intend to pursue higher education degrees (Alvares, 2014).

Some voices emphasized the dangers of these policy options. This period between 2011-2015, influenced by the German vocationalist approach with its «dual system», led to the adoption of these Vocational Programmes, with the goal of enrolling 13-year-old children, especially those with learning difficulties. There was a shift from the framework, measures, and practices aiming for equal opportunities, and the improvement of social and economic development, to policies and instruments focusing on the labour market qualifications correlation (Magalhães et al., 2015).

Strategically, the establishment of better monitoring systems involving care and protection services and teams of specialized technicians, such as psychologists and social workers, in schools contributed to and complemented the political measures favouring early detection of cases of ESL and had a positive impact on its reduction (Alvares, 2014).

EDUCATION ACT 55/2018

The 55/2018 Education Act providing schools, nationwide, with increased autonomy and flexibility was placed in confrontation by Cosme and Trindade (2019) in two studies that set out to understand how the first schools involved in the pilot project perceived the curricular and pedagogic challenges, arising since 2017/2018, at the onset of the implementation. The first study retrieved questionnaires from 130 schools, integrating the pilot trial (60% of the universe of participating schools). The second study focused on innovative measures created and implemented in six schools. These measures involved different curricular management practices developed to promote pedagogic innovation, as well as other forms of organization and internal management and new community interplay.

The Curricular Autonomy and Flexibility Project's improvements and strengths, as described by the schools, in a swot type analysis, place an emphasis on the changes in the curricular and pedagogic dimensions, namely: the articulation of schoolwork and interdisciplinary collaboration that was brought about by this environment; the new solutions developed to deal with the encyclopedic curriculum; and the diversification of pedagogic methodologies (Cosme & Trindade, 2019). The expected changes would lead to, from a management point of view, the reduction of the isolation of school subjects, changing the worktimes or school periods. The promotion of interdisciplinary articulation of school subjects, with less focus on content areas and more on the development of competencies, represents another expected outcome (Cosme & Trindade, 2019).

The most fragile aspects, considering the curricular and pedagogical aspects portrayed in these questionnaires, revolve around the lack of working conditions needed for such a demanding task, on the one hand, and the sheer opposition of teachers to this change, on the other (Cosme & Trindade, 2019). Some participants are rather critical of the Profile of Students at the End of Compulsory Education proposal.

Moreover, the opportunities described in the autonomy and flexibility process pertained to the chance to have stronger and more independent management of schedules and interdisciplinary work. The analysis shows greater participation in the first grades of the school cycle: 62,3% in the first school year, 60% in the fifth year, 59,23% in the seventh, and 20% in the tenth year. This smaller level of involvement in the secondary years is explained by the pressure from exams required at the end of the level, which are important to access university (Cosme & Trindade, 2019).

The transformation expected and allowed by this new Act presupposes that all educating agents are fully in control of the curriculum and can move from content teaching to competences development. But, as Cosme and Trindade (2019) refer, to many people, including by part of the teachers, this project only resulted in delaying the regular transmission of subjects' matters.

Finally, the studies by Ariana Cosme Rui Trindade (2019) provide several examples of new solutions, such as different interconnected curricular areas, new pedagogical and didactic measures, that appear as alternatives to exposition methods: e.g., project methodology, dialogic classrooms, interactive research work teams, classroom questions, games design.

The OECD analysis (Liebowitz, et al., 2018) of this Portuguese new Education Act, under the name DL 55/2018, begins by highlighting the contradiction that, while the Profile of the Student at the End of Compulsory Education describes the profile that young Portuguese students should have at the end of schooling, many questions remain on how to achieve it.

However, many strong features have been highlighted in this report: the Profile of the Student grants schools with autonomy over a part of curricular and pedagogical areas. This means that schools can design learning experiences coherent with the aims of the expected student profile. For example, schools can target lessons and practices for non-native Portuguese speakers or students at risk of dropping out (Liebowitz, et al., 2018).

It is also recognized that the Profile of the Student at the End of Compulsory Education included input from all stakeholders, whether by expert consultation, meetings with teachers, students, administrators, and parents, who all have provided important information (Liebowitz, et al., 2018) with the further benefit of focusing the Project for Curriculum Autonomy and Flexibility pilot project in the goals and standards of greater equity and inclusion, as well as in reducing the high dropout rates in the country.

Liebowitz et al. (2018) also identified some challenges to this legislation, such as how the changes to the curriculum that accompany these alterations have raised concerns among some parents, teachers, and students. The Project for Curriculum Autonomy and Flexibility is perceived to be in conflict with the main goals of many parents, teachers, and students in the education system – namely, obtaining high grades on the country's national final exams, mandatory for university applications. Even if it intends to develop high-quality, participative approaches to learning, less focused on content transmission and more on deeper learning, a widespread notion that greater flexibility in the curriculum implies lowering learning standards persists (Liebowitz, et al., 2018).

According to Silva & Fraga (2021), the innovations integrated into the Project for Curriculum Autonomy and Flexibility constitute transformational measures in educational policy, both at the curricular and pedagogical levels. Improving the quality of teaching and learning appears connected to increasing real and actual processes of autonomy in schools in a model of educational administration that contrasts with a centralized model traditional in Portugal. With this Act, the school has the possibility to participate in curricular development (even if with limits), as well as to find curricular options adequate to their students' specific contexts and needs. Schools get instruments to construe and develop curricular, pedagogic, and organizational innovation plans adequate to their needs and that can foster the inclusion and success of all students (Fraga e Silva, 2021). It becomes the school's responsibility, following this line of reasoning, to develop students' abilities, to interconnect knowledge and make it operationalized in complex situations, mobilizing and contextualizing contents, and activating, on the students, different cognitive and metacognitive skills, like critical and creative thinking, self-regulation, and socio-emotional capacities, such as empathy and self-efficacy. Thus, the focus of the Profile of the Student at the end of Compulsory Education is to build on students, after 12 years of schooling, the cognitive, emotional, and social tools to continue their studies or to integrate into the labour market (Silva & Fraga, 2021).

In a study by Calvacanti and Leite (2020), participants were explicit about how interesting and useful the Project for Curriculum Autonomy and Flexibility could become. Benefits were identified in terms of its adequacy to fit different

profiles of students; in terms of how progression is evaluated, which is more respectful of student development; and in how it promotes collaborative work (Calvacanti & Leite, 2020). It was also emphasized that this Act provides schools with the autonomy to work on the promotion of school success through a very important measure: pedagogical differentiation (Calvacanti & Leite, 2020). Almost all participants recognize the need for curricular change and innovation, the importance of respecting the student's knowledge and learning processes, and that flexibility and autonomy can make it easier for teachers to consider their particular contexts and the diversity of students in the construction of a more inclusive curriculum.

Carlos Ferreira (2020) also underlines that the 55/2018 Act brings more autonomy for teachers and schools to reconfigure and manage curriculum according to the diversity of their students and their contexts, and can create the conditions for better learning and more adequate pedagogical practices. Affirming the importance of a student-centered curriculum, for the author (Ferreira, 2020) curricular flexibility requires that the processes and teaching techniques are differentiated, creating the right contexts for students to acquire the necessary knowledge, capacities, attitudes, values, and this way prepare them for full, active, and responsible participation in society.

PROGRAMA ESCOLHAS

In an external evaluation of this program (Alexandre et al, 2020), in the 7th edition (2019-2020) questionnaires were used to collect data from older participants, technical teams (coordinators, technical professionals, community mobilisers), and management teams or promoting organisations. In terms of results, the technical staff of the program reported that the intervention had shown positive impacts in the youngsters. Plus, for 74.2% changes in the field area or community where it is implemented were Good or Very Good. Within these impacts, the youngsters highlighted the development of school skills, such as an increase in literacy an improvement in their attendance rate, and a notorious change in learning skills. This led to more school success, more personal and social abilities, improved digital literacy, and a change in attitude, especially towards the value of school.

When it comes to the focus of the interventions, the elements of the teams of the projects, as well as the participating youngsters, both highlight the attainment of goals of Measure I, which is focused on contributing to school success, reducing school irregular attendance and drop-out, and contributing to professional training and qualification.

One of the coordinators of the program Escolhas considers that the collaboration with the schools has had a highly positive impact and states that they have been receiving positive feedback from teachers and schools. The results were very good in terms of school success, especially at secondary educational levels. Their work has managed to help many young people in the projects to succeed – an example talks about this project with more than 85 participants and where only 5 have been retained – even in communities that had high retention and ESL levels. The young participants consider it important that they can do their homework in the project, on a daily basis, with the support of the technical team (Alexandre et al., 2020).

Calado (2014) considers that Escolhas, with its connections to formal education, can be described as a supplementary response, and has been positively articulated with schools' contexts. In his view, the projects indicate that their non-formal education practices have significantly contributed to overcoming unsolved issues in the formal educational system. Looking at Calado (2014) it is also interesting to note that young participants do not feel that the school represents the most adequate educational context to develop some learning and competencies they see as essential for their integration and social participation, and therefore, the program can be an important supplementary intervention that may raise a taste for learning.

3.2 Comparative Analysis of successful and less effective policies

3.2.1 POLICY ANALYSIS IN THE LIGHT OF EUROPEAN COMMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS

Portugal has shown a tremendous progression in overcoming ESL. Early School Leaving has decreased from 23.0% in 2011 to 5.9% in 2021. It even surpassed the EU average rate of 9.7% in 2021.¹ The measures adopted in past decades, including prevention, intervention, and compensation strategies, were able to progressively increase the overall attainment and school permanence of students from different levels. In this section, we will look at prevention, intervention, and compensation measures that may have contributed to tackling the root problems and reducing early school leaving. We start by presenting the measures that are included in the different Education Acts and Programs that we presented before in this document and then discuss them.

PREVENTION MEASURES

In terms of the preventive approach, in Portugal, we can highlight the extension of compulsory education to the 12th grade, the access to good quality early education, the universal standardized evaluation of the quality of teaching, and the diversification of vocational options, with the implementation of vocational training options in public schools and increasing curriculum autonomy and flexibility.

Integrated in the 55/2018 Education Act:

- Relevant and engaging curriculum: with greater autonomy and flexibility in managing the curriculum and in organization, schools gain in terms of the possibility of individualization and differentiation of the teaching/learning process, thus increasing student connection to the school, and therefore, increasing the ability of school staff to create and maintain learning environments that support at-risk pupils.
- The intensification of collaborative work among teachers, with an emphasis in interdisciplinary work, can create an atmosphere that facilitates integration, motivation and learning for all students.

Integrated in the 176/2012 Education Act:

- The extension of compulsory education up until the 12th grade led to an increase in continuity and put pressure on schools and families to make students go further.
- A strong and well-developed guidance system: the 176 ACT highlighted the important role of teams of technical staff and their support to guide students through their school path.
- Access to good quality early childhood education and care (ECEC): universal access to ECEC, became one of the basic tenets to improve success and reduce ESL in Portugal. In 2021, according to Eurostat, Portugal's rate of "Participation in early childhood education (from age 3 to starting age of compulsory primary education): is situated at 92.9%". (retrieved from: <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eac/education-and-training-monitor-2022/en/country-reports/portugal.html>)

¹ retrieved from: <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eac/education-and-training-monitor-2022/en/country-reports/portugal.html>

- Diversifying educational paths, including high quality, attractive, and engaging vocational education and training (VET) options and making them present in public schools, especially at the secondary educational level, but also at elementary levels.

INTERVENTION MEASURES

Integrated in the 55/2018 Education Act:

- Focus on the individual student's needs, and use curricular autonomy and flexibility, as well as a multilevel approach of educational measures, to address the difficulties.
- Promote extra-curricular and out-of-school activities to enrich the opportunities for learning offered and to strengthen students' sense of belonging in school.
- Developing the capacity of school staff to create and maintain learning environments that support at-risk students, especially by supporting teachers in the use of innovative and specific strategies and methodologies to meet the student's needs; this is achieved by promoting autonomy and collaborative and interdisciplinary work in schools.

Integrated in Education Act 176/2012:

- Strengthen the capacities for Guidance and counseling and value the important role of technical support and guidance.

Integrated in Escolhas Program:

- Promote extra-curricular and out-of-school activities with a focus on non-formal educational methodologies. Bring diverse opportunities for learning and strengthen students' sense of belonging and their valuing of school.

COMPENSATION MEASURES

- Compensation measures that create opportunities for those who have left education and training prematurely to gain qualifications have been available since 2008 (Novas Oportunidades/ New Opportunities) and are offered by the State.
- Accessible and relevant second chance schemes are also present. The Portuguese education system offers several options for adult education, including training courses that constitute a widespread and accessible opportunity for adult training and education. There is, however, a huge lack of second-chance schools (E2O), with only seven existing in the whole country. These offer specialized, educational, and social solutions to ESL through the creation of individual processes and integrated responses for family, health, economic autonomy and justice issues, employment promotion, etc, to youngsters between 15 and 25 years old, in school dropout condition. <https://www.e2oportugal.org/2-2-resposta-de-segunda-oportunidad>

- TEIP Program (Educational Territories for Priority Intervention programs): although the TEIP report (2012) considers that there are positive effects in terms of early school leaving, absenteeism, and retention, the absence of prior data, at the onset of the program, makes it difficult to confirm that the impact is due to this national program. Studies have shown that TEIP schools have not revealed improvement in school attainment (Ferraz, Neves, & Nata, 2018). Abrantes and Teixeira (2014) have a different perspective and consider that the semi-success of this program demonstrates that it is necessary to implement policies that break the cycle of deprivation and reproduction in vulnerable territories, going beyond compensatory or reparatory measures and actually transforming the school and community structures. The same authors, nonetheless, emphasize the reduction in disciplinary problems achieved by the program, as acknowledged by both teachers and students, which, in turn, helps considerably with the learning climate and, we might add, may have an indirect impact on early school leaving.

DISCUSSION

Political priorities, as well as instituted norms, have managed to influence ESL, sometimes in a significant manner (Azevedo, 2021). The way the formal curriculum is organized, the level of autonomy of schools, the educational priorities that are set, the evaluation and accountability systems, and the availability of different educational paths for students all contribute to tackling or increasing ELS.

According to Azevedo (2021), the policies set in Portugal at the beginning of this century designed to prevent ESL have two common features: i) they include, beyond the Ministry Of Education, other key elements, other social policies to promote inclusion and reduce poverty, such as the extension of ECEC, Basic Income, programs for the promotion of adult qualification; and ii) they have been implemented for a long period of time, showing continuity. Measures such as the TEIP Program (Educational Territories for Priority Intervention programs) and the Escolhas Program are still active after more than 20 years. Also, the Program for the promotion of adult qualification (via certification of qualifications and recognition of competencies) is still in place, which also improves the educational levels of younger people. VET learning at the secondary educational level is another significant strategy, growing from 7% in 1989 to 42% in 2018, and together with vocational courses (directed at those in basic education between the fifth and ninth grades) have played an important role in tackling ESL (Azevedo, 2021).

Yet, according to this author, a major factor in the improvement of ESL rates lies clearly in the extension of mandatory education to the 12th grade, or 18 years old, which took place in 2009/12. It created political and social pressure for schools and families to keep children and youngsters in schools. Between 2010 and 2015, the ESL rates reduced dramatically, even if it is not possible to evaluate specifically which measures had a bigger impact on this progress (Azevedo, 2021).

It is also important to say that the intervention against ESL must be articulated with the promotion of school success (Alvares, Abrantes & Dantas, 2016). Already in the period prior to 2009, the path to reducing ESL in Portugal can be seen as related to the increase in control and coordination of policies, as well as the extension of compulsory school until 18 years of age. The importance of this coordination became clear in how measures targeting adult training and adult qualification were a shared responsibility amongst the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Work and Social Security. Joint responsibility and coordination were also notable between the Ministry of Education and the municipalities and sustaining the drop in the ESL rate, the strengthening of social support measures, and curricular enrichment (Alvares, Abrantes & Dantas, 2016).

As Alvares, Abrantes and Dantas (2016) state, preventive, student-focused measures, such as positive discrimination, tutorial programs, pedagogical and personalized help, and financial aid, were privileged actions as

they recognize that clusters of economically vulnerable students in a school, and social problems in certain territories, greatly increase the rates of school failure and ESL. Therefore, such measures can promote coordinated efforts to involve diverse contextual agents and institutions. The Portuguese experience also encompasses the positive impact of legislation changes concerning the expansion of compulsory education, a strategic policy accompanied by increasing options in school tracks, curricular reforms, and the promotion of changes in teaching methodologies (Alvares, Abrantes & Dantas, 2016).

3.3 Policies, gaps, and solutions

3.3.1 GAPS IDENTIFIED IN EXISTING POLICIES

A notable absence when performing this analysis and review of the policies and structured measures in Portugal is the lack of systematic evaluation and detailed analysis of the effects of the different policies and of their proposed measures, as well as of the nationwide strategies implemented. The progression results gathered can provide a picture of the conjoint effort and contribution of all measures through time. Still, there is not enough data and literature reflecting on separate measures and policies, their implementation, and their impact. This does not allow for detailed conclusions on the constant adaptation, promotion, or even removal of some measures according to their impact. The “rigorous evaluation of the measures is often absent from their design and implementation” (Cosmin, et al., 2020, p.379), and that complicates further study of their impact and usefulness.

The lack of a real whole-school approach in the existing educational contexts, organization, and processes. Even though it is part of the basic guidelines in several documents at national or school levels, it does not become a practice in the everyday functioning of school settings.

Despite the existence of some programs designed to help the integration of immigrants and minorities, as well as some local interventions taking place, it became noticeable that the tangible actions in everyday school life are far from being intentionally directed to the inclusion of these populations (maybe the exception is the Escolhas Program with the Roma population, and still it should be noted that Escolhas is an out-of-school program that does not cover all schools).

3.3.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY APPROACHES BASED ON SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE AND RESEARCH TO ADDRESS UNDERACHIEVEMENT

- Diversifying the educational paths that are accessible to students, with quality alternatives, accompanied by guiding and support systems and professionals, may help students, especially those from the most vulnerable groups and contexts, access further education.
- Include preventive and student-centered measures supporting school success and reducing grade repetition and implement measures conducive to assessment for learning and learning feedback to students in schools.
- Integrate educational policies and measures in sets of others, particularly social and economic support policies that improve the society's well-being and social/cultural resources, as well as equity. Strong welfare, working conditions that allow for family/work conciliation, free meals, and transport, among others, all contribute to lower ESL.
- The extension of compulsory education alongside other measures of promotion for school success can create social and political pressure conducive to keeping students in school and transform education so that it responds better to diverse and at-risk students.
- Providing schools with real autonomy and flexibility to adjust and manage their curriculum and engage in student-centered pedagogical differentiation capable of responding to students' individual strengths and frailties and supporting educational success.

- Create the conditions, in school and society, that can lead teachers and parents to support challenging and transformational policies and measures and that can help them succeed.
- Coordination of different policies (e.g., educational, social, economic) and consistency and continuity of policy goals and measures for long periods.

4.0 KEY TAKEAWAYS

- It would be important to have better, more consistent, and detailed, data regarding the evaluation of educational policies and their proposed measures.
- Coordination of policies, continuity of policy investment, and of measures and programs over time has supported a progressive reduction of ESL.
- A combination (over time) of promoting more flexible educational paths, and more accessible VET, while putting in place better guidance and technical support systems and teams in schools, strengthening measures to sustain school success and reduce grade retention, and extending the number of years of compulsory education was decisive to the observed reduction in ESL.
- Community-based programs, in articulation with schools, that develop context-specific interventions, using different pedagogical approaches, and providing support for learning and school skills and school valuing attitudes, are important to tackle ESL, especially for the most vulnerable groups and contexts.
- Strengthening the autonomy and flexibility of schools, their control over the design of student-centered, context-adequate, diverse learning experiences and creating the condition for collaborative work between teachers and for pedagogical differentiation, maybe the next transformational impulse to continue improving quality of education and reducing ESL. There are signs that this measure may face resistance from teachers and parents if the right material work conditions, and necessary changes in discourses and understandings of what quality education is (e.g. addressing the issues connected with exam preparation, and with an engrained view that opposes flexibility and high educational standards) are not created in contexts.

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Version 1.0

REVIEW OF LOCAL, REGIONAL AND/OR NATIONAL POLICIES TO TACKLE EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING – ROMANIA

Reduce early school leaving and underachievement



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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Since the fall of the dictatorial regime in 1989, Romanian education initiated an intense transformation of its ideologies, turning away from communism (Bîrzea, 2003). In the following years, many different educational strategies were implemented, struggling between old ideas and bases built during the communist regime and the construction of less centralised, controlled, and bureaucratic educational structures (Florian & Țoc, 2017; Habinyak, 2022) focusing on the comprehensive, free and harmonious development of the students (Habinyak, 2022).

This report analyses the Law on Pre-University Education of 07/05/2023, the Strategy Regarding Early School Leaving of Romania approved in 2015, and the strategies for the Inclusion of the Roma Minority from 2012 to 2027 (Ministry of Education, 2021; Romanian Parliament, 2023).

The new Law on Pre-University Education of 07/05/2023 is analysed regarding aspects related to preventing early school leaving. The 2023 Law dictates the new structures of the pre-university educational system. It aims to develop the students in the cognitive, socioemotional, professional, civic, and entrepreneurial fields, with the feeling of belonging to the Romanian nation and Europe.

The Policy Regarding the Reduction of Early School Leaving in Romania is a document that comprises strategies involving many sectors of the government, NGOs, and religious institutions to develop an effective system of prevention, intervention, and compensation policies to avoid early school leaving with the focus of young people from 11 to 17 years old (Romanian Parliament, 2015b, 2015d, 2015e).

The analysis of the Strategies regarding the Inclusion of Roma Minority from 2012 to 2027 focuses on its educational aspect. Those Strategies recognize inequalities in terms of the quality of education, the discrimination faced by this minority, and its consequences in terms of low marks in educational evaluations and high levels of early school leaving when compared to the majority of the Romanian population (Kitchen et al., 2017; Ministry of Education, 2021; National Institute of Statistics, 2022; Patache & Neguriță, 2020; Romanian Parliament, 2023). The Strategies comprise the Government Decision n° 1221/2011, the Government Decision n° 18/2015, and the Government Decision n° 560/2022 (Romanian Parliament, 2011b, 2015c, 2022b).

2.0 POLICY/POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

2.1 Law on pre-university education

The law on pre-university education N° 198 of 7/5/2023 is part of Project *România Educată* (Educated Romania). The debate on the Project started in 2016, it was implemented on the 12th of July 2021 by the Memorandum of the Ministry of Education registered with the no. 12909/12.07.2021, and materialised in the law on pre-university education.

Educated Romania is the largest educational policy Project in Romania. It is associated to and has its objectives guided by the Resolution of the Council of the European Union on a strategic framework for European cooperation in the field of education and training, with a view to the realisation and further development of the European Education Area (2021-2030), and by the results of the "Education and Training Monitor", which indicates that Romania has not reached important targets assumed for 2020, such as the rate of early school leaving (Ministry of Education, 2021).

Therefore, the Memorandum regarding the implementation of the Educated Romania Project asserts four main objectives: i) The training in basic (including digital) and transversal skills; ii) Inclusion and equal opportunities, ecological and digital transitions; iii) Teacher training, the development of higher education; iv) The strengthening of international cooperation in education, also through increasing the vocational and technical education sector.

The Memorandum also Considers Implementing integrated measures to reduce school dropout and the early school leaving rate as part of the strategies for Increasing the quality of pre-university education in Romania.

The law on pre-university education N° 198 of 7/5/2023 establishes that reducing school dropouts is part of the concept of quality education. It also defines that educational units will develop priority intervention measures, with the support of local, county, national and international partners for students in the class age in the situation of school dropout or at significant risk of school dropout. The law also establishes the commission for evaluating the education quality for each educational unit and defines its duties as follows: coordinate the application of evaluation and quality assurance procedures and activities approved by the organisation's management; annually prepare a public internal evaluation report on the quality of education in the respective organisation; and develop a strategy with the following directions: learning outcomes, reducing functional illiteracy, reducing absenteeism, school dropout and early school leaving, and promoting excellence.

The law guarantees Inclusive quality education to all the primary beneficiaries of education through the Department of Inclusive and Special Education. The Primary beneficiaries are those at risk of stigmatisation, discrimination, disregard of their cultural identity, segregation, school dropout and school failure.

As defined by the law, students from the following categories are considered at risk of social exclusion: students from socioeconomically disadvantaged, isolated environments, students from socially marginalised groups, students with disabilities, and children and young people from communities of vulnerable Roma, at risk of school dropout or school failure. It is also guaranteed by the law that pregnant students have the right to adapted education to prevent school dropout.

The law states the following programs: the **"Second chance"** programs for primary, secondary and high school education, and for anyone who has exceeded the age corresponding to the class, and the **"Remedial Learning"** program to support students with learning difficulties or lagging in learning. The program is also intended for students at risk of dropping out and/or leaving school early and Romanian children coming from outside the country's borders.

The law on pre-university education establishes the **"Integrated National Program to Reduce School Dropout"**. Its main pillars are free transportation, social grants, and school supplies. As part of the Integrated National Program, students identified as being in the category at risk of dropping out of school participate with priority in the activities of the **"School After School"** program, of the national **"Remedial Learning"** program, in psycho-pedagogical counselling activities and benefit from free camps organised in leisure centres located in the domain of the state. The program includes a follow-up measure by the County Directorates of Pre-University Education (DJIP) from the Bucharest Municipality Directorate of Pre-University Education (DMBIP) with the production of an annual report on dropout levels. The program is associated with the **"Health Meal"** program (PNMS).

The law permits public, private and confessional education units and local public administration authorities to establish school consortia to increase the opportunities for the development of educational units in disadvantaged, mountainous, rural and/or isolated environments, as well as to reduce the risk of school failure and early school leaving. It also states that scholarships to support students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, vulnerable groups, or special medical situations will be provided to help create the conditions for participation in learning activities and prevent school dropout.

Art.	Main measures regarding early school leaving prevention or remediation
17	Educational units will develop priority intervention measures, with the support of local, county, national and international partners for students in the class age in the situation of school dropout or at significant risk of school dropout.
20	States the "Second chance" programs, both for primary and secondary and high school education, for people who have exceeded the age corresponding to the class.

21	Decides that State, private and confessional education units and local public administration authorities can establish school consortia to increase the opportunities for the development of educational units in disadvantaged, mountainous, rural and/or isolated environments, as well as to reduce the risk of dropping out and school failure.
67	Guarantee inclusive quality education to all those at risk of stigmatisation, discrimination, disregard of their cultural identity, segregation, school dropout and school failure, through the Department of Inclusive and Special Education (CNEI). The inclusive education targets those with unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs, with special attention to children at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or having low school results.
75	" Remedial Learning " program to support students with learning difficulties or lagging in learning. The program is also intended for students at risk of dropping out and/or leaving school early and Romanian children coming from outside the country's borders.
76	Guarantee adapted education to pregnant students to prevent school dropout.
77	Establishes the measures to reduce school dropout:
a)	The main pillars of the integrated national program to reduce school dropout: - Free transport - Social grants - School supplies
b)	Follow up by the DJIP/DMBIP with an annual report on dropout levels.
c)	The National "Healthy Meal" Program (PNMS).
d)	Students identified as being in the category at risk of dropping out of school participate with priority in the activities of the "School After School" program, of the national "Remedial Learning" program, in psycho-pedagogical counselling activities and benefit from free camps organised in leisure centres located in the domain of the state.
78	Includes Students from the following categories at risk of social exclusion group: students from socioeconomically disadvantaged, isolated environments, students from socially marginalised groups, students with disabilities, and children and young people from communities of vulnerable Roma, at risk of school dropout or school failure.
108	Grants social scholarship supports students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, vulnerable groups, or special medical situations, provided in the framework methodology, to support participation in teaching activities and prevent school dropout.
231	The reduction of school dropouts becomes part of quality education.
234	Establishes the commission for evaluating the education quality for each educational unit and defines its duties.
a)	Coordinates the application of evaluation and quality assurance procedures and activities approved by the organisation's management.
b)	Annually prepares a public internal evaluation report on the quality of education in the respective organisation.
c)	Develop a strategy with the following directions: learning outcomes, reducing functional illiteracy, reducing absenteeism, school dropout and early school leaving , and promoting excellence.

Table 1: Identifying the main measures and corresponding articles in the law on pre-university education N° 198 of 7/5/2023.

2.2 Policy (Strategy) The Strategy Regarding the Reduction of Early School Leaving in Romania 2015-2020

The Strategy Regarding the Reduction of Early School Leaving in Romania was approved in 2015 for the Government Decision n° 417/2015. The Document is based on the EU recommendations for reducing early school leaving in June 2011. The strategy was developed in collaboration with the World Bank, and with the involvement of the Roma Educational Fund, World Vision and Save the Children NGOs (Alexa & Baci, 2021). The Strategy includes a mix of policies from different coordinated sectors and the integration of measures to support the reduction of early school leaving across all relevant policies affecting children and young people. The short-term objective was to implement an effective system of prevention, intervention and compensation policies and measures to address the major causes of early school leaving, focusing on young people in the 11-17 age group. As defined by the EU Council Recommendations of 2011 and followed by the Strategy Regarding the Reduction of Early School Leaving in Romania, the Strategy included prevention, intervention and compensation policies.

PREVENTION POLICIES

The prevention policies present in the Strategy are i) good quality early education system; ii) diversification of the educational offer with the expansion of educational and professional training beyond the age included in the

compulsory education; iii) promotion of active desegregation policies and additional support to schools in disadvantaged areas; iv) emphasise the value of linguistic diversity and support those children who have another mother tongue, to improve the language knowledge necessary for the learning process; v) increase the involvement of parents in the educational process; vi) increase the flexibility and permeability of educational paths; vii) consolidate vocational training paths and increase their attractiveness and flexibility.

INTERVENTION POLICIES

The intervention policies present in the Strategy are i) the transformation of schools into learning communities to inspire and encourage freedom of thought; ii) improve the identification system of signs of risk of early school leaving; iii) develop a closer connection between parents and other relevant community organisations such as community services representing immigrants or minorities, sports and cultural associations, and other civil society organisations; iv) sustain and continuously support the efforts of teaching staff in their work with students from at-risk groups; v) develop intervention policies that focus on the individual level such as mentoring and teaching methodologies adapted to the needs of students, consolidating guidance and counselling systems, and financial support for those young people whose economic situation is likely to result in early school leaving.

COMPENSATION POLICIES

The compensation policies present in the Strategy include: i) the “Second chance” school reintegration program, differentiated from school programs, which is characterised by small study groups, personalised, age-appropriate, innovative teaching, and flexible educational paths; ii) ensuring different ways of reintegration into the established vocational education and training system; iii) recognition and validation of acquired competences; iv) directed individual support combining social, financial, educational and psychological support for young people with difficulties.

PROGRAMS

Four pillars with representative programs were developed to achieve the objectives of the Strategy. Pillar 1, *Ensuring Access to Education and a Quality Education for all Children* comprises the Representative Program 1.1: Increasing Access to Early Childhood Care and Education; and the Representative Program 1.2: Ensuring Quality Primary and Secondary Education for All. The Pillar 2: *Ensuring the Completion of Compulsory Education by all Children* comprehends the Representative Program 2.1: Developing Early Warning Systems and Strengthening Remedial and Support Programs for Students at Risk in compulsory education; and Representative Program 2.2: Improving the Attractiveness, Inclusion, Quality and Relevance of Vocational and Technical Education (VET). Pillar 3: *Reintegration in the Educational System of People Who Left School Early* has the Representative Program 3.1: Ensuring an Adequate Supply of Second Chance Educational Programs. Finally, Pillar 4: *Development of Adequate Institutional Support* includes the Representative Program 4.1: Strengthening the Government's Capacity to Implement, Monitor and Evaluate the Strategy to Reduce Early School Leaving.

The Representative Program 1.1: Increasing Access to Early Childhood Care and Education is a prevention program that aims to strengthen and consolidate the successful expansion of early childhood education based on the completion of preschool education (3-6 years) and the initiation of rapid growth of the provision of ECCE services for children under three years (especially for children aged 2-3 years).

The Representative Program 1.2: Ensuring Quality Primary and Secondary Education for All is a prevention and intervention program that builds on previous achievements at the primary and secondary education enrolment level. It will focus on two main areas of intervention: the development of functional literacy and key skills of students and the strengthening of on-the-job teacher training.

The Representative Program 2.1: Developing Early Warning Systems and Strengthening Remedial and Support Programs for Students at Risk in compulsory education is a prevention, intervention and compensation program that will develop early warning and early intervention systems to detect children at risk of dropping out of school. The program will also support the strengthening and expanding of various prevention and remedial programs, including the School After School program.

The Representative Program 2.2: Improving the Attractiveness, Inclusion, Quality and Relevance of Vocational and Technical Education (VET) is a prevention program that will redesign the VET pathways to increase the attractiveness and relevance of VET, including by expanding opportunities for workplace learning. Also, the program will support the curricular reform of VET and teacher training.

The Representative Program 3.1: Ensuring an Adequate Supply of Second Chance Educational Programs is a compensation program that aims to support, in the short term, those who leave school early by ensuring access and participation in the Second Chance program in contexts in which prevention and intervention programs are implemented in the medium and long term. The program also aims to improve the quality of the Second Chance education.

The Representative Program 4.1: Strengthening the Government's Capacity to Implement, Monitor and Evaluate the Strategy to Reduce Early School Leaving is a prevention program that will support the creation of an enabling environment for the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Strategy, focusing on the capacity and ability of the government to adopt a comprehensive approach to solving the challenges of early school leaving.

2.3 Policy (Strategy) Inclusion of Roma Minority 2012-2020, 2015 review and 2022-2027

The Strategy of the Government of Romania for the Inclusion of the Romanian Citizens Belonging to the Roma Minority from 2012 to 2020 was set in 2011 by the Government Decision n° 1221/2011 document. This Strategy is based on the European Commission's Communication "An EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020". It was later reviewed in 2015, and the Government of Romania for the Inclusion of Romanian Citizens Belonging to the Roma Minority from 2015 to 2020 was approved by the Government Decision n° 18/2015. The Strategy was reset in the Strategy of the Romanian Government on Inclusion of Romanian Citizens Belonging to the Roma minority for the period of 2022 to 2027, approved by the Government Decision n° 560/2022.

The Strategies are developed in groups of Directions of Action in the Annexes of the Government approval documents. The Strategy of 2012 has the following groups of actions for direction: Education, Employment, Health, Culture and Housing and Small Infrastructure. The 2015 review included the directions for action group Infrastructure and Social Service. The Strategy of 2022 document has a slightly different structure. It includes 4 action plans: 1. Improving living conditions for members of vulnerable communities with Roma; 2. Ensuring access to quality inclusive education for Romanian Roma citizens; 3. Increase the employment rate of Roma in line with market requirements in view of their professional development; 4. Supporting research, conservation and promotion of Roma cultural heritage and cultural identity; 5. Combating discrimination, and antigypsyism and anti-gypsy hate speech or hate crimes. Although there are many groups of Directions of Action, this report will only focus on the Directions of Action involving educational actions or policies.

EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

The 2012 Strategy included the ongoing "Ensuring Equal Opportunities and Increasing Participation in Education" program of the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports (MERYS), running between 2007 and 2013. This program trained school mediators to encourage parental involvement in children's education and school life and to facilitate the collaboration between family, community, and school. It allocated financial support to about 3,000 high school and to approximately 500 university students. School attendance for Roma children has historically

been low, the 2012 Strategy document states that in 2002 only 21% of the Roma children aged between 15 and 18 were at school, and only approximately 31% of Roma children attended kindergarten. School segregation was banned in 2007; however, since persons belonging to national minorities had the right to be taught in their mother tongue, it was still possible in 2011 to have schools consisting of only Roma students with classes in Romani or the bilingual system.

The 2015 Strategy Review used data from 2011 to 2012 to characterize the educational reality of the Roma children. Its data showed that in Romania, the preschool enrolment rate for Roma children aged 3-6 years was 37 % of Roma children while it was 77 % of non-Roma children. 20% of the Roma children did not attend school, mostly because they lacked financial resources. 60% of the Roma parents invoked ethnic discrimination to explain their children's weak school attendance. Over 80 % of Roma parents stated that they wanted their children to have at least secondary education, but more than 75 % of the Roma children did not finish eight years of schooling. Female Roma students face much higher risk of abandoning school or of early school leaving than male Roma students, which is reflected in 10% more female Roma being unable to read or write than male Roma. The distribution of persons who graduated higher education is 14.8 % for persons who declared themselves Romanian vs. 0.7 % for persons who declared themselves Roma. Concerning those who are not able to read or write in Romania, among people over ten years of age it was 1% for those who declared themselves Romanian, and 14.1% for those belonging to the Roma minority.

The 2020 Strategy uses the same data already present in the 2015 Review. However, the 2020 document adds data of the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy from 2018 to show that, in terms of high school completion, rates for the majority population are three times higher than those of the Roma ethnic. The 2022 Strategy document explains that:

“Romania has not made progress in recent years in facilitating access to early education for Roma children. There has also been no progress in compulsory education, even though the gap between Roma and the majority population is smaller than for early childhood education. The share of Roma children attending compulsory education is 78 % (compared to 95 % for Romanian children in the neighbourhood). The gap is widening again for access to upper secondary education, where less than a quarter of Roma pupils are found (22 %), compared to the majority population where the share rises to 80 %³⁴.”

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES IN THE EDUCATION FIELD

The specific educational objectives of the 2012 Strategy were: i) ensuring equal, free and universal access to quality education of Romanian citizens belonging to the Roma minority at all education levels; and ii) promoting inclusive education in the education system, including preventing and eliminating segregation, and combating discrimination based on ethnicity, social status, disability or any other criteria affecting children and young people belonging to disadvantaged groups, including the Roma people.

In order to achieve the objectives in the field of education, the following priorities were set: i) extending, developing, monitoring and promoting in the media the set of assistance programs designed to stimulate school participation, reduce absenteeism and achieve school success in secondary education; ii) restructuring the initial training of teachers, respecting the principles of inclusive education; iii) continuing the positive measures designed to support the education of disadvantaged groups, focusing on employing human resources who respond to the identified needs.

For the 2015 Strategy Review, the educational objectives were: i) reducing the educational development gap (knowledge level) and school attendance gap, at all levels of education (pre-primary, primary, lower-secondary, upper-secondary, tertiary) between Romanian citizens belonging to the Roma minority, including traditional Roma communities, and the rest of the population; ii) reducing the socio-economic gap between Roma and non-Roma students in aspects that block educational inclusion (food, clothing, living conditions, health status), inter alia, by

granting support for the improvement of the family's economic condition or ensuring free daily transport from home to school; iii) promoting inclusive education and reduction of discrimination and segregation in schools on grounds of ethnicity, social status, disabilities or any other criteria which affect children and young people belonging to disadvantaged groups, including the Roma people, through the establishment of an effective detection, monitoring and prompt intervention system for eliminating incidences of school segregation and the supplementing of the current legislation on combatting segregation with sanctions and compulsory actions for cases of school segregation; iv) increasing school participation and school performance of Roma students; v) increasing the educational level of the Roma; vi) cultivating and developing the Roma ethno-cultural identity through education, in accordance with national and EU legislation; vii) ensuring and extending the study of the Romani language and, if necessary, of Roma history and traditions at all educational levels, where there is sufficient demand, including Roma students admitted on distinct lists at high schools and universities.

The 2022 Strategy did not have specific educational objectives. However, it expected results from educational measures at a community level: i) access to quality and inclusive education; ii) reducing early school leaving; iii) active participation in lifelong learning programmes of all age groups. There were also some expected personal or family-level results: i) acquiring a sustainable portfolio of basic skills, including digital skills; ii) diversification of professional opportunities.

DIRECTIONS OF ACTIONS IN EDUCATION OVER TIME:

This report organises the Directions of Action in Education regarding the Strategy of the Government of Romania for the Inclusion of the Romanian Citizens Belonging to Roma Minority 2012-2020, of its 2015 review of the 2022 Strategy that followed.

It presents the information is presented in five parts titled according to the model present in the 2022 document: A) Prevent early school Leaving of students from Roma ethnicity; B) Inclusion of the Roma children in the formal educational system; C) Ensure the quality of schools and preschool structure and equipment for Roma students; D) Promote interculturality and create an inclusive school environment; E) Preservation of students' cultural Roma identity.

Each section shows how the Strategy changed over time and it helps to understand how the program developed over the years. The sections are also differentiated between Prevention, Intervention or Compensation measures to facilitate further analysis. The sections that include measures based on the whole school approach also identify these.

A - PREVENT EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING OF STUDENTS FROM ROMA ETHNICITY

This section includes Prevention and intervention actions. However, it has no Compensation or Whole School-Approach Actions.

The 2012 Strategy focused on continuing Actions such as the "After School" programs and social programs to support the access to quality education of children from the Roma minority, financing programs for students from disadvantaged economic families, and improving training programs for school mediators. The 2012 Strategy also defined the development of counselling, guiding and tutoring activities for children from disadvantaged groups and a system for collecting and monitoring data from all preschool and school-age children in education.

The 2015 review specified the targets for ongoing Actions of the 2012 Strategy. It also reinforced the need for the development of counselling, guiding and tutoring activities for children from disadvantaged groups and a system for collecting and monitoring data, indicating that those Actions had not been taken until then.

The 2022 Strategy focused on including students and informing them about the ongoing programs, employing specialised people to integrate the Roma students and implementing many monitoring tools to guarantee the quality of the Actions set in the 2022 Strategy. It set specific Actions with concrete measures, such as employing and training school mediators from Roma communities for schools where Roma students were at least 15%.

Prevent early school Leaving of students from Roma ethnicity			
Group	Description of the Direction for Action		
	2012 Strategy	2015 Strategy Review	2022 Strategy
1 Prevention and Intervention	Action: Continue and develop "After-school" programs and state financing of participating in programs for children from economically disadvantaged families.	Action: Continue and develop "After-school" programs in communities where the percentage of Roma students is significant and stimulate financing by central and or local public authorities of the Roma children participation in these programs, including other categories of children vulnerable to educational exclusion.	Action: Include Roma students in recovery programs for learning gaps and school remediation, type "School after School", and other support programs financed from the state budget. Expected result: Increase school performance among Roma students; Lower absenteeism among Roma students; Increase school participation.
2 Prevention and Intervention	Action: Continue social programs designed to stimulate school participation, reduce absenteeism, and develop foreign financing programs supporting the access to quality education of children belonging to the Roma minority.	Action: Initiate and develop programs to improve the socio-economic condition of the Roma students in aspects that are obstacles to educational inclusion (food, clothing, living conditions, health status), among other things, by granting support for improving the family's economic situation. These programs are meant to stimulate school attendance, reduce absenteeism, and support Roma children's access to quality education.	Action: Inform Romanian citizens belonging to the Roma minority about the national programs in the field of education. Identify Roma students who do not have access to programs of national interest (PIN) and work on their inclusion in support programs. Expected result: Increase school participation by Increasing the number of Roma students benefiting from national programs such as: Providing school supplies; High school money; Granting financial aid to stimulate the purchase of computers; Student transport; School textbooks, Scholarships and others.
		Action: Ensure school transport for Roma students living in peripheric or isolated localities.	
		Action: Adopt legislative and administrative measures to ensure school participation and continuity for children travelling abroad by developing a methodology for school re-enrolling for children who, for different reasons, often accompany their parents when they find work abroad.	
3 Prevention and Intervention	Action: Continue improving training programs for school mediators and their employment; training	Action: Continue implementing training programs for school mediators and improving their employment	Action: Employ and train school mediators from Roma communities where Roma

	Roma school mediators (with particular attention to high school graduates with a high school diploma) from 1000 communities in which there are over 20% of students belonging to the Roma minority or where they are confronted with significant obstacles in accessing to quality education;	in the education system. Training Roma school mediators (especially high school graduates with a high school diploma; for traditional communities, persons coming from the respective community and fluent in Romani	students are in proportion to a minimum of 15%. Expected result: Increase school participation.
	Action: Develop counselling, guiding and tutoring activities for children from disadvantaged groups.	Action: Develop counselling, guiding and tutoring activities for children from disadvantaged groups.	
4 Prevention and intervention	-	-	Action: Create and revise an evaluation methodology for analysing the impact of the program of school mediation. Expected result: Increase the performance of the school mediation program by developing a methodology to regulate the activity of the school mediator and monitor and evaluate the impact of the school mediation program.
5 Prevention and intervention	-	-	Action: Create and employ, in each county where Roma people live, the School Inspector for Roma knowing the language/s of the communities. Expected result: Correct diagnosis of students' school situation. Timely detection of school segregation, of discrimination, and set intervention for remediation.
6 Intervention	Action: Develop a system for collecting and monitoring data including from all preschool and school-age children in education.	Action: Establishing an effective detection, monitoring and prompt intervention system for eliminating incidences of discrimination and school segregation	Action: Implement a monitoring system for school units with a significant proportion of Roma to prevent early school leaving or other types of exclusion that can affect the future of Roma children and youth. Expected result: Immediately detect early school leaving cases or other forms of social exclusion and immediately intervene to solve them. Evaluate semesterly the school situation of Roma students.

7 Intervention	-	Action: Monitor cases of school dropout and offer counselling to Roma students at risk of dropping out of school, as well as to their families.	Action: Collect and (semi-annually) update data (from local, county, regional and central levels) regarding the participation of Roma children in education, by educational level. Expected result: Monitor children's participation in the education system by education level periodically.
8 Intervention	-	-	Action: Collect and annually update data (from local, county, regional and central levels) regarding the education of Roma outside the education system. Expected result: Monitor the Roma children and adults outside the education system periodically to co-opt them into the education system or Second Chance programs.

Table 2: Directed Actions to Prevent Early School Leaving of students from Roma ethnicity present in the 2012, 2015 and 2022 Strategies.

B - INCLUSION OF THE ROMA CHILDREN IN THE FORMAL EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

The section includes Prevention, Intervention and Compensation Actions. It also has whole school-approach Actions in it.

The 2012 Strategy focused on actions to: increase early education for children from disadvantaged groups by granting access to nurseries, half-day or full-day kindergartens, summer preschools, bilingual kindergartens and multifunctional day-care centres; encourage parents' participation in the educational process and monitor the County School Inspectorates and the assistance groups and committees for improving access to education of disadvantaged groups. The 2012 Strategy also defined continuing Actions such as "second chance" programs, teacher training programs for those working in kindergartens with children belonging to the Roma minority, as well as positive discrimination measures facilitating the entrance of Roma students into vocational or post-secondary education.

The 2015 Review repeated the Action focused on creating programs to increase the early education of children from disadvantaged groups. The 2015 Review also restated the intention to create programs to encourage the participation of parents in school activities. Still, instead of monitoring the County school Inspectorates and the assistance groups, the focus then turned to monitoring the local assistance groups/committees. The continuing Action of the 2015 document increased the scope of the "second chance" program and the measures to facilitate the entrance of Roma students into vocational or post-secondary education. Regarding this, it should be noted the explicit focus on enabling them to have modern occupations and drop traditional, obsolete, unprofitable and sometimes anachronistic occupations.

The 2022 Strategy established the creation of nurseries and kindergartens with regular or prolonged programs in communities with Roma population, including summer, bilingual, and multifunctional kindergartens and day-care

centres. The Action to encourage the participation of parents in the educational process now focused on developing a school-family-community partnership to increase the help given by parents to students' involvement in education. The "second chance" program altered its scope and moved to the Employment Strategy to develop and value the human capital that comes from the Roma communities through programs specifically adapted to them. It also included prison students in the "second chance" program. Regarding the programs to facilitate the entry of Roma students into vocational education, the 2022 Strategy changed the target to the participation of young Roma in the vocational and dual vocational education system, especially in the field of agriculture and related branches, to favour the school inclusion of young Roma living in rural areas. Finally, the 2022 Strategy included continuing the affirmative measures for Roma students dedicated to their participation at the pre-university levels.

Inclusion of the Roma children in the formal educational system			
Group	Description of the Direction for Action		
	2012 Strategy	2015 Strategy Review	2022 Strategy
1 Prevention based on the whole school approach	Action: Create programs designed to increase the access to the early education of children belonging to disadvantaged groups, including the children belonging to the Roma community (nurseries, half-day or full-day kindergartens, summer preschools, bilingual kindergartens and multifunctional day-care centres) to ensure these children have equal opportunities of school success.	Action: Create programs designed to increase the access to the early education of children belonging to disadvantaged groups, including the children belonging to the Roma community (nurseries, half-day or full-day kindergartens, summer preschools, bilingual kindergartens and multifunctional day-care centres) to ensure these children have equal opportunities of school success.	Action: Establish nurseries and kindergartens with regular or prolonged programs in communities with the Roma population, including summer preschools, bilingual kindergartens and multifunctional day-care centres. Expected result: Inclusion of Roma children in the early education process.
	Action: Continue implementing training programs for teachers who work in kindergartens and schools with children belonging to the Roma minority, including by using European funds or other external financing sources.	Description of the means a. Facilitate and promote early education participation of Roma children (parental counselling, food provision for disadvantaged children at kindergarten, etc.); b. Set up or develop half-day or full-day kindergartens nurseries in communities with Roma population, including summer preschools, bilingual kindergartens and multifunctional day-care centres, to ensure these children have opportunities for school success.	

2 Intervention			Action: Continue affirmative measures for Roma students in secondary, high school, post-high school, and university education, and promote these measures. Expected result: Increase the degree of school participation at the pre-university and university levels.
3 Compensation In the 2022 document, It was part of the Employment Actions	Action: Continue programs such as “A second chance” to bring back to school children and young people who dropped out of school before finishing compulsory education.	Action: Continue the program “A second chance” or the programs for functional literacy, correcting early school dropout, and reducing the percentage of people unable to read or write for children, young people, and older people, including those from communities with the Roma majority population.	Action: Develop and value the human capital that comes from the Roma communities through programs adapted and permanently addressed to their profile and that is specific from a sociocultural and regional point of view. Expected result: Increase the number of people from vulnerable groups benefiting from the Second Chance program, including those organised in penitentiaries.
4 Intervention program based on the Whole school approach.	Action: Design and implement programs and activities of parental education and encourage the participation of the Roma parents in the education process within and outside the school; monitor the County School Inspectorates (CSI) and the local assistance groups and committees for improving access to education of disadvantaged groups.	Action: Design and implement programs and activities for parental education and stimulating Roma parents’ participation in the education process within and outside the school. Monitor the activity of the local assistance groups/committees for improving access to education of disadvantaged groups, including the Roma populations	Action: Encourage the development of programs for the participation of Roma parents in the educational process inside and outside the school. Expected result: Develop a school-family-community partnership to increase the help given by parents to students' participation in education.
5 intervention	Action: Continue positive measures in the field of education. Continue to offer facilities and places for young Roma people	Action: Continue positive discrimination measures in the field of education. Continue to offer facilities and special	Action: Encourage the participation of young Roma in the vocational and dual vocational education system, especially in the field

	wishing to enter high school education, vocational or post-secondary education, and higher education institutions, including master and doctoral degrees.	places for young Roma people who wish to enter upper-secondary education, vocational education or post-secondary education, and higher education institutions, including master and doctoral degrees.	of vocational and dual vocational education in agriculture and related branches.
		Action: Facilitate access of Roma children to vocational education, enabling them to have modern occupations and drop traditional, obsolete, unprofitable, and sometimes anachronistic occupations.	Expected result: Increase the interest of young Roma in acquiring a job. The inclusion in the school system of young Roma living in rural areas.

Table 3: Directed Actions for the Inclusion of the Roma children in the formal educational system that are present in the 2012, 2015 and 2022 Strategies.

C - ENSURE THE QUALITY OF SCHOOLS AND PRESCHOOLS STRUCTURE AND EQUIPMENT FOR ROMA STUDENTS

This section comprises one Action from the 2015 Strategy Review and two from the 2022 Strategy. The Action from the 2015 Strategy Review recognised that schools mainly occupied by Roma students have equipment of lower quality and needed investment. The 2022 Strategy proposed intervention ensuring appropriate school infrastructure and granting facilities to teachers working in schools from marginalised communities.

Ensure the quality of schools and preschools structure and equipment for Roma students			
Group	Description of the Direction for Action		
	2012 Strategy	2015 Strategy review	2022 Strategy
1 Intervention	Action:	Action: Furnish school premises and equip schools where there are mainly Roma students, recognising that these schools have premises and equipment of lower quality.	Action: Ensure the school's appropriate infrastructure.
			Expected result: Reduce absenteeism and increase teaching quality.
			Action: Grant facilities to teachers working in school units from marginalised communities.
			Expected result: Increase the quality of teaching by providing an inclusive educational environment.

Table 4: Directed Actions to Ensure the quality of schools and preschools structure and equipment for Roma students present in the 2015 and 2022 Strategies.

D - PROMOTE INTERCULTURALITY AND CREATE AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

This group of Actions includes Prevention and Intervention Actions. It also has Actions based on a Whole School Approach.

The 2012 Strategy aimed to harmonise and complete the system, ensuring quality education and focusing on inclusive education. To do so, it included support for maintaining teachers belonging to the Roma minority in the Romanian education system; implemented teacher training according to principles of inclusive education in the initial training degrees and promoted courses on fighting against discrimination and promoting diversity in school and society in master degree; involved the Ministry of Education, school inspectorates and educational establishments, in partnership with NGOs and representatives of the Roma minority in organising campaigns to promote diversity and interculturality, prevent and fight against educational discrimination, refer to the importance of preschool, secondary, high school and university education, prevent absenteeism and school dropout, child abuse and neglect, and all phenomena causing difficulties for children; and integrate into the school curriculum subjects that focused on preventing and fighting against discrimination and promoting diversity in schools and society.

The 2015 Review discontinued the support for teachers from the Roma communities and the restructuring of teacher training. On the other hand, it included the need to design and implement training programs for the staff of public institutions and public services in the fields of education, health, social assistance and social protection on the prevention of discrimination and the promotion of diversity (historical/ ethnical/ linguistic/ cultural/ religious/ gender/ physical, etc.), interculturality and societal difference, through partnerships with the National Agency for Roma, Ministry of Culture and NGOs. Regarding the third Action of the 2012 Strategy, instead of integrating subjects into the school curriculum, the 2015 Review proposed to supplement the current legislation on combatting segregation with sanctions and compulsory actions in cases of school segregation. It also promoted campaigns on the prevention of discrimination in schools, and how to mediate conflicts involving students and parents from the Roma minority. The 2015 document added the Action for developing extra-school activities with Roma and non-Roma children to stimulate and develop inter-ethnic relations.

The 2022 Strategy brought back the need to train teachers. However, the new Strategy was based on courses approved by the Ministry of Education for the professional development of teaching staff and auxiliary teaching staff in pre-university education. The 2022 document simplified the 2015 review Action on designing and implementing training programs for the staff of public institutions by stating that the teaching staff must be trained to combat discrimination and develop intercultural education every two years. The 2012 Action dedicated to integrating subjects into the school curriculum comes back in the 2022 Strategy now including all university students who complete the psycho-pedagogical module and content disciplines. Finally, the extra-school activities with Roma and non-Roma children to stimulate and develop inter-ethnic relations present in the 2015 Review Strategy are kept in the 2022 document.

Promote interculturality and create an inclusive school environment			
Group	Description of the Direction for Action		
	2012 Strategy	2015 Strategy Review	2022 Strategy
1 Prevention and intervention	Action: Harmonise and complete the system which ensures quality education, focusing on the management of inclusive education.	-	Action: Include courses approved/accredited by the Ministry of Education for the professional development of teaching staff and auxiliary

	Action: Restructure the initial training of teachers, respecting the principles of inclusive education and introducing in the degrees courses focused on the prevention and fight against discrimination and courses on the promoting diversity in schools and society.		teaching staff in pre-university education. The proposed courses will be focused on developing specific topics in intercultural education, inclusive education, equal opportunities in education, education of disadvantaged groups and other specific topics offered by the Ministry of Education to ensure a quality inclusive education system. Expected result: Create an inclusive school environment in pre-university education units.
2 Intervention	Action: Involve MERYS, school inspectorates and educational establishments, in partnership with NGOs and representatives of the Roma minority (official and unofficial leaders), in organising campaigns promoting diversity and interculturality, preventing and fighting against educational discrimination, as well as referring to the importance of preschool, secondary, high school and university education, preventing absenteeism and school dropout, child abuse and neglect, and all phenomena causing difficulties for children.	Action: Design and implement training programs for the staff of public institutions and public services in the fields of education, health, social assistance and social protection, etc., on the prevention of and fight against discrimination, promotion of diversity (historical/ ethnic/ linguistic/ cultural/ religious/ gender/ physical, etc.), interculturality and societal difference, through partnerships with the National Agency for Roma, Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, Ministry of Culture and/or NGOs.	Action: Periodically (every two years), train the teaching staff to combat discrimination and develop intercultural education. Expected result: Increase the quality of teaching. Develop an Inclusive educational environment.
3 Prevention and Intervention Action	Action: Integrate subjects into the school curriculum on preventing and fighting against discrimination and subjects on promoting diversity in schools and society.	Rewrites to change the approach Supplement the current legislation on combatting segregation (Ordinance No 1540 from 19 July 2007) with sanctions and compulsory actions for cases of school segregation.	Action: Introduce into the school curricula (or in the programs of school subjects) classes/subjects/topics of human rights, fighting against discrimination/segregation and supporting multicultural education to create a positive educational climate. Apply the measure at the university level for all students who complete the disciplines of the psycho-pedagogical module. Expected result: Change the content of school subjects. Knowledge about the protection of human rights by graduates.

4 2012 Intervention 2015 and 2022 Prevention and intervention Action based on the whole school approach.	Action: Support the maintenance of teachers belonging to the Roma minority in the Romanian education system.	Action: Extra-school activities with Roma and non-Roma children to stimulate and develop inter-ethnic relations.	Action: Organise extracurricular activities for students regarding the understanding of ethnic diversity and interculturality. Expected result: Inclusive educational environment.
		Action: Campaigns for the prevention of and fight against discrimination in schools and for the mediation of conflicts within the educational system involving students and parents from the Roma minority	

Table 5: Directed Actions to Promote interculturality and create an inclusive school environment present in the 2012, 2015 and 2022 Strategies.

E - PRESERVATION OF STUDENTS' CULTURAL ROMA IDENTITY

This section includes prevention Actions to preserve the Roma students' identity. It contains one Action from the 2012 Strategy, one from the 2015 Review and three from the 2022 Strategy.

The 2012 Strategy ensured teaching of the Romani language at all secondary education levels in schools with sufficient demand for it.

The 2015 Review increased the scope of the 2012 Action ensured the teaching of the Romani language to all educational levels and added the teaching of Roma history. It also included the need to design and implement educational programs for young people and adults of the Roma ethnicity to ensure knowledge of civil rights and the raising of self-respect through partnerships with local public authorities, the National Agency for Roma, the Ministry of Culture and NGOs.

The 2022 Strategy declared, for the first time, the need for a review of the curriculum and school textbooks of history, civics, and literature at all levels of education. It also supported the teaching of the Romani language and literature, the history and traditions of the Roma. However, the latest Strategy discontinued the design and implementation of programs to ensure the knowledge of civil rights present in the 2015 Review.

Preservation of students' cultural Roma identity			
Group	Description of the Direction for Action		
	2011 Strategy	2015 Strategy Review	2022 Strategy
1 Prevention	-	-	Action: Review the curriculum / "programs of school subjects" and school textbooks of history, civics, literature, etc., at all levels of education. Expected result: Promote and valorise the Roma identity, culture and traditions.
2 Prevention	-	-	Action: Develop the teaching of the Romani language and literature, the history and traditions of the Roma, and music in the Romani

			language appropriate to the level of education. Expected result: Building self-esteem.
3 Prevention	Action: Ensure teaching the Romani language at all levels of secondary education (ante-preschools, preschools, primary schools, secondary schools, high schools, vocational schools, and post-secondary schools) where there is sufficient demand for it.	Action Ensure the teaching of the Romani language and Roma history at all levels of education where there is sufficient demand for it.	Action: Train teachers for all levels of education to teach the Romani language and literature, history and traditions of the Roma. Expected result: Ensure the quality of education.
4 Intervention	-	Action: Design and implement educational programmes for the young and adults of the Roma ethnicity and/or communities which aim to ensure civil rights knowledge and the raising of self-respect through partnerships with local public authorities, the National Agency for Roma, the Ministry of Culture and/or NGOs.	-

Table 6: Directed Actions to Preservation of students' cultural Roma identity present in the 2012, 2015 and 2022 Strategies.

MAIN CHANGES OVER TIME OF THE DIRECTIONS OF ACTION

This review looked at the Strategy for the Inclusion of Roma Minority in their instances from 2012 to 2022. It's possible to observe that its actions became more concrete, with an increased scope and clearer targets. The targets, the means to achieve the objectives, and what is expected of each Action became more detailed over time as each new Strategy or Review was developed. The 2022 document also specified the time for each Action and where the necessary budget was coming from, demonstrating a clear evolution of the Strategies over the years. The urge to transform the Strategy or its implementation is evident in the 2022 Strategy document, which explains that the previous actions were not enough to integrate the Roma population and guarantee their educational rights as part of the People of Romania. The document explains that the educational gaps between the Roma people and the Romanian population have increased over the years.

3.0 POLICY REVIEW

3.1 Policy Review as in academic literature

LAW ON PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

The Law on Pre-University Education N° 198 was published in May 2023. Therefore, no scientific literature was found discussing its effects on the educational system in terms of early school leaving at the time this report was being written. However, it is necessary to address and specify its actions regarding ESL prevention, as described previously.

The Law is part of the Educated Romania Project. This Project was launched in January 2016 to improve the quality and flexibility of the educational system, according to the European principles of educational quality (Madalina,

2023; Pohoată & Mocanu, 2023). One of the main changes it proposes is the reform of the funds directed to education to improve the structure, educational facilities, and income of those directly involved in the educational process (Madalina, 2023). However, budget allocated to education remains low, reaching its historical minimum of 2.5% of GDP in 2021 (Pohoată & Mocanu, 2023). Romania is the European Union country that least invests in education (Madalina, 2023).

The OECD, in 2017, pointed out inequity as one of the main problems of Romanian education. The 2020 UNICEF Report also raised called attention to it, when looking at how the COVID-19 pandemic in Romania increased the dropout rate, as only half of pre-university students had access to online contact with teachers for all subjects (Kitchen et al., 2017; UNICEF, 2020). The OECD document also mentions students' diversity as a significant challenge for the government (Kitchen et al., 2017). The 2023 Law addresses the issue of inequity in the prevention of early school leaving by defining the students at risk of school dropout and prioritising those students in programs such as Second Chance, Remedial Learning and School After School. Inequity is also considered by establishing the Integrated National Program to Reduce School Dropout based on granting transportation, social grants, school supplies and food to students in need. Diversity is addressed by putting an emphasis on inclusive education with help from the Department of Inclusive and Special Education (Romanian Parliament, 2023). The actions to address diversity are not as detailed, and do not include as many specified resources, as the measures to address inequity when considering early school leaving.

The OECD document also mentions school satisfaction for teachers and students as a significant challenge for the government (Kitchen et al., 2017). The most recent curriculum is based on the idea that we learn to participate by participating, not by listening about participation. However, this intention is not necessarily followed with practical actions that could effectively transform the learning process (Sava et al., 2022). The need for the whole school approach is raised by Sava et al. (2022) as a base for developing transformative measures. The Law on pre-university education guarantees psycho-pedagogical counselling and free camps organised in leisure centres for students at risk of dropping out (Romanian Parliament, 2023), which is a small step considering the problem's importance. Regarding teacher satisfaction, it honours and awards to teachers through merit. Teachers also may receive decorations, orders, medals and titles according to excellent results in teaching (Romanian Parliament, 2023). Teachers can also benefit from free medical assistance for examinations, free vaccination and measures to prevent occupational disease, even though there are no programs or actions for developing or maintaining the satisfaction and well-being of teachers (Romanian Parliament, 2023).

Teacher training and investment in the whole educational staff are among the most important actions the Romanian government should take to improve education and decrease early school leaving (Madalina, 2023; Pohoată & Mocanu, 2023; Sava et al., 2022). Even though teachers' training is in many political documents, and it is cited several times in the Law of Pre-University Education (Romanian Parliament, 2011a, 2015a, 2015b, 2015e, 2022a, 2023), teachers are not obliged to undertake continuous training in social education (Sava et al., 2022). Furthermore, The methodologies used in these training courses should be more teacher-friendly (Sava et al., 2022), and the financial investments to increase the quality of teaching and the well-being of teachers need to be made effective.

STRATEGY FOR REDUCING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IN ROMANIA 2015 -2020

The Strategy for Reducing Early School Leaving in Romania 2015-2020 was developed with the collaboration of the World Bank to achieve the ET framework's objectives and reduce the early school leaving rate in Romania to 10% by the year 2020 (Romanian Parliament, 2015e). The Strategy also involved NGOs such as the Roma Educational Fund, World Vision and Save the Children (Alexa & Baciu, 2021). However, in 2015, when the project was created, the dropout rate was 19.1% (Eurostat, 2023); in 2020, the last year of this Strategy, the rate was 15.6% (Eurostat, 2023). It is important to note that there was some improvement during this period despite the failure of the strategy's primary objective. The last drop was in 2019, when the rate fell from 16.4% in 2018 to 15.3% in 2019 (Eurostat, 2023). Between 2020 and 2022 the rate oscillated between 15.3% and 15.6% (Eurostat, 2023). Although the general rate

decreased, the dropout rate in rural areas increased, and the Roma dropout rate reached 77% (Patache & Neguriță, 2020). It is important to highlight that the 2020 increase may be related to the Covid-19 pandemic. During the 2019/2020 school year, 28% of children and 43% of teachers did not possess material for online education (Pohoață & Mocanu, 2023).

The Strategy considers education as a service, considering its demand and offer. Therefore, the Strategy may be divided into two main groups: aspects influencing students and families related to educational demands and aspects related to the educational offer, considering its structure and service (Alexa & Baci, 2021). The Strategy aims at those it considers at risk of leaving school early: those with low socio-economic status, children from rural areas, Roma ethnic children, and other marginalised or underrepresented groups (Romanian Parliament, 2015e).

Even though the Strategy implements and monitors early school leaving programs, and intends to improve data collection and monitor students at risk of dropping out, it lacks a consistent approach to improve the educational outcomes (Kitchen et al., 2017).

For tackling early school leaving more effectively Alexa and Baci (2021) left several recommendations: i) consider the students on their specificities: gender, ethnicity, academic achievement, educational needs, disability, absenteeism, motivation for school activities and school engagement, performance at school, behaviour, values and expectations regarding education, socio-economic status of the family and educational models within the family, structure of the family and number of family members, general climate within the family, parental employment status, child's involvement in household duties and uncommon personal situations of the children; ii) consider the environmental aspects: characteristics of the community where the child lives and characteristics of the school in terms of infrastructure, resources, and quality of teaching; iii) consider the Governmental aspect, which comprises central budget allocations for specific preventive measures, funding for "School After School" and "Second Chance" programs, compatibility between the educational content and the real needs of the labour market, and the presence of support specialists (counsellors and school psychologists) in the schools. All these aspects must be thought about considering their interplays and effects on the student. Also, iv) start by listening to the needs of the population and not from the perspective of the policymakers and school representatives; and finally, v) search for programs and measures that are working, especially for disadvantaged groups.

INCLUSION OF ROMA MINORITY 2012-2027

The attention of the Romanian Government towards the Roma minority dates back at least to 1978 when the Communist Party published the "Communication concerning some problems raised by the Gypsy population for our country". The document labelled them as unstable, backward, parasites, as the cause of mass spreading of diseases and of being responsible for most recorded crimes (Popoviciu & Tileagă, 2019). At that time, the Roma people were not acknowledged as an ethnicity. The government aims were to impose assimilation, to extinguish their cultural specificity, making them indistinguishable from majority Romanians (Popoviciu & Tileagă, 2019). In 1993, the European Commission proposed recommendations to improve the situation of the Roma people. However, the changes in Romanian law only started in 1997. As a condition for entering the European Union, the Romanian government created the first strategy for improving the situation of the Roma in 2001 (Popoviciu & Tileagă, 2019), revised in 2006 (Lazar & Baci, 2014). In 2004, the National Agency of Roma was created to promote activities, projects and programs to improve the situation of the Roma people (Patache & Neguriță, 2020). However, even with the recognition of the Roma ethnicity, the situation has worsened from the communist regime to 2017 (Lauritzen, 2019).

The Romanian Government's Strategy for the Inclusion of Citizens from Roma minority was launched for the period from 2012 to 2020 (Romanian Parliament, 2011b). In 2014, one year before its 2015 review, the level of progress of 12 of its 17 Directions for Action was unknown. The other five followed similar pre-existing initiatives and had a high involvement of public actions and low participation of the private sector (Lazar & Baci, 2014). The Actions with acknowledged progress were Second Chance programs, special places for Roma people in pre-universities and

universities, teaching the Romani language where there is sufficient demand for it, maintenance of teachers belonging to the Roma minority in the Romanian educational system, and training programs for school mediators (Lazar & Baci, 2014). The work of Lazar and Baci (2014) highlights the progress of the 2012 Strategy as it elaborates partnerships with the private sector, especially representatives of the Roma community. On the other hand, it identifies the main fragilities of the 2012 Strategy as redundancies in the document, lack of organised Action Plans to implement the proposed solutions, lack of a clear division of tasks to be distributed between the public and private sectors, and lack of short-term goals to guarantee long term goals (Lazar & Baci, 2014).

The educational aim of the 2015 Strategy Review was to integrate partnerships with civil society in all stages of local and central public education and to adapt the interventions to the social particularities of the subgroups of the Roma minority (Patache & Neguriță, 2020).

The 2012-2020 Strategy failed to provide the information necessary to understand the results of the ongoing Actions, such as the monitoring systems and evaluation measures and instruments to identify problems faced by the Roma communities locally. The 2012-2020 Strategy also failed to develop communication and coordinated work of the decision-makers from the county to the national level regarding measures of Roma inclusion. It failed to create protocols and intervention methodologies in cases of discrimination against the Roma community (Patache & Neguriță, 2020).

To this date, no papers have been found regarding the educational aspects of the Strategy of the Romanian Government on Inclusion of Romanian Citizens Belonging to the Roma minority for the period of 2022 to 2027. However, Serban (2022) cites the slow-growing intervention of the Romanian state in equaling opportunities for the Roma ethnics, with relatively positive policies but slow progress and weak performance. The author considers that the policy must be more operative and active to significantly prevent and combat antisemitism, racism, radicalization and hate speech. Although the government strategies are complex and prioritise the Roma minority at the discursive level, the strategies are poorly executed (Serban, 2022).

3.2 Comparative Analysis of successful and less effective policies

3.2.1 POLICY ANALYSIS IN THE LIGHT OF EUROPEAN COMMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS

Given its recent publication, the success or failure of the aspect of the Law of Pre-University Education cannot yet be read in the Eurostat figures for ESL.

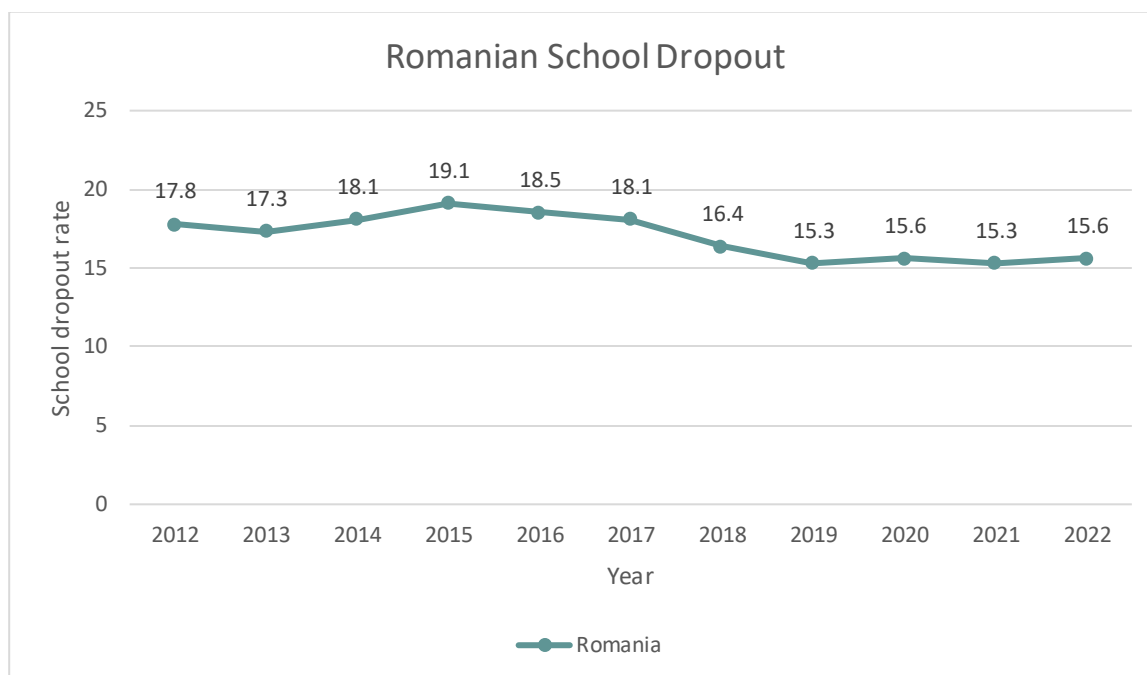


Figure 1: Eurostat numbers for the Romanian school dropout rates between 2012 and 2022 (in percentage).

The main consequences of the Strategy Regarding the Reduction of Early School Leaving in Romania can be translated in the following graphic from Eurostat (Eurostat, 2023). As explained above, the Strategy's final objective was to reduce the early school leaving rate in Romania to 10% by 2020, which did not happen, as the 2020 dropout rate was 15.6% (Eurostat, 2023; Romanian Parliament, 2015e). However, it is important to note that there was some improvement during this period despite the failure of the strategy's primary objective. The early school leaving rate fell from 19.1% in 2015 to 15.6% in 2020 (Eurostat, 2023). Although the general rate decreased, its levels remained very unequal, with the rate of early school leaving in rural areas increasing, and the Roma dropout rate reaching 77% (Patache & Neguriță, 2020). It is important to highlight that decreasing trend of the rate may have been interrupted due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it affected different groups of children: during the 2019/2020 school year students and teachers did not have adequate materials for online education (Pohoață & Mocanu, 2023).

Some literature indicates that the educational situation of the Roma population in Romania has been worsening over the years (Lauritzen, 2019). However, no data in Eurostat or the literature explains why.

Prevention measures regarding the ESL of the Law of Pre-University Education of 2023:

The prevention measures in the Law of Pre-University of 2023 regarding preventing ESL were:

- i) The establishment of the dropout rate as part of the concept of quality education;
- ii) Deciding that State, private, and confessional education units and local public administration authorities can establish school consortia to increase the opportunities for the development of educational units in disadvantaged, mountainous, rural and/or isolated environments, as well as to reduce the risk of children dropping out and of school failure;
- iii) Defining groups of students who may be at risk of social exclusion and focus some actions on them: students from socioeconomically disadvantaged, isolated environments, students from socially marginalised groups,

students with disabilities, and children and young people from communities of vulnerable Roma, at risk of school dropout or school failure.

Investing in quality education and building partnerships with local services and NGOs to help students with socioeconomic difficulties and focusing measures on students who are especially vulnerable or at risk of early school leaving are measures that can be found in The Council Recommendation of 28 November 2022 on Pathways to School Success on policies to reduce early school leaving. The literature also considers that identifying students at risk of dropping out or of school failure and focusing government actions on them may result in lower ESL (Brutschy & Zachary, 2014; Chevalère et al., 2023; European Council, 2022; Mendes et al., 2021; Mistry et al., 2002).

Prevention measures of the Strategy Regarding the Reduction of Early School Leaving in Romania:

The Strategy prevention policies were:

- i. Providing a good quality early education system;
- ii. The promotion of active desegregation policies and additional support to schools in disadvantaged areas;
- iii. To put an emphasis on the value of linguistic diversity and to support those children who have another mother tongue to improve the language knowledge necessary for the learning process;
- iv. To increase the involvement of parents in the educational process;
- v. To increase the flexibility and permeability of educational paths; to diversify the educational offer with the expansion of educational and vocational training beyond the age included in the compulsory education; to consolidate vocational training routes and increase their attractiveness and flexibility.

Quality of early education, combating segregation, and promoting linguistic diversity are related to preventing school dropout in the Council Recommendation of 28 November 2022 on Pathways to School Success on policies to reduce early school leaving (European Council, 2022). The connection between the quality of early education and the reduction of ESL is also supported by the literature (Bonnier, 2008; O'Hare et al., 2022; Roy & Rutter, 2006; Träff et al., 2020).

The Council Recommendation of 28 November 2022 on Pathways to School Success recommends increasing the flexibility and permeability of educational paths, the involvement of parents and promoting linguistic diversity to reduce early school leaving (European Council, 2022).

Prevention measures of the Strategies for the Inclusion of Roma Minority 2012-2020, 2015 Review and 2022-2027:

The Prevention Actions measures of the Strategies for the Inclusion of Roma Minority 2012-2020, 2015 Review and 2022-2027 were:

- i) The Strategies support government financing of programs for children from economically disadvantaged families.
- ii) All the Strategies introduce laws and subjects in the school curriculum for the promotion of human rights, combating discrimination and segregation, supporting multicultural education, and ensuring the teaching of the Romani language at school. The 2015 Review included teaching Roma history where it had sufficient demand. Nevertheless, the 2022 Strategy maintains the previous measures without the demand restriction for history and adds Roma literature, music, and traditions. To make this prevention measure viable, the 2022 Strategy establishes the review of the curriculum and school textbooks of history, civics, literature, etc., at all educational levels; the

training of teachers of all levels to teach the Romani language, literature, history and traditions; and the creation and employment, in each county where Roma people live, of a School Inspector for Roma connoisseurs of the language/s of the communities. The 2012 Strategy included support for maintaining teachers from the Roma minority in the educational system. However, this support was discontinued in the 2015 Review and did not come back in the 2022 Strategy.

This Action is the same one presented in the 2023 Law of Pre-University Education. As explained above, the Council Recommendation of 28 November 2022 on Pathways to School Success on policies to reduce early school leaving and the literature consider these students at risk of dropping out or of school failure and recommends government actions focusing on this group (Brutschy & Zachary, 2014; Chevalère et al., 2023; European Council, 2022; Mendes et al., 2021; Mistry et al., 2002). Specific actions attending to Roma children, the promotion of their culture, and inclusion promotion are also part of the actions in the Council Recommendation (European Council, 2022).

Intervention measures for Early School Leaving on the Law of Pre-University Education of 2023:

The intervention measures in the Law of Pre-University of 2023 regarding preventing ESL were:

- i. To guarantee inclusive quality education to all those at risk of stigmatisation, discrimination, disregard of their cultural identity, segregation, school dropout and school failure through the Department of Inclusive and Special Education. Inclusive education targets those with unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs, with special attention to children at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or having low school results. Also, to guarantee adapted education to pregnant students.
- ii. To guarantee the basic conditions for students in socioeconomic need to access education, such as free transport, social grants, school supplies, food, and special medical assistance.
- iii. To develop reports on dropout rates and education quality, and developing a strategy focused on learning outcomes, reducing functional illiteracy, reducing absenteeism, school dropout and early school leaving, and promoting excellence.
- iv. Application of a Remedial Learning program to support students with learning difficulties or lagging. The program is also intended for students at risk of dropping out and/or leaving school early and Romanian children coming from outside the country's borders. Students identified as at risk of dropping out of school have priority to participate in the activities of the School After School program of the national Remedial Learning program, in psycho-pedagogical counselling activities and benefit from free camps organised in leisure centres located in the domain of the state.

The development of monitoring systems at a national, regional and local level to collect qualitative and quantitative data from students and factors that affect the learning process is considered important in the Council Recommendation (European Council, 2022). Adapted teaching methods, inclusive education and education to combat discrimination are in the recommended actions as well (European Council, 2022). The same document also encourages the development and use of after-school programs to promote educational success for all learners (European Council, 2022).

Support measures for those specially at risk and especially vulnerable are not only supported by European Council recommendations (European Council, 2022) but also by literature (Brutschy & Zachary, 2014; Chevalère et al., 2023; European Council, 2022; Mendes et al., 2021; Mistry et al., 2002)

Intervention measures of the Strategy Regarding the Reduction of Early School Leaving in Romania:

The Strategy intervention policies were:

- i) The transformation of schools into learning communities to inspire and encourage the freedom of thought;
- ii) To improve the system for identifying risks and signs of early school leaving;
- iii) Develop a closer connection between parents and other relevant organizations outside school as community services representing emigrants or minorities, sports and cultural associations, employers or civil society organizations;
- iv) Sustaining and continuously supporting the efforts of teaching staff in their work with students from at-risk groups and Support Programs for Students at risk in compulsory education including an intervention and compensation program such as the School After School program;
- v) Develop intervention policies at the individual level, such as mentoring and adapting teaching according to the needs of the student, consolidating a guidance and counselling system, and access to financial support for those young people whose economic situation is likely to result in early school leaving.

Besides monitoring systems, these intervention measures have a focus on developing closer connections between schools, parents and community services and organisations and supporting Programs for Students at risk in compulsory education including an intervention and compensation program such as the School After School. This kind of action is in line with the “Whole School Approach” is one of the leading educational strategies proposed by the Council Recommendations, Pathways to School Success on policies to reduce early school leaving (European Council, 2022). The same document also supports adapting teaching methods, inclusive education, and measures to decrease the students' vulnerability and consequent dropout risk (European Council, 2022).

Intervention measures of the Strategy for the Inclusion of Roma Minority 2012-2020, 2015 review and 2022-2027:

The intervention measures of the Strategy for the Inclusion of Roma Minority 2012-2020, 2015 review and 2022-2027 were:

- i. Actions to develop programs to improve the socio-economic condition of the Roma ethnic students with food, clothing, living conditions, health and financial assistance and ensure school transport started in 2015 but were discontinued in the 2022-2027 Strategy.
- ii. The 2012 Strategy promoted quality education, focusing on inclusive education. This measure was discontinued in the 2015 Review and recovered in the 2022 Strategy as part of the inclusion of courses for the school staff to develop intercultural and inclusive education and equal educational opportunities for disadvantaged groups.
- iii. Use the “School After School programs for learning gaps and school remediation.
- iv. Employ and train school mediators from Roma communities.
- v. The 2012 Strategy and its review included the development of counselling guiding and tutoring for children from disadvantaged groups. However, this action was excluded from the 2022 Strategy. The 2015 Review included, as one of its Actions, the monitoring of school dropout and counselling to Roma students at risk of dropping out. The 2022 Strategy refined the monitoring program, collecting and updating data (from local, county, regional and central levels) regarding the participation of Roma children in education by educational level, and collecting data regarding the education of Roma outside the education system. However, the 2022 program does not include student or parental counselling in its Actions.

- vi. Implementing a monitoring system for school units with a significant proportion of Roma to prevent early school leaving or other types of exclusion that can affect the future of Roma children and youth.
- vii. Establishing nurseries and kindergartens in communities with the Roma population, including summer activities and bilingual and multifunctional day-care centres. The 2012 Strategy included kindergarten teacher training for those working in schools with students from the Roma minority. However, this measure was discontinued in the 2015 Review and was not brought back in the 2022 Strategy.
- viii. The 2015 Review presented an offer of facilities and special places for young Roma students to enter upper-secondary and vocational or post-secondary education and higher education. The 2022 Strategy discontinued the special places. Instead, it encourages the participation of young Roma ethnic in vocational education and dual vocational education in agriculture-related branches.
- ix. The 2012 Strategy promoted the involvement of the Ministry of Education, school inspectorates and educational units in partnership with NGOs and Roma ethnic representatives to organize campaigns promoting diversity and interculturality, preventing and fighting against educational discrimination, as well as referring to the importance of preschool, secondary, high school and university education, preventing absenteeism and school dropout, child abuse and neglect, and all phenomena causing difficulties for children. The 2015 Review changed the institutions responsible for taking this Action involving the National Agency for Roma, Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, Ministry of Culture and NGOs. The 2015 Review and the 2022 Strategy defined the need to train the teaching staff every two years to combat discrimination and develop intercultural education. The 2015 Review included a campaign to prevent and fight discrimination at school and mediate conflicts in the educational system conflicts involving parents from the Roma minority. The 2015 Review also designs and implements educational programs for the young and for adults of Roma ethnicity and/or communities, which aim to increase their knowledge of civil rights and the raising of self-respect through partnerships with local public authorities, the National Agency for Roma, the Ministry of Culture and/or NGOs. However, this was discontinued in the 2022 Strategy.
- x. The 2015 Review included extra-school activities with Roma and non-Roma students to develop inter-ethnic relations. However, the actions were reduced by the 2022 Strategy to the organization of extracurricular activities for students regarding the understanding of ethnic diversity and interculturality, without declaring those responsible for that.

In these intervention measures some look to decrease the Roma students' vulnerability and consequent risk of dropping out. As mentioned before, specific support measures for groups who are especially at risk are supported both by European documents and by literature (Brutschy & Zachary, 2014; Chevalère et al., 2023; European Council, 2022; Mendes et al., 2021; Mistry et al., 2002).

One of the most interesting aspects of these intervention measures is how they propose to combat discrimination against the Roma in educational institutions, and the transformation of these contexts so they become more adequate and welcoming to Roma students. Measures such as training and employ mediators from the Roma communities, promoting campaigns promoting diversity and interculturality, preventing and fighting against educational discrimination, including partnerships with NGOs and the National Agency for the Roma, training teachers and educators in to develop intercultural and inclusive education and to be better prepared to work with disadvantaged and Roma populations. Measures supporting inclusive education and education to combat discrimination are in the recommended actions of the Council Recommendation (European Council, 2022) and understood as important to create the conditions for ESL to be reduced among those groups who are especially disadvantaged.

Compensation measures for Early School Leaving of the Law of Pre-University Education of 2023:

The compensation measures in the Law of Pre-University of 2023 regarding preventing ESL were:

i) “Second Chance” type programs, both for primary and secondary and high school education, for people who have exceeded the age corresponding to the school year.

Second chance programs are recommended by the Council Recommendation of 28 November 2022 on Pathways to School Success on policies to reduce early school leaving for all who have left education and training prematurely (European Council, 2022).

Compensation measures of the Strategy Regarding the Reduction of Early School Leaving in Romania:

The compensation policies include:

- i. “Second Chance” school reintegration programs, different from the school programs, with small study groups, personalised, age-appropriate, innovative teaching, and flexible educational paths. Include diverse ways of reintegration into the vocational education and training system;
- ii. Establish programs for the recognition and validation of already acquired competences;
- iii. Promote directed individual support by combining social, financial, educational, and psychological support for young people with difficulties.

Second chance programs, and offering flexible entry points to the educational and training system for all who have left education and training prematurely are recommended in the Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success on policies to reduce early school leaving for all who have left education and training prematurely (European Council, 2022). Schemes involving social, financial, educational and psychological support for young people with difficulties is also recommended (European Council, 2022).

Compensation measures of the Strategies for the Inclusion of Roma Minority 2012-2020, 2015 review and 2022-2027:

The compensation Actions of the Strategies for the Inclusion of Roma Minority 2012-2020, 2015 review and 2022-2027 were:

i) Second Chance programs appeared both in the Strategy of 2012 and the Review of 2015 promoting functional literacy, correcting early school leaving, and reducing the percentage of children and older people who are unable to read or write, including those from Roma communities. The perspective changed in the 2022 Strategy, where the Action was moved to the Employment Strategy, focusing on using the program to develop and value the human capital from Roma communities adjusting it to their specificities.

As cited in the compensation measures in the Law of Pre-University of 2023 regarding preventing ESL, Second chance programs are recommended by the Council Recommendation of 28 November 2022 on Pathways to School Success on policies to reduce early school leaving for all who have left education and training prematurely (European Council, 2022).

Whole School Approach

As cited above, all measures that support the whole school approach are strongly supported by the Council Recommendation of 28 November 2022 on Pathways to School Success on policies to reduce early school leaving for all who have left education and training prematurely (European Council, 2022) as it is one of the leading educational strategies it proposes.

Whole School Approach regarding the ESL of the Law of Pre-University Education of 2023:

The Whole School Approach measures in the Law of Pre-University of 2023 regarding preventing ESL were:

i) Promoting priority intervention measures in schools with the support of local, county, national and international partners for students in the class age who dropped out or who are at significant risk of dropping out of school.

Whole School Approach of the Strategy Regarding the Reduction of Early School Leaving in Romania:

The Whole School Approach policies included:

- i) Increase the involvement of parents in the educational process;
- ii) Develop a closer connection between parents and other relevant organizations outside school such as community organizations representing immigrants or minorities, sports and cultural associations, employers or civil society organizations.

Whole School Approach of the Strategies for the Inclusion of Roma Minority 2012-2020, 2015 review and 2022-2027:

The Whole School Approach Actions of the Strategies for the Inclusion of Roma Minority 2012-2020, 2015 review and 2022-2027 were:

- i) in the 2015 Review, a campaign to prevent and fight against discrimination at school and to mediate conflicts in the educational system involving parents from the Roma minority. The 2015 Review also proposed the design and implementation of educational programs for the young and for the adults of Roma ethnicity and/or Roma communities to increase their knowledge of their civil rights and the raising of their self-respect through partnerships with local public authorities, the National Agency for Roma, the Ministry of Culture and/or NGOs. It was discontinued in the 2022 Strategy.
- ii) The 2015 Review included extra-school activities with Roma and non-Roma students to develop inter-ethnic relations. However, the actions were reduced by the 2022 Strategy to the organization of extracurricular activities for students regarding the understanding of ethnic diversity and interculturality, without declaring those responsible for that.
- iii) Included the implementation of programs to stimulate the participation of Roma parents in educational activities inside and outside schools.
- iv) The 2015 Review included a campaign to prevent and fight against discrimination at school and to mediate conflicts in the educational system involving parents from the Roma minority. However, it was discontinued in the 2022 Strategy.

3.3 Policies, gaps and solutions

3.3.1 GAPS IDENTIFIED IN EXISTING POLICIES

The central gap identified in the Romanian laws and strategies concerns that even though the writing documents predict actions to prevent school dropout and promote equal education regardless of origin and ethnicity, many measures are not taken to fulfil the documents' predictions (Florian & Țoc, 2017; Sava et al., 2022; Serban, 2022). For example, when looking at the Directions of Actions of the Strategies to Integrate the Roma Minority over time, the 2012 Strategy predicts developing a system for collecting and monitoring data concerning including all preschool and school-age children in education; the 2015 Review predicts establishing the monitoring and intervention system to fight discrimination and segregation at school; and the 2022 Strategy states the implementation of a monitoring system for school units with a significant proportion of Roma to prevent school dropout and other social exclusions, and collecting data regarding the participation of Roma children inside and outside the educational system. The repetition of such actions is a sign that implementation may have failed. This sign is corroborated by the literature that highlights the lack of data about the discrimination against the Roma people, the lack of system monitoring and evaluating the Roma Integration Strategies measures, and the lack of data collection mechanism analysing the size of the Roma problem (Patache & Neguriță, 2020).

The 2023 Law on Pre-University Education, the Strategy for preventing early school leaving and the educational aspect of the Strategies for the Inclusion of Roma Minority do not have actions concerning the well-being of teachers in their daily activities (Romanian Parliament, 2011a, 2015a, 2015e, 2022a, 2023). This aspect is one of the main challenges reported by the OECD in 2017 and has not been addressed (Kitchen et al., 2017).

3.3.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY APPROACHES BASED ON SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE AND RESEARCH TO ADDRESS UNDERACHIEVEMENT

Diversifying the educational paths and making them accessible to students, accompanied by guiding and counseling systems and professionals.

Create flexible second chance and reintegration programs, and inclusive teaching methodologies adapted the needs of students.

Integrate educational policies and measures in sets of others, particularly social and economic support policies focused on those especially at risk or from vulnerable communities. Include measures supporting school success. Work on providing better quality education and better school provision especially in remote and rural areas and for disadvantaged groups and communities such as Roma. This should include early childhood education. It also should include teacher training and training for the other educational staff to make them more prepared for working with disadvantaged and Roma communities.

Consistently and systematically work on the desegregation of schools and in combating discrimination in educational contexts, especially racism against Roma children and communities. Actions should transform schools making them more friendly to, respecting and embracing of Roma communities, language and culture. Engaging parents, NGOs, training teachers, employing community mediators, and revising curricula and school manuals can provide support for the kind of transformation this work demands.

4.0 KEY TAKEAWAYS

The main issue regarding all the analysed laws and strategies is the incomplete application of its Actions and plans (Florian & Țoc, 2017; Sava et al., 2022; Serban, 2022).

Regarding the effects of the 2023 Law on Pre-University Education, there is a lack of studies on its possible impacts and changes over time from the previous one, the 2011 Law on Pre-University Education.

Regarding Early School Leaving, the most critical fragility is found in rural areas and among the Roma ethnic groups. ESL is strongly related to rural and Roma socioeconomic inequity and racism against the Roma population, causing difficulties in the enrolment of children at school and suffering in the school environment (Florian & Țoc, 2017; Kitchen et al., 2017; Lauritzen, 2019; Lazar & Baci, 2014; Patache & Neguriță, 2020; Pohoată & Mocanu, 2023).

The measures to prevent ESL are spread in many documents and often follow recommendations found in EU documents. They are also commonly repeated and there is no evidence of coordinated actions between the documents, as well as little evidence that measures and policy objectives are consistently and continually pursued, especially in those areas and communities that are especially disadvantaged.

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Version 1.0

REVIEW OF LOCAL, REGIONAL AND/OR NATIONAL POLICIES TO TACKLES EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING – Poland

Reduce early school leaving and underachievement



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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Early school leavers are defined by the European Union (EU; 2013) as people aged 18-24 who have only lower secondary education or less than two years of upper secondary education who are not currently in school or receiving further training. By 2030, EU has set the goal of reducing early school leaving (ESL) to less than 9%. In 2022, the prevalence of early school leaving is estimated to be 9.6% across the EU (EUROSTAT, 2023), although geographical differences are noted with some countries having already achieved the 2030 target. Poland is one such country, where ESL is currently around 5% (EUROSTAT, 2023). In Poland, the current educational structure includes 8 years of primary school followed by either 4 years of general secondary school; 5 years of technical secondary school; 3 years of Stage I sectoral vocational school that are optionally followed by two years of Stage II sectoral vocational school; or 3 years of special school (Eurydice 2023). Compulsory education spans ages 6-15, although children are obligated to continue education in some form until age 18. This education could be through secondary school or vocational training offered in employment settings. In Poland, early school leavers are defined as those who do not continue their training or education after lower secondary school and those who leave school prior to completing compulsory education (age 15; Eurydice, 2023).

Educational attainment at the tertiary level is high with the number of 25-34 year-olds with a tertiary education increasing by 26% between 2000 and 2021 (OECD, 2022). In the country, upper secondary attainment is often seen as the bare minimum for successful labour market participation. Educational attainment is thus very closely associated with employment opportunities in the country. In 2021, for instance, the employment rate for 25-34 year-olds with a tertiary education was 41% higher than those with less than an upper secondary education. This employment gap between those with and without an upper secondary education is greater than the OECD average (41% vs. 26%; OECD, 2022). These disparities in employment rates underscore the importance of educational attainment in the country.

Because of the low rate of ESL historically in Poland, it is not considered a national priority in the country (Ryan et al., 2014). There is currently no national policy or strategy specifically targeting ESL in the country (European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, & Cedefop, 2014: 55). In fact, an analysis by Tomaszewska-Pekala and colleagues (2015) of policy documents, reports, and academic literature suggests that the issue of reducing ESL was never considered until the Europe 2020 Strategy identified it as a priority for EU educational policies. Even then, the term ESL is very rarely used in the Polish academic literature. More frequently, other terms such as school dropout, school abandonment, or school mortality are used, each often carrying cultural stigma. Thus, the low rates of ESL in Poland cannot be attributable to a deliberate strategy to combat ES, rather the low rates may better reflect longstanding general policies targeting young people broadly and indirectly affecting ESL. Example focus areas of such policies include improving access and quality of early care and education (ECEC); increasing the quality of teacher professionalization and training; fostering opportunities for lifelong learning, including through “second chance” education or alternative schools; and more recently, targeting the needs of a growing number of immigrant and refugee children in the country (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Cedefop, 2014; Eurochild & UNICEF, 2022).

Existing literature has identified four main groups of factors as primary in influencing ESL in Poland: (i) environmental, including parental, sociocultural, and gendered expectations; (ii) psychological, including low self-esteem; (iii) economic, including family financial situation and ability to pay for educational expenses; and (iv) other factors, including problems within the family and learning disabilities (Federowicz & Sitek, 2011; Kozarzewski, 2008; Fatyga et al., 2001). High risk populations in Poland include individuals from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, with special educational needs, and from Roma or migrant backgrounds, including asylum seekers

and refugees (Marchlik and Tomaszewska-Pękała 2013). Despite low ESL rates nationally, it is unclear whether existing policies have addressed these risk factors and reduced ESL specifically among these higher risk groups.

Measures to tackle ESL are generally categorized as prevention-, intervention-, or compensation-focused (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Cedefop, 2014). Examples of prevention measures include improving ECEC access and quality; reducing grade retention; increasing available extra-curricular activities; and investing in teacher training and professionalization. Examples of intervention measures include identifying and providing targeted support for low achievers and providing language training and support for non-native speakers. Compensation measures include strengthening second chance education systems and alternative schools; and providing venues for re-entry and continued training. The European Union (2014) further recommends that approaches to tackle ESL take a whole school approach, where all members of the school community work (e.g., schoolteachers, staff, students, parents) collaborate with other sectors (e.g., businesses, psychologists, lawyers) and with the larger community to tackle the factors thought to underlie students' disengagement from schools. Such a whole-school approach views schools as inherently socially and ecologically embedded, connected to other institutions and to the local communities.

The focus of this review is thus first to understand the educational landscape in Poland, including the general policies that have introduced prevention, intervention, and compensation measures affecting ESL in the country and/or contributed towards a "whole school approach" to promote student engagement. Secondly, the analysis aims to elucidate how these general policies have contributed to the historically low rates of ESL nationally and to evaluate whether they have been equally effective in addressing ESL among higher risk populations. Understanding these policies necessitate a review of the pivotal changes wrought by the 1999 educational reforms, which have set the stage for more recent structural changes and reactionary policies. This review will thus first describe the 1999 reforms then review policy changes since 2012 that have affected (i) ECEC access and quality; (ii) teacher professionalization and training; (iii) lifelong learning, including efforts to increase student engagement in schools, strengthen vocational education and training, and provide continued learning opportunities outside of schools; and (iv) immigrant and refugee children. The review will then evaluate the degree to which there is empirical evidence suggesting that these policies have been effective in increasing student performance, engagement, or long-term outcome. It will lastly pinpoint gaps in existing policies and/or our empirical understanding of factors affecting ESL in Poland.

2.0 POLICY/POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

Prior to 1989, there was one national curricula, corresponding to one state-mandated textbook for each subject. The dominating political party had full control over the training of teachers and students alike (Kowalczyk-Walędziak, Kędzierska, & Korzeniecka-bondar, 2022). In 1991, passing of the *Act on the Education System of 7 September 1991* effectively decentralized the management of schools and shifted control over to the local government and to teachers, who were tasked to develop their own course curricula (Szyszka 2010). In practice, however, few teachers felt prepared to do so. The educational reforms that began in 1999 by the Ministry of National Education pushed to further solidify the independence of teachers and to increase the participation of students in upper secondary education. It did so by restructuring the educational system.

Prior to 1999, eight years of primary school was followed by either four years of secondary school or three years of vocational school (Jakubowski, 2021). The structural reforms of 1999 replaced this with nine years of comprehensive education. Specifically, primary school was cut to six years and a three-year lower secondary school gymnasium was introduced for all students. After completion of lower secondary, students were then tracked into

either a three-year upper secondary, four-year technical school, or two-to-three-year vocational school. In practice, the reform lengthened the period before students would be tracked into either upper secondary or vocational school by a year and introduced a revised core curriculum. The total years of education for students in general education did not change, but for basic vocational educational students, total schooling increased by one year. What the reform also introduced were educational goals, that is, competencies and skills that should be developed including in learning, thinking, inquiry, self-improvement, communication, and cooperation. Schools were tasked to implement those educational goals, and teachers were given the autonomy to design the syllabus and choose the textbook they thought appropriate.

To facilitate this transition, the Ministry of Education organized a cascade training program that over 70% of teachers participated in. The training program introduced the new curriculum and advised teachers on how they could revise their syllabi, create appropriate assessments, and prepare students for national exams. Teachers were given the freedom to choose which textbooks to use and which teaching methods to adopt. A professional attainment ladder, consisting of four levels, was introduced to incentivize teacher professional development (Kowalczyk-Waledziak, 2021). The four grades were trainee teacher, contracted teacher, appointed teacher, and certified teacher. New teachers began at the first grade as trainees with a one-year probation period. After this period, they are promoted to contracted teacher (second grade) and progress up the professional ladder through additional training. Progression along the ladder translated to wage increases (Swietek & Osuch, 2020; Zahorska et al., 2009). In 2022, however, the Ministry of Education and Science reduced the ladder to two steps: appointed teacher and certified teacher.

Lastly, mandatory exit exams were introduced at the end of primary and lower secondary schools to assess competencies defined in the national curriculum. Scores at the exit exams influenced where students were subsequently placed. The scores for these exams were publicly available for students, teachers, and—at the aggregate level—to the public. This created an incentive for schools to perform better.

In Poland, policies are developed centrally (OECD, 2015). Regional authorities are tasked to carry out the national policies, and local authorities are tasked with running primary and secondary schools. Although the structural changes that began in 1999 brought about increases in student test scores and in the number of students finishing upper secondary and tertiary education, the reforms were largely modelled after educational systems in the West and implemented haphazardly without input from teachers or researchers (Gawlicz & Starnawski, 2018). Teachers in newly established lower secondary schools found themselves struggling to implement the new curriculum while also having to develop techniques to handle their teenage student demographic (Wisniewski & Zahorska, 2020). So, too, educational reforms in 2008 sought to expand the age of compulsory education to 6-year-olds while mandating preschool for 5-year-olds. In reaction to these policies, protests began to “Save the Toddlers.” These elements contributed to a feeling of ill will that was capitalized in 2017 when the Law and Justice Party won the parliamentary elections. Since 2017, several structural changes have been introduced to reverse the educational changes associated with the 1999 educational reforms. These reversals in policies and practice should be noted when reviewing the policies, guidance, and strategies described below.

2.1 Policy (Law/Strategy): Strategy for the Development of Human Capital (SDHC; 2013)

The focus of the SDHC was to enhance the quality of life in Poland, including through an investment in human capital. The SDHC adopted three objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy for implementation, including: (i) to increase the employment rate nationally; (ii) to increase the percentage of young people either currently pursuing or have completed tertiary education; (iii) to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty (Rady Ministrow, 2013). Barriers to achieving these objectives included the low level of enrolment in early care and education; poverty

particularly among larger families; development of skills in schools that were ill-fitting with labour market demands; lack of interest in vocational schools; lack of a comprehensive, updated Polish Qualification Framework and register; and lack of adequate labour market participation among those with special needs and disabilities.

As part of this strategy, the following actions were taken at the national level by the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (Eurocultura, Oswiaty, Sysco Business Academy, & Polska, 2016):

- Refocusing general education on key competencies and complex skills that are better aligned with the demands of the labour market. Of particular interest was preparing students or and encouraging them to pursue careers in science and technology.
- Increasing digital competencies through “Digital School,” a government-ran program targeting both teachers and students.
- Modernizing the external examinations to better assess complex skills.
- Providing room for further tailoring of educational activities to the individual needs of students to ensure that the needs of gifted and talented students and those with special needs and disabilities are being met.
- Improving vocational training in schools and promoting greater participation in said training, including by providing detailed descriptions of the skills and competencies involved in each diploma program, fostering closer connections with prospective employers, and equipping staff with the appropriate skills to guide students into their specific professional careers.
- Strengthening teacher training and access to and retention in the teaching profession by increasing the number of teacher training centres.
- Introducing a new system to support schools and improving the system to evaluate and track the quality of schools.
- Increasing the financial and socioemotional support students have available, including through the form of scholarships, school benefits, and extracurricular activities.
- Increasing the participation of students and young people with disabilities in the educational system, ideally in mainstream schools.
- Developing an education monitoring system.

2.2 Policy (Law/Strategy) School Education Act (2013)

From 2011 until recently, enrolment in ECEC was mandatory for children aged 5. Pre-school education was offered optionally for children aged 3-4 as well. From 2015 to 2017, compulsory education started when children were age 6. A June 2013 amendment of the School Education Act guaranteed a place at preschools for every 4-year-old, starting September 2015, and for every 3-year-old, starting September 2017. The law was overseen nationally by the Ministry of Education and implemented locally at the commune level. Since the 2017 reforms, the age of compulsory education has changed back to age 6.

The School Education Act limited pre-primary education fees (Foundation for the Development of the Education System, 2014). Specifically, for students attending public preschools, attendance is largely free up to five hours daily, but additional hours and mealtimes are paid for by parents (Schreyer & Oberhuemer, 2017). The 2013 amendment to the School Education Act limits the amount of money that can be charged for each additional hour. Fees are also reduced for low-income families.

2.3 Policy (Law/Strategy) Lifelong Learning Perspective (2013)

The Lifelong Learning Perspective sought to reform curricula from the preschool to higher education, vocational, and continuing education levels to bolster creativity, entrepreneurship, and innovation among students. The primary objective of the strategy was to have children and young people be “well prepared for learning through life, and adults expanding and supplementing their skills and qualifications in accordance with the challenges they face in social and personal life” (Rady Ministrów, 2013). Schools were given more autonomy to adapt the curricula and teaching methods to student interest and local market demands. The policy also contributed towards refining the skills and qualifications students could acquire as they progressed in their education. More funding was invested into early childhood education and care, including to the pre-existing Toddler Programme (since 2011). The 2013 Perspective further reenforced the government’s interest in providing vocational education and training to prepare graduates for employment. Lastly, the Lifelong Learning Perspective introduced new validation mechanisms for adults to acquire certifications based on vocational exams outside of the traditional school setting.

2.4 Policy (Law/Strategy) Law on School Education of 14 December 2016 (ustawa z dnia 14 grudnia 2016 r. Prawo oświatowe)

The Law mandates that 6-year-olds attend one year of preschool education where they can acquire basic skills prior to starting primary education. In Poland today, children ages 0-3 have available centre-based childcare through *creches*, kids’ clubs, and home-based childcare (Eurydice, 2023). Preschools are available to children starting at age 3, although in exceptional cases, a child can start as young as 2.5 years of age. Since 2017, 3-year-old children have the legal right to participate in preschools, and this responsibility is placed on the *gmina*, or lowest local government unit; 4-year-old children have had that right since 2015; and 5-year-old children, since 2009. Although municipalities are legally required to provide ECEC spaces for children, subsidies to assist in this implementation are not provided (Schreyer & Oberhuemer, 2017), contributing to geographical disparities in the availability of ECEC locations nationally.

2.5 Policy (Law/Strategy) 2017 Education Reform

The 2017-2023 education reforms pushed back against the changes wrought by the earlier 1999 reforms (Profile commissioned by EASNIE for the Global Education Monitoring Report 2021 - Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia - Inclusion and education: All means all, 2021). The school system was again restructured by lengthening primary school education to eight years, abolishing lower secondary school, and extending general secondary school to four years and vocational schools to five years. The last lower secondary exam was administered in 2018-2019. Now children aged 6 were required to complete one year of pre-primary education; full-time compulsory education then spanned ages 7-15; and part-time compulsory education was mandated for ages 15-18 either in a school setting or non-school (work) setting (Eurydice, 2023). Exams were introduced at the end of primary school, corresponding to what would have been the final lower secondary school exam, with scores influencing where students may place for secondary school.

General upper secondary, now spanning four-to-five years, begins after eight years of primary school education. Options included either a 5-year technical or 4-year general upper secondary education. Although families technically have the option of choosing whichever general upper secondary school they want, schools with more students will often choose pupils based on their scores on the primary school exit exam. At the end of upper secondary, students complete a maturity exam to obtain their certificates. The system for vocational education and training (VET) also transformed. Previously, VET included two types of schools: (i) a 4-year technical upper secondary school where students could take a maturity exam upon completion and transition to tertiary education; and (ii) a 3-year basic vocational school. From 2019 onwards, a two-stage vocational school option was introduced

where students could complete 3-year of Stage I sectoral vocational school, obtaining a professional qualification by the end, and optionally progress to Stage II sectoral vocational school, where they can then obtain a technician diploma and take the maturity exam. The new VET system also focused on establishing closer ties with employers so that students could acquire training in specialized courses geared towards the need of a specific employer.

2.6 Policy (Law/Strategy) The Teachers' Charter with further amendments], Journal of Laws of 2019, item 2215 and item 4).

Teachers are obligated to undertake professional development to strengthen the skills and knowledge considered critical towards enhancing the quality and performance of their schools. In-service training in Poland can take either the form of additional higher education and certification or school-based staff development. The Centre of Education Development oversees the professional development of teachers nationally and encourages professionalization through workshops and conferences. Initial teacher training can only be completed at higher education institutions (HEIs) with at least a research grade B to ensure quality of training.

2.7 Policy (Law/Strategy) Council Implementation Decision (EU) 2022/382 of 4 March 2022

This decision and related provisions (Articles 50 to 59 of the Act of 12 March 2022 on the assistance for citizens of Ukraine in connection with the armed conflict on its territory and the Regulation of the Minister of Education and Science of 21 March 2022) allowed schools to establish preparatory units for Ukrainian students to facilitate their language learning and general integration into the Polish school systems (Stowarzyszenie Interwencji Prawnej, 2023). Students can stay in such preparatory units for a maximum of two years. While in the preparatory units, students may be eligible for exemption from the mid-year and end-of-year assessments, should their command of the Polish language not allow them to keep pace with regular classes and the content taught in the preparatory units are not amenable to assessment.

2.8 Policy (Law/Strategy) Vocational Education and Training Action Plan for 2022-2025

As part of ongoing reforms to vocational education, the Ministry of Education and Science developed Poland's Vocational Education and Training Plan for 2022-2025. This Plan aims to further align the training students received with the needs of the current labour market. Specific actions included in the plan are to increase the involvement and interest of potential employers, amending the curricula to better meet market demands particularly considering recent technological and digital changes; expanding the occupational options available to students with special needs and disabilities; and increasing the participation of local government in expanding vocational education and implementing the Integrated Skills Strategy.

2.9 Policy (Law/Strategy) Integrated Skills Strategy 2030

The priorities outlined in the Integrated Skills Strategy include the following:

- Increased investment in strengthening the quality of education and student skill acquisition and mastery of core competencies, particularly ICT skills, and having funding and quality assurance mechanisms in place.
- Fostering a lifelong approach towards learning at a student-, teacher-, and institutional-level.
- Strengthening the ties between schools and prospective employers, including the availability of opportunities for experiential learning.
- Building an updated, transparent, and accessible system for skills assessment and anticipation and strengthening counselling and guidance systems for people at all walks of life to facilitate their skills development.
- Strengthening inter-ministerial and inter-sectoral collaborations to advance policies and monitoring and evaluation systems strengthening skills development

- Eliminating barriers to and strengthening facilitators for participation in skills building systems.

3.0 POLICY REVIEW

3.1 Policy Review as in academic literature - ECEC

Efforts to expand early childhood education and care (ECEC) have been found to be associated with positive gains in long-term academic achievement and cognitive and socioemotional development. In particular, ECEC participation in international contexts has been found to be associated with an 8.1% decreased chance of special education placement, 8.3% decrease in grade retention, and 11.4% increase in high school graduation rates (McCoy, Yoshikawa, & Shonkoff, 2017). These benefits may be more pronounced for higher-risk children (Sattler et al., 2023). However, there is little empirical support to suggest that those gains increase with earlier ECEC participation. Some studies find no statistical difference between starting ECEC at age 3 and at age 0-2, while other studies find unintended negative effects (Haack, Lefebvre, & Merrigan, 2015; Leak et al., 2010; Melhuish et al., 2015). A recent meta-analysis of 30 studies conducted between 2005 and 2017 evaluated the effects of universal ECEC participation on children's cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes, long-term educational outcomes, and earnings in adulthood (van Huizen & Plantenga, 2018). The authors found that the effects of 0-2 ECEC participation compared to typical age participation were ambiguous and sometimes suggesting harm; full-time programs and public programs were also associated with better outcomes.

The strongest predictor of child outcomes was the quality of the program (educational standards, staff-child ratios). This corroborates findings from Balladares and Kankaras (2020), who found that ECEC participation was associated with better performance on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Furthermore, across all OECD countries, students performed an average of 15-20 points better when they had attended schools supervised by trained staff. However, differences between students who had and had not participated in ECEC were negligible when students' socioeconomic status were considered. Specifically, students from a lower SES background were much less likely to participate in ECEC at all and when they did, at older ages and for shorter periods of time. Similar to van Huizen & Plantenga (2018), the authors lastly observed that participation in ECEC at an earlier than typical age was associated with worse performance on the PISA at age 15.

What these results indicate is that although ECEC participation is generally associated with student performance, retention, and longer-term success, there are still multiple inequities when it comes to access to and quality of programs. Individuals who are at higher risk are more likely to benefit from ECEC participation, but they are less likely to participate and when participating, often doing so at later ages and for shorter periods compared their counterparts from higher SES families. In the early 2000s, Kwiecinski (2002) had observed a close link between early school leaving, family SES, and rural residency. He proposed that parents' early school leaving had a boomerang effect contributing to the higher likelihood that their own children will leave school prematurely. These results indicate that two decades and multiple reforms later, the association between SES and academic outcomes remain strong. Studies from OECD countries and internationally indicate that the quality of ECEC programs is strongly associated with students' long-term outcomes while the age of participation in ECEC programs seems variably associated with later outcomes with some studies even suggesting that younger than average participation is harmful. Greater attention should thus be paid towards investing in services for children aged three and above and particularly in the training of staff.

3.1.2 Policy Review as in academic literature – Engagement in primary and upper secondary

To examine the multi-level factors shaping ESL in Poland, Kwiecinski (2002) has proposed a macro-meso-micro model that looks at the ways policy (macro) shapes the educational environment in which school staff, teachers, and students interact (meso) to shape student outcomes (micro). Tomaszewska-Pekala and colleagues (2015) conducted interviews with staff at two general upper secondary, one general vocational, and one technical school to understand their perceptions/beliefs about ESL. Most of the individuals interviewed were not familiar with the term “early school leaving,” but were familiar with the term “school dropout.” So, too, most were not aware that ESL was considered a European policy priority or that there were associated strategies or guidance surrounding the issue. Only staff at the vocational school indicated that they thought ESL was a serious issue. At their school specifically, there was a 15% ESL rate, and only half of the students finished their education in the prescribed time. Factors that were perceived of as being important for ESL included: individual factors such as lack of adequate preparation, motivation, or educational aspiration or poor health or disability; accidental factors, such as disruptive life events; and family factors such as poverty, familial discord, lack of parental support, and family dysfunction (e.g., violence). Family-related factors were the one most often emphasized. Others pointed to systemic factors such as the deterioration of the vocational schools, pressure on schools to take students even those with less ability, and lack of adequate government funding and support. Except for conflicts between the school and parents, no institutional school-related factors were mentioned in the context of the interviews.

The school environment can powerfully shape students’ level of engagement in schools. Within the academic literature, engagement has often been conceptualized as comprised of three components: a behavioural component (e.g., effort, participation), an emotional or affective component (e.g., sense of belonging, interest), and a cognitive component (e.g., learning goals, investment) (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008). ESL is thought to be the endpoint of a gradual process of academic dis-engagement (Rumberger 2011). Lessard and colleagues (2008) proposed three phases leading to ESL: *setting the stage* in which the confluence of two primary factors—family turmoil and early problems in school—shape the course of students’ educational trajectory; *teetering*, where students are balancing between factors that prolong and those that threaten to end their educational journey; and *ending the journey* when either a pivotal moment or gradual fading process ends in their leaving. Analysis of the educational trajectories of students at risk of ESL in several OECD countries including Poland suggests five main trajectories for at-risk children: (i) *unanticipated crisis*, where an unexpected event (e.g., death in the family) suddenly disrupts the student’s educational trajectory and contributes to often momentary disengagement; (ii) *shading out*, where the accumulation of negative experiences contribute to a gradual process of disengagement; (iii) *boomerang*, where the student fluctuates between periods of leaving and returning to schools; (iv) *resilient*, which is characterized by continued engagement in spite of multiple existing risk factors; (v) *parabola*, where a downward trend is reversed because of the availability of social support; and (vi) *downward spiral*, where a downward trend continues unabated because of the lack of appropriate or sufficient social support.

What appears to distinguish those in the parabola and downward spiral trajectories is the availability of appropriate social support, that is, the type and amount of social support that the students need and are open towards receiving (Tomaszewska-Pekala et al., 2019). House (1981) distinguished between four main types of social support: emotional, informational, appraisal, and instrumental. Emotional support can include listening to and showing empathy towards the person. Informational support might include providing the person with facts or resources to make a decision on a problem. Appraisal might include putting the problem the person faces into perspective. Lastly, instrumental support involves performing specific acts (e.g., tutoring) or providing specific resources (e.g., money) to help the person address the problem. Aside from types of social support, there is also the identity of the person providing the support. A survey of 3157 upper secondary students from 57 schools in Warsaw, Lublin, and

Chelm suggests that students perceived receiving less social support from their teachers than from their parents and friends; but support from friends and family members—though similar in rating—were not well correlated, suggesting a person often had primarily one or the other (Wrona et al., 2015). Social support from friends was most strongly associated with aspirations to stay in school. What these data and the qualitative studies reviewed earlier indicate is that there can be mismatch between teachers' perceptions of student needs for social support and the kind or amount they might want. Biases or misperceptions around drivers of ESL may also impact teachers' provisioning of social support to at-risk students.

Such discordance between teacher support and student needs may be particularly high for students from refugee and immigrant backgrounds. Although several policies have been advanced in response to the influx of foreign students into Poland, studies conducted by Błeszyńska (2009) and Badowska (2017) suggest that the everyday implementation of the policies is much more variable. Specifically, while teachers and school administrators have been found to report a positive attitude towards foreign students, many were unsure what they should specifically do to facilitate the integration of students into the school beyond general attempts to understand the students' cultures, resolve any cultural differences, and provide general support for students and their parents. Most did not have knowledge of the educational policies affecting foreign students, the circumstances under which certain groups of refugee or immigrant children may have entered Poland, or the cultural or individual backgrounds of the students themselves (Błeszyńska et al., 2017). School counsellors were identified as the group most resistant to interacting with and having the most negative attitudes towards foreign students, while simultaneously believing they were the best equipped to address the students' needs (Błeszyńska et al., 2017; Gmaj, 2021). School staff generally thought engaging with parents was difficult because the parents did not understand the Polish language or culture and did not appear interested in actively participating in the school environment or with other Polish parents. What was lacking from the responses, however, were discussions of what might motivate these barriers to participate and what strategies could be used to counter them. Although most school staff report that foreign students appeared hardworking, they also evaluated the social integration of foreign and Polish students as only average or below average. Specifically, foreign students' participation in student clubs, organizations, and other extracurricular activities were generally rated as below average. Lastly, the support school staff provided to foreign students were often not customized to the student and largely constrained to financial aid, language training, psychological support, homework help, or linkages to other forms of support (e.g., tutoring). Classroom curricula rarely made references to the foreign students' culture.

What these qualitative findings point to is the gaps between policies and implementation at the school-level. School staff were often unsure of the specific policies affecting foreign students and lacked concrete strategies to engage with foreign students and their parents. In the context of this review, no studies were found in English that examined the lived experience of foreign students in primary and secondary schools in Poland, including the impact of the school environment on their feeling of belonging within Polish educational systems. Observations from teachers, as reported by Błeszyńska (2017), indicate though that students are not well integrated socially into the school systems. Feelings of isolation or lack of social support may contribute towards early school leaving from upper secondary schools (Wrona et al., 2015). As the wider literature on early school leaving in Poland indicate, appropriate social support is pivotal in reversing a trajectory marked by gradual or sudden school engagement. However, the current educational environments described by the reviewed qualitative studies indicate that such support is lacking, and teachers are not being adequately prepared to receive refugee or migrant children. Given the importance of a whole-school, ecological approach towards elucidating the macro-meso-micro factors shaping student engagement and long-term retention, more emphasis should be placed on changing how school staff conceptualize and implement strategies locally.

3.1.3 Policy Review as in academic literature – Vocational education and training

For students who are un-interested in academia, strong vocational education and training (VET), second chance, and adult education programs are pivotal towards keeping them engaged in and/or providing easier re-entry points back to education. In Poland, VET has had a long history. Up until 1989, it was the primary mode of secondary education, providing a steady supply of workers to meet rising industrial demands (Benke & Rachwal, 2022). During the political and socioeconomic upheavals leading to 1989, companies found themselves financially strapped and withdrew funding from VET programs (Kurek & Rachwal, 2012). More students turned towards upper secondary schools, and a number of basic vocational schools closed during the 1990s. Lack of government investment and wider public interest in VET during this period also meant that the schools remaining were not updated and not well equipped to match the increasingly technology-oriented demands of the market. To this day, VET continues to be held in lower esteem than other academic paths, and the number of individuals going into basic vocational training is less than 10% (Jakubowski, 2021).

3.1.4 Policy Review as in academic literature – Adult education

In spite of a number of social policies promoting adult education, participation remains low. The Adult Education Survey 2016 suggested for instance that only a quarter of adults in Poland had participated in either formal or informal educational opportunities in the past twelve months (Eurostat, 2019). This is lower than the EU average (45.1%; Eurostat, 2019). Participation in non-formal education and training in Poland is among the lowest in the EU (Eurostat, 2019). Estimated participation, based on data from the national survey, suggests that participation may be higher with over 50% having participated in either formal or informal education (OECD, 2019). Individuals who have less formal education, are older, living in rural areas, or working for small-to-mid-sized companies are less likely to participate. A survey of adults in Poland suggests that the primary barriers to participation include not wanting further training (61% of Polish adults surveyed, EUROSTAT, 2019); family responsibilities; schedule; and cost. Those least likely to see themselves as needing further training are those in low-skilled professions (Kocor et al., 2015). These views may be reflected at the employer level as 55% of Polish companies also do not offer further training to their employees (EUROSTAT 2015).

Two primary limitations in Poland's promotion of adult education are that most are not aware of the benefits of adult education and integration of training into workplace settings remains relatively limited. First, awareness of strategies remains limited particularly in rural areas (OECD, 2019). Terminologies for speaking about adult education—for example, lifelong learning, adult education, adult education and training, and continuing credit—are numerous and not always clear to people. Although awareness campaigns can bolster participation (European Commission, 2015), Poland has had few. Similarly, although educational institutions often collaborate with social partners to enhance the relevancy of skills training, social partners are not very involved in awareness campaigns. Second, basic skills programs and general competence courses, including for information and communication technology and entrepreneurship, are largely embedded in educational institutions. There is evidence from other countries that integrating basic skills training in the workplace can increase participation, particularly among low-skilled adults (Windisch 2015), and contribute towards improved job performance, job retention and motivation, and confidence (Benseman 2012; Conference Board 2006; Wolf, Evans, & Bynner, 2009).

In 2019, there were an estimated 9% of Polish youths between the ages of 15 and 24 who were not in employment, education, or training (NEET). These often are individuals who are unemployed and not currently looking for jobs. This disengagement from the labour market so early on is often associated with less financial stability, social and political engagement, and income later in life (OECD, 2016; Eurofound, 2016). As part of the EU 2013 Youth Guarantee program, member states received funding to support the reengagement of NEETs. However, in 2016,

only 40% of NEETs were registered with a Youth guarantee provider (Eurofound, 2016). This suggests that most NEETs are still following under the cracks, and Poland is no exception.

In Poland, there are an estimated 16 regional and 340 local PES (Public Employment Services) offices. Approximately 3-out-of-4 NEETs in Poland are unreachable by public employment services. Because there is no national strategy for NEET outreach, the strategies the PES employs vary on locality. However, PES have limited engagement with local institutions. Engagement with NEETs in rural areas is particularly low due to several structural constraints. First, it often takes longer for people to reach their local PES office (Sztandar-Sztanderska, 2016). So, too, limited early childhood education and care facilities may reduce the ability of NEET parents to join the workforce (Magda, 2020). The primary reasons NEETs cited for why they were not participating in the workforce included family care obligations and health or disability-related issues. Those who had the lowest educational level and who were economically inactive were among the least likely to be included in the PES registers. The primary strategies PES uses include advertising at job or education fairs, local events (e.g., festivals), organizing mobile units or satellite locations, providing information at schools for at-risk youths as well as at other local institutions (e.g., sport centres), and maintaining a website. This may limit engagement with PES, particularly in more disadvantaged locations.

3.1.5 Policy Review as in academic literature – Teacher professionalization

Cutting across various prevention, intervention, and compensation measures is the issue of teacher professionalization and retention. Currently, in Poland, initial schoolteacher education and training is provided by higher education institutions with a research grade/category of at least a B rating (Eurydice, 2023). Three degree programmes are available: first-cycle programmes, leading to a Bachelor's degree; second-cycle programmes, leading to a Master's degree; and long-cycle programmes leading to a Master's degree as well. In addition, there are non-degree post-graduate programmes that provide a certificate. As part of a concurrent model increasingly offered in HEIs, students can acquire both professional teacher training and subject-specific training. Graduates can assume a school teacher position if they have completed a higher education diploma and teacher/pedagogical training or other program at an initial teacher training institution. Newly appointed teachers begin as a novice without a professional promotion grade then progress to appointed teacher and lastly to chartered teacher. Each promotion is associated with a salary increase.

Teachers are mandated to complete in-service training activities and other professional opportunities, amounting to 40 hours of activities per 3-year cycle (Eurydice, 2023). Trainings are aimed at enhancing or updating professional knowledge, particularly related to new technologies; increasing familiarity with the quality assurance system for a specific sector; and developing other skills as they become relevant to the students/populations they work with. Although increased resources are provided to further their professionalization, little empirical attention has been paid to the actual experiences of teachers participating in these trainings (Korzeniecka-Bondar et al., 2022). What literature exists suggests that although teachers welcome the opportunity to participate in these in-service training opportunities, they do not report the trainings influencing their everyday practice. So, too, many are incentivized to participate to move up the professional ladder, not necessarily because they perceive the knowledge and skills as relevant to their school setting (Wilkomirska & Zielinska, 2013; Fazlagic, 2012; Fazlagic & Erkol, 2015).

It is estimated that 69 million new teachers are needed globally to meet UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2016). However, one of the main challenges obstructing this realization is the high level of attrition among teachers with nearly half of all new teachers leaving within the first few years (Sims & Jerrim, 2020). Poland is one such country confronting a teacher shortage. Some have estimated that as many as 20,000 more teachers are needed to meet present demands (Gera & Spike, 2022). Because the pay for schoolteachers has

remain largely stagnant, young people are more reluctant to enter the profession. This shortage comes at a particularly pressing time because there are now nearly 200,000 Ukrainian students in Polish schools; many of whom confront language and cultural barriers and have mental health and trauma-related needs (Chodownik, 2023). Research on teacher attrition suggests that some of the most prominent predictors are burnout and job satisfaction (Madigan & Kim 2021). Although Poland has placed much emphasis on the ongoing professionalization of teachers, ongoing protests and shortage suggest that underlying needs—including for higher pay, recognition of their work, and greater involvement in deciding on policy changes—are not being met.

3.2 Policy analysis in the light of european commission recommendations

As this review has highlighted, if one were to look to existing policies and programs in Poland, there are several prevention, intervention, and compensation measures built through different strategies targeting ECEC, student engagement, vocational education and training, adult education, and teacher professionalization. Expansion of ECEC is a prevention-focused measure to build students' capacity for and engagement with academics at an early stage. The scientific literature supports the long-term benefits of ECEC on student academic performance, upper secondary graduation, and professional outcomes (McCoy, Yoshikawa, & Shonkoff, 2017; van Huizen & Plantenga, 2018). More recent policies have increased the affordability of early education and care. Amendments to the School Education Act, for instance, lowered the fees associated pre-primary education centers can charge and increased the support available to low-income families. At the same time, inequities remain in access to and quality of ECEC delivered to students (Balladares and Kankaras, 2020). Availability of preschool programs for children aged 3-6 are more readily available with 92.9% of children aged 3-5 in urban areas and 85.3% of children aged 3-5 participating in preschool education. Childcare institutions for ages 0-3 are more limited and available in only 47% communes in Poland (Eurydice, 2023). At the end of 2020, 31% of rural communes had such institutions available. The quality of these programs, as reviewed in Section 3.1.1 can also be variable.

Several prevention measures have been implemented to ensure that the quality of teachers' training can be more closely monitored and updated according to their schools' needs. This has included requiring that initial training take place only at higher education institutions with at least a B grade and that teachers complete 40 hours of in-service training per 3-year cycle (Eurydice, 2023). Yet as Section 3.1.5 might indicate, the push is coming largely top-down and not translating to improved classroom instruction (Wilkomirska & Zielinska, 2013, Fazlagic, 2012; Fazlagic & Erkol, 2015).

Intervention measures are integrated at the school-level through mechanisms for identifying and supporting low-income students; establishing preparatory units for immigrant and refugee children; allowing more for more permeability across academic tracks; and having multiple referral pathways available to psychologists, lawyers, and social service providers for students with additional needs. At the same time, as Section 3.1.2 suggests, the translation of these centrally developed policies into a supportive school environment for students remains uneven. Similarly, while compensation measures are in place and have been strengthened in recent years to encourage participation in vocational education and training as well as adult education, participation continues to be notably lower among those who would stand to benefit from the programs (Kocor et al., 2015; Sztandar-Sztanderska, 2016).

3.3 Policies, gaps and solutions

Policies, gaps, and solutions have been discussed in Sections 3.1.1-3.1.5 for each policy domain. In this section, the focus will be on summarizing cross-cutting gaps and solutions across the policy domains. First, as Korzeniecka-Bondar and colleagues have argued (2023), educational reforms in Poland implemented over the past three decades have largely been top-down. Students and teachers were often not involved in the co-creation of the policies or adequately prepared for the changes that would occur. Teachers are often left scrambling to implement

new curriculum changes or to respond to large-scale structural changes. The 2017 reforms, for instance, resulted in the closure of all lower secondary schools, which meant that many teachers lost their jobs. Although emphases have been placed on the professionalization of teachers as a compensation and intervention measure, what is being missed is the incentivization structures to attract and retain talent. Poland currently confronts a national shortage of teachers at a time when it is facing an influx of immigrant and refugee children. Instead of pushing professionalization opportunities, more attention needs to be paid to how to attract and retain teachers. As reviewed in Section 3.1.5, these factors extend beyond pay towards pay. Current professionalization workshops and courses are not translating well into improvements in instruction. As Section 3.1.2 further suggest, there is a need to better train teachers on recognizing the institutional/structural factors affecting their students and on strategies to support their students more effectively. This includes strategies on how to engage with immigrant and refugee parents more meaningfully.

A whole school approach is integral to the European Commission recommendation, and review of the extant literature suggests that it is being adopted by schools in Poland. However, the findings from Section 3.1.2 suggests that the crosstalk between sectors still needs to be strengthened and the quality of programming can be highly variable depending on the type of school, the location of the schools, and the at-risk population of focus. One study importantly found that school counsellors were the most resistant to interacting with and having the most negative attitudes towards foreign students while simultaneously believing they were the best equipped (Błeszyńska et al., 2017; Gmaj, 2021). For a whole school approach to act effectively on ESL, there needs to be better means of training and addressing biases across the different parties involved. Qualitative studies reviewed in Section 3.1.2 indicate that despite the support mechanisms theoretically in place, there are still a high number of students reporting that they are not receiving the type of support that they need. It may be that while instrumental support is readily available, the emotional support students might need is not being adequately and appropriately provided as many school staff are seemingly unaware of, uninterested in, and unable to meaningfully age with the cultural backgrounds of the students (Błeszyńska et al., 2017; Gmaj, 2021). It is possible that because this review was largely focused on studies published in English that the empirical literature appears more limited than it actually is. However, very few studies appeared available that forefront the perceptions, experiences, and needs of high-risk students and their parents in Poland.

In recent years, Poland has moved towards revitalizing its vocational education and training and adult education infrastructure. One of the primary ways it has done so is through increasing education-industry partnerships and revising curricula to better correspond to market demands. At the same time, as Sections 3.1.3 and 3.1.4 indicate, substantial geographical and demographic disparities remain, disadvantaging those who are in rural areas and those who are the most un-skilled and who may stand the most to benefit from these educational mechanisms (Kocor et al., 2015; Sztandar-Sztanderska, 2016). Future policy efforts need to focus on updating outreach strategies, increasing recruitment efforts in rural areas, increasing buy-in from industries resistant towards providing opportunities for employees' continuing education, and building in support mechanisms that allow NEETs and low-skilled employees to easily engage with adult education opportunities.

4.0 KEY TAKE AWAYS

Poland has historically had one of the lowest rates of ESL in the EU (EUROSTAT, 2023). Owing to this, ESL is not considered a national priority, and the country does not have a national strategy for tackling ESL. Instead, Poland has maintained a historically low ESL rate through multiple policies that have introduced prevention, intervention, and compensation measures affecting ESL in the country and/or contributed towards a “whole school approach” to promote student engagement. These policies have primarily focused on (i) ECEC access and quality; (ii) teacher

professionalization and training; (iii) lifelong learning, including efforts to increase student engagement in schools, strengthen vocational education and training, and provide continued learning opportunities outside of schools; and (iv) immigrant and refugee children. Through these efforts, Poland has made strides in expanding access to ECEC, enhancing the quality of teacher professionalization, integrating diverse students into its school systems, revamping its vocational education and training, and increasing opportunities for adult education. At the same time, it is also apparent that the approach it has taken of developing policies centrally without much input from stakeholders then pushing municipalities to implement the policies has contributed to discontent, mismatches between policy recommendations and on-the-ground needs, and disparities in access and quality of existing programs. The 2017 reform reflects these tensions, and its impacts on students is to be determined. To effectively target high-risk populations, more attention and resources need to be directed at high-risk populations alongside efforts to integrate their voices into policy change.

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Version 1.0

REVIEW OF LOCAL, REGIONAL AND/OR NATIONAL POLICIES TO TACKLE EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING – GREECE

Reduce early school leaving and underachievement



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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The EU has set an EU-level target stipulating that the share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 9 % by 2030. Keeping this target in mind, Europe needs to make the most of policies to successfully tackle this challenge.

For achieving this, policies at the local, regional and/or national level that have effectively reduced the rates of ESL in the last 10 years are identified in this report through EUROSTAT (in particular, the statistics about participation in education and training from 2010 to 2020 for all EU-27), the OECD library as well as information provided in each national context.

In spite of the financial and the refugee crisis, Greece is one of the EU member states where early-school leaving rates have fallen impressively over the last decade. The report discusses how this has been achieved through a combination of measures, along the recommendations provided by the European Commission on prevention, intervention and compensation. Further challenges to implement a “whole school” approach that will address the country’s developments around inclusive education and underachievement are also discussed.

Subsequently, a comparative analysis will be carried out aiming at identifying those policies that have obtained best results in achieving the target, and those which have not made a good progress towards it. Following that, an in-depth policy analysis will be performed to examine the scientific evidence, research and theory underlying the most successful policies. A preliminary version of Report Policy approaches based on scientific evidence and research to address underachievement will be carried out.

2.0 POLICY/POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

Country context

Education in Greece is enshrined in Article 16, Section 4 of the Greek Constitution, which sets out that:

Education constitutes a basic mission for the State and shall aim at the moral, intellectual, professional and physical training of Greeks, the development of national and religious consciousness and at their formation as free and responsible citizens.

The Greek education system falls under the central responsibility and supervision of the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs. Early childhood education usually starts at age 4 (although with low enrolment rates) and pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education has, since March 2018, been compulsory between the ages of 4 and 14/15. Primary education (*Demotiko*) lasts six years, and lower secondary education (*Gymnasium*) lasts three years. Student tracking starts at the end of lower secondary education, when 15-year-old students choose between vocational or academic tracks. Upper secondary education – unified upper secondary school (*Lyceum*) and vocational upper secondary school (*Epaggelmatiko Lyckeio, EPAL*) – lasts three years. Students who want to go into tertiary education take the Panhellenic examination which gives access into higher education institutions, which include 22 universities as well as 14 Technological Education Institutes (TEIs) across Greece.

The education system in Greece is highly centralised: the main responsibilities in all education sectors are with the national Ministry of Education. A 1982 OECD review described the system as “highly centralised”, and governed by “Parliamentary laws and executive acts”, managed “by a powerful centralised bureaucracy” (OECD, 1982), with low levels of responsibility at the regional and local level.

Over the past decade, Greece has faced a sustained recession that has greatly affected its economy and society, including many dimensions of Greek lives and the education system. For instance, during the same period, public spending in education declined by 36% (in nominal terms), with cuts affecting teachers, especially wages and hiring. A recruitment freeze of public civil servants has resulted in the hiring of new teachers through short-term contracts, a situation that is having a negative impact on the quality of schools and the education system as a whole.

In spite of these – and additional – challenges, the Greek education system stands around the OECD average in equity, measured as the impact of students' socio-economic background on their educational performance, as measured by PISA (OECD, 2016). Moreover, and as discussed below, Greece has among the lowest dropout rates across European Union countries.

Background to the policies/strategies

According to the European Commission's Education and Training Monitor of 2022, Greece has one of the lowest rates of early leavers from education and training in the EU. At 3.2% in 2021, the proportion of early school leavers is already far below the 2030 EU-level target of 9%. In 2021, the rate in rural areas is only slightly higher than in urban areas, at 4.1%.

Greece manages to maintain this low level, which is an indication that the state handles the problem effectively. Policies facilitate transitions within education and training systems or provide alternative education and training pathways. They also help early school leavers re-enter the education system through second-chance education and career guidance. Individuals who have dropped out of compulsory education in Greece return as adults to the educational system, particularly to Second Chance Schools, which were planned and funded by the European Union two decades ago so that member states could offset the consequences of student dropout rates and counter social exclusion (Kiprianos & Mpourgos 2020). Proof of the effectiveness of Greece's policies is also that in 2021, 95.7% of 20 to 24 year-olds obtained at least upper secondary diplomas, making Greece the top performer in this area (Eurostat 2022).

Though the proportion of early school leavers is particularly low in Greece, the risk of early school leaving was 7.8 times higher among young people born outside the EU (30%) than among those born in the EU. Moreover, educational outcomes of Roma pupils lag far behind those of their peers. Greece has a significant Roma population: The Council of Europe estimates that there are approximately 265,000 Roma living in Greece (2.47% of the population). The most recent Fundamental Rights Agency survey shows some improvement, but Roma pupils still face major challenges in education. Only 16% of them complete upper secondary education, compared to 95.7% of the total population.

Such low rates of early leavers from education and training have not always been the case.

In fact, the rates of early leavers from education and training decreased markedly during the last decade. Eurostat was reporting that 11.4 percent of the student population had dropped out of school in 2010 (Greek Reporter 2016). Moreover, even though early school leaving has been much reduced in rural areas, it remains high among foreign-born people (Eurostat 2019). For instance, the OECD (2018) reported that, in 2016, the share of early school-leavers among 15–24-year-olds was nearly three times higher for foreign-born students (15.2%) than for native-born students with native-born parents (5.3%).

In Greece, overall performance remains below the OECD average (OECD, 2016) and challenges to equity are primarily related to three factors:

- (1) a lack of inclusiveness,
- (2) geographic isolation, and
- (3) refugee status.

According to the Eurostat 2022 country report, about half of the disadvantaged pupils in Greece are low achievers, a sign that the quality and equity of education need to be addressed. One in five students underperformed in all three subjects tested as part of the PISA 2018 survey – severe underachievement. As in other EU countries, educational outcomes are heavily influenced by socio-economic background. Almost half of the students in Greece from the lowest socioeconomic quartile lack basic reading skills compared to only one in seven students from the highest quartile. According to the same 2022 Eurostat report, equally worrying, about half of students from a migrant background obtain low results compared to one in three students born in Greece.

With reference to the second factor mentioned above affecting the degree of equity, namely (2) geographic isolation, in spite of the country's centralized system, there is also selected evidence pointing to regional disparities in educational attainment (such as early school leaving rates). These data indicate that regional disparities in terms of educational attainment are the fifth largest among OECD countries (OECD, 2017; Ballas et al., 2012). The data on regional school and student performance, while limited, suggest a correlation between the state of educational provision and educational outcomes in individual prefectures and the socio-economic conditions of the area (ibid, 2012).

In fact, the geography of Greece – with its islands and mountainous regions – strongly influences the provision of education, and significant differences between geographical districts are noted (Nikolaou *et al*, 2018). In primary education, while 30% of the nursery and primary schools are located in the large urban centres (Athens-Attiki and Thessaloniki-Central Macedonia), almost every small town and village has its own school: 18% of nursery and primary schools are located on islands; 3.5% of schools are classified as “difficult to access”. In secondary education the situation is very similar: 34% of schools are located in large urban centres (Athens-Attiki and Thessaloniki-Central Macedonia) but the rest are much more sparsely distributed; 18% of the schools are located on islands; 5.5% of schools, of which more than half are located on islands, are classified as “difficult to access”.

Greece has recognised the need for improvement and has engaged in a series of reforms to tackle key policy areas. A wave of reforms has been implemented since 2011. The main policies and strategies adopted by the Greek state to address these issues of early school leaving and underachievement are discussed in the following sections.

2.1 Zones of Education Priority (ZEPs)

Since 2010, the Education Priority Zones (Zones Ekpaideftikis Proteraiotitas, ZEPs), co-funded by Greece and the EU, have aimed to improve access to education and combat school failure by providing additional funding and human resources to participating schools. The priority zones are determined according to various socio-economic and educational indicators and cover schools from pre-primary to upper secondary level.

Allocating more resources to disadvantaged areas has been a common policy response in many OECD countries. Following the passage of a Law on Education Priority Zones (ZEP) (Law 3879/2010) in 2010, the Ministry issued a Ministerial Decision to define the localities where this initiative would be applied. The regions were chosen presenting the characteristics of the Education Priority Zones (ZEP). These zones include primary and secondary education schools in areas where the basic indicators of school integration (such as well-being, educational level of

adults aged 33-43, relative dangers of poverty, and total educational levels) were all low, or where there were a high proportion of foreign, Roma or other minorities in the student populations (Eurydice, 2014).

Education Priority Zones (ZEP), as deployed in Greece, are based on the notion of positive discrimination, and promote a holistic approach to education (with support to and from the local community). They constitute an effort to create a permanent institution in the context of the Greek education system in which districts and schools related to Sensitive Social Groups (SSG) will be incorporated based on local needs (Eurydice, 2014).

In order to support primary and secondary education schools that are incorporated in Education Priority Zones (ZEP), the following actions have been implemented:

- combating current high levels of school failure of repatriate and foreign students in Greek schools, so as to guarantee, as far as possible, equal education of these groups compared with their native counterparts, and contributing to their social integration
- implementing intercultural education actions in secondary education, through the reinforcement of international co-operation through ZEP Enhancement Coaching Courses for students coming from sensitive social groups (SSG)
- implementing educational actions with a special emphasis on culture and with support of the integration in primary schools of students coming from SSG.

During 2013 and 2014, the scheme was expanded to more than 1 500 schools, mostly primary, to cover around 190 000 students. At the same time, further training of teachers was instituted and nutrition provisions added to the programme (Koutsogeorgopoulou et al., 2014). These were supported by policy measures, including the operation of reception and remedial classes. Since 2018, ZEP Reception Classes for children of upper secondary school age have also be implemented (Ministerial Decree 3727/2017).

For the school year 2019-20 almost 1 700 ZEP classes were established in primary and secondary education. In 2019, further opportunities to introduce ZEP Reception classes with a focus on language acquisition and integration in primary schools, or on reducing school drop-out and enhancing basic literacy and numeracy skills in secondary schools were announced.

As of 2020, no systematic review or evaluation of the impact of ZEPs on student outcomes had taken place. The OECD (2018) previously noted that, where ZEP schools have a positive influence, co-operation among staff, coherence in teaching and strong school management have been key. Similar policies in other OECD countries have had mixed results though, and so careful evaluation is critical.

2.2 “All-day” schools

“All-day” schools were instituted from 1989 in Greece and funded with European Union structural funds. While in the early stages the aim of these schools was to help parents, especially mothers, to enter the labour market, this later shifted to encompass educational goals as well (OECD, 2017).

Two main types are prevalent (Thoidis & Chaniotakis, 2015):

- The "classic" all-day school (since 2002): students can stay at school after 2 p.m. in order to complete their homework, take part in creative activities, and rest (about 60% of schools in 2016). All-day school programmes were extended to the pre-primary level in 2009. All-day kindergartens operate on an extended timetable for at least eight hours per day (compared to four hours a day in the case of “regular” kindergartens). There have also been initiatives to ensure equitable access to primary school for children

with special needs, such as parallel support classes in mainstream kindergartens and the establishment of special education kindergartens, and measures to reduce geographical disadvantages (Koutsogeorgopoulou, 2009).

- The "new" all-day school was progressively rolled out from 2010 to 11, as part of the "New School" reform package (about 29% of schools). Children may arrive as early as 7 a.m. and leave as late as 4 p.m., during which time they can benefit from extra study support (individual and group). Attendance is compulsory until 3:30 p.m. The curriculum has been enriched with foreign language classes, art, drama, and physical education. The duration of the school year was also slightly extended.

In the first half of 2016 the government advanced new proposals that "classic" and "new" all-day schools be amalgamated into a "unified" type of all-day primary school that would include the vast majority of all primary schools, and which would be in operation from the next school year (2016/17). It was proposed that in this type of school, children would not arrive earlier than 8 a.m. but could leave as late as 4 p.m. Attendance would be compulsory until 1:15 p.m. in a regular curriculum enriched with classes in English language teaching, information and communication technology (ICT), art, drama, and physical education in the afternoon classes. The new enriched curriculum implies less time for more conventional subjects, and therefore a shift in the teaching load from primary teachers to specialist secondary teachers (thereby helping to employ the oversupply of secondary teachers).

2.3 Refugee/migrant integration in education

Over the last decade, Greece has faced increasing immigration. While around 6.2% of the Greek population in 2013 had been born abroad, putting Greece among OECD countries with the smallest foreign-born population, there has been a massive increase in refugees.

In 2015 Greece received nearly one million refugees. Greece is a country of first-entry within the European Union (EU) and experiences ongoing humanitarian migration. According to the European Commission (EC) (2017), the situation peaked in 2015 when around 10 000 migrants and refugees arrived daily. Greece has since taken policy measures to grant access to education for refugee and migrant children

Integration of recently arrived migrants into education has so far primarily focused on schools. In 2018/2019 substantial efforts were made to provide schooling for 12 867 refugee children, 8 290 of them in mainstream classes with parallel educational support and 4 577 in separate afternoon schooling facilities. Some 30 kindergartens exist in refugee camps, including those on islands. 690 teachers received dedicated training. Interpretation was provided to assist the enrolment of refugee children and psychologists recruited to support refugee students, families and educators. This integration process is closely related to another strategy that focused on adapting the curriculum to new needs, discussed below.

With reference particularly to the educational challenges of Roma students in Greece, national efforts are underway their integration in the educational system. Between 2020 and 2022, Greece participated in an Erasmus+ project called '[Inclusive schools for Roma](#)'. Encompassing capacity-building activities and education mediation, the project involved 200 teachers, 50 Roma education mediators and 20 schools.

2.4. Adapting the curriculum to new needs

Currently, curricula in Greece are heavily focused on acquisition of subject knowledge rather than the development of competencies or critical thinking (which combine knowledge, skills, attitudes and values).

The introduction of new Greek curricula, initiated in 2017, has sought to provide an opportunity to adapt Greek education for the future and also to support greater equity. This reform placed emphasis of curricula on diversified pedagogy (refugee education, immigrants, and vulnerable social groups). A more rational programme that respects both the number of courses and their hours of teaching is meant to be institutionalised gradually in schools, instead of the plethora of courses in the current system.

At the same time, the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs, in collaboration with the Institute for Educational Policy (IEP), has set up committees to rationalise the curricula (Ministry of Education Research and Religious Affairs, 2017).

Under the plan, new curricula are currently being developed for most upper secondary school subjects. These will be the focus of a national dialogue and discussion in committees overseen by the Institute for Education Policy. During this process, general principles and selected themes considered important and appropriate for students at each stage will be developed, and the curricula drawn up by the previous government evaluated, judged, and either retained, amended or discarded on the basis of the same criteria.

3.0 POLICY REVIEW

3.1 Policy Review as in academic literature

As far as the introduction of all-day schools is concerned, a number of problems had been reported with their initial implementation (Kyriakou 2006; Gkoratsa, 2013). These included weak integration of afternoon provision, especially in the "classic" all-day schools (Thoidis and Chaniotakis, 2015); insufficient infrastructure to support the new activities; teacher recruitment difficulties; inadequate homework support (Gkoratsa, 2013); dropout during the school year reported in the "classic" model; and, students not staying at school for the afternoon classes (Institute of Educational Policy, 2015).

Certain gaps between policy and practice in the operation of the "all-day" school have been identified. The "all-day" school aimed to achieve certain pedagogical and social aims, as described in the policy documents of the Ministry of Education. In practice, only a few of these aims, mainly related to the social dimension of the "all-day" school, could satisfactorily be said to have been achieved so far. The all-day school in its initial form did not achieve such pedagogical aims as homework completion at school (Gkoratsa, 2013).

In May 2017, a law change meant that any school, including kindergartens, could become an all-day school. This replaced the system of self-nomination that had existed to that point. This also eliminated the risk that better organised and equipped schools were more likely to have the potential to become new all-day schools, thereby widening the gap between new all-day schools and their students and other less favoured schools (OECD, 2017).

3.2 Comparative Analysis of successful and less effective policies

3.2.1 POLICY ANALYSIS IN THE LIGHT OF EUROPEAN COMMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS

Prevention and Intervention: Integration of Migrant children

In spite of the efforts mentioned above, integrating refugee children into education remains an uphill struggle, considering that an estimated 28 000 refugee and migrant children reside across Greece (UNICEF, 2019). Particular challenges relate to: allocating teachers qualified for multilingual and diverse settings; teacher training; and resources and access to education for older children and young adults, including at post-secondary and tertiary levels (Tzoraki, 2019). To assess refugees' higher education qualifications, Greece has been part of the Council of Europe project to create the European Qualifications Passport¹³⁶.

Evaluate the effectiveness of Education Priority Zones (ZEP)

While it is hard to determine the effectiveness of the ZEP overall, a systematic review needs to be made before taking any decision on their future. Where ZEP schools have succeeded in raising the achievement potential of their students there has been discernible mutual co-operation between staff, coherence in their teaching of a relatively constant group of students to enhance pedagogic continuity, and a strong and dynamic school management that emphasises school performance.

Intervention: Target interventions to student groups that need it most

Some communities and students may require targeted support to succeed.

As mentioned above, in Greece, isolated schools in remote islands or mountainous regions, and refugee students require careful review and attention to ensure that they have high quality educational opportunities.

For instance, isolated communities may suffer from frequent teacher turnover, or from an imbalance of new versus more experienced teachers. In turn, teachers working in isolated schools are not able to benefit from collaborative work with peers. School networks and clusters can leverage the capacity of many smaller schools as well as the broader community.

Targeted support for second-language learning and intercultural education will also be important to meet the needs of refugee students. This may include ongoing language support for learners, as well as teaching guidelines and materials on how to integrate content and language learning.

3.3. Policies, gaps and solutions

3.3.1 GAPS IDENTIFIED IN EXISTING POLICIES

Migrant Education

As in other OECD countries, migrant education constitutes a persistent challenge in Greece. According to Article 55 of L. 4939/2022 the minor children of asylum seekers, of recognized refugees, or of beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, may access the national education system under similar conditions as Greek nationals (UNHCR).

According to the Asylum Information Database of the European Council on Refugees and Exiles, a Ministerial Decision issued in September 2016, which was repealed in 2017 by Joint Ministerial Decision 139654/ΓΔ4 (B' 2985/30.08.2017), established a programme of afternoon preparatory classes (Reception School Facilities for Refugee Education – DYEP classes) for all school-aged children aged 4 to 15. The programme is implemented in public schools neighbouring camps or places of residence. The organisation, operation, coordination and training program of DYEP classes is supervised by the Refugee Education Management, Coordination and Monitoring Team as defined by the Secretary General of the Ministry of Education, in cooperation with the competent Directorates of the Ministry of Education, the competent Regional Directorates of Education and the competent Directorates of Primary and Secondary Education.

The location and operationalisation of the afternoon preparatory classes is subject to the yearly issuance of a Joint Ministerial Decision (exceptionally a Decision by the Minister of Education and as of 2019 a Decision by the Deputy Minister of Education). Such decisions have been respectively issued for each school year up to the current school year 2022-2023.

Children aged between 6-15 years, living in dispersed urban settings (such as ESTIA accommodation, squats, apartments, hotels, and reception centres for asylum seekers and unaccompanied children), may go to schools near their place of residence, to enrol in the morning classes alongside Greek children, at schools that will be identified

by the Ministry. This is done with the aim of ensuring a balanced distribution of children across selected schools, as well as across preparatory classes for migrant and refugee children where Greek is taught as a second language.

According to UNICEF's Annual Report on Greece for 2021, it was estimated that by the summer of 2021 there were more than 31,000 refugee and migrant children in Greece, while by the end of the year the number of unaccompanied children was 2,225.

The 2023 report by the Greek Council for Refugees notes that the perplexities of providing accurate data on the enrolment of migrant students and on whether or not they continue attending Greek schools become obvious through the following:

- For the school year of 2020-2021, conflicting data provided by the Ministry of Education seem either to highlight a 32.52% decrease in the number of children enrolled or a 12.67% increase in the number of children enrolled to education compared to 2019. Namely, per the response of the Deputy Minister of Education to a Parliamentary question in March 2021, there were 8,637 children enrolled to education, while as per an April 2021 reply of the Ministry to relevant findings of the Greek Ombudsman (see further below), there were 14,423 children enrolled to education by 21 February 2021. In both cases, reference is made to the same "My school" database, albeit in the latter case, it is specified that due to reasons *inter alia* stemming from the mobility of the specific population (e.g. due to change of status or a transfer decision), relevant 'accurate quantitative data are not guaranteed'.
- In either case, the number of children enrolled to education for the school year 2020-2021 remained well below the number of 20,000 school-aged (aged 4-17) children provided in the Ministry's April 2021 reply. Moreover, because of the lack of available, broken-down data, it remains uncertain whether this number includes all refugee and asylum-seeking children present in Greece at the time of the reply, or if it only regards beneficiaries of international protection, as the reply's wording ("refugees") seems to imply. Either way, by the end of 2020, a total of 44,000 refugee and migrant children were estimated to be in Greece, which could indicate an even wider gap between the number of refugee and migrant children present in Greece and the number of those enrolled to education.
- Furthermore, in 2020-2021, children's access to education was further challenged by a number of factors, also related to the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to record levels of exclusion of refugee children from the Greek system of education. Particularly in what concerns mainland camps, even though slightly more than 62% of school-aged children living in the camps were formally enrolled to education (6,472 out of 10,431 children), only 14.2% (or 1,483) were actually able to attend it, as per findings of the Greek Ombudsman in March 2021.

As noted by the Ombudsman in March 2021, '[t]he number of children [living in] facilities of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum and [in] RICs that are enrolled to school is dramatically far apart from their actual attendance'.

On the Eastern Aegean islands, where children have to remain for prolonged periods under a geographical restriction together with their parents or until an accommodation place is found in the case of unaccompanied children, the vast majority remained without access to formal education during school year 2020-2021 as well.

According to the Asylum Information Database, the school year 2021-2022 was marked by positive developments in some areas compared to school year 2020-2021, but with actions that still need to be undertaken.

In particular:

Regarding enrolment, there was a significant improvement compared to previous school year 2020-2021 when school enrolment ranged from 8,637 to 14,423 children out of an estimated 20,000 eligible children. During the 2021-2022 school year, 17,186 children were enrolled. The main difficulties in enrolment during the 2021-2022 school year included:

- the limited school capacity in urban areas,
- the lack of information by school Directors that all children, even the ones without regular residence (i.e. who are not included in the official reception system or are homeless) and children arriving in the middle of the school year, have the right to enrol.

Regarding attendance, there was an improvement in attendance compared to the previous school year (2020-2021) when 7,769 attended (14% attendance in open accommodation centres and less than 1% in Reception and Identification Centres). More precisely 12,285 children attended (75%) out of 17,186 children enrolled during the 2021-2022 school year. The main difficulties of attendance during the 2021-2022 school year included:

- the worsening of living conditions,
- the restrictions children and their families face in accessing asylum,
- the fact that refugee and migrant children regularly have to move, often due to the asylum procedure, abrupt changes of children's legal status with the issuance of final rejections of the asylum claim, all being a common reality.
- Also, the lack of language skills deters children from attending school that has also resulted in dropouts.
- The change of children's legal status has led to discontinuation of state support and assistance.
- Ministerial decisions denying specific groups of people access to food catering, caused families additional stress and unwillingness to put education as their primary focus as they needed their children to help them earn a livelihood.
- People who have not yet been registered in the reception system, and individuals whose request for asylum has been rejected also struggled with access.

Regarding the inclusiveness of education, compared to previous school year (2020-2021) when no specific initiatives for refugee and migrant children were undertaken, there was an improvement during the 2021-2022 school year with a new UNICEF project *All Children in Education (ACE)*¹, aiming to facilitate the integration of refugee and migrant children in formal education through non-formal education services, such as interpretation services in schools, Greek language courses, psychosocial support for students and teachers' empowerment. The main barriers to an inclusive education included curricula and school materials that were not adjusted to refugee children and their specific educational needs and teachers not adequately trained on intercultural education.

Despite the positive steps undertaken by the Ministry of Education during the school year 2021-2022, and the announcements made at the beginning of the school year 2022-2023 for an upgraded education system and improved school integration of refugee students, numerous shortcomings remain in school enrolment, attendance, and transportation. At the beginning of the school year 2022-2023, Greek Refugee Education Coordinators reported that a significant number of children with their families have moved within Greece, due to the termination of the

¹ Launched in September 2021 by UNICEF with the collaboration of the Ministry of Education and religious Affairs and the MoMA. UNICEF, press release entitled: "Διαβατήριο για την εκπαίδευση για 8.400 το ελληνικό πρόγραμμα ACE που θα γίνει πρότυπο για εφαρμογή σε όλη την ΕΕ (in Greek), 17 June 2022, available in Greek at: <https://bit.ly/3WRcFHG>.

ESTIA accommodation programme. This forced students to leave their school and enrol in new schools in other regions, disrupting their education and integration into the school community.

Moreover, the new asylum application system introduced on 1 September 2022, is also impeding school enrolment and attendance, as the electronic lodging of the asylum claim does not provide asylum seekers with an official document serving as a proof of their application, rendering children and their families ‘invisible’ to the state until the registration of their asylum claims at one of the competent RICs. Without being able to prove the legality of their residence, children often face difficulties in school enrolment, as an identity document and proof of vaccination booklet are usually requested during enrolment, despite not being a legal requirement. Finally, families’ fear of being deprived of their freedom of movement or arrested, deters parents from approaching public authorities generally, including schools (Greek Council for Refugees, 2023).

Inclusion and Equity

The Greek state, through the Ministry of Education, seems to have put inclusion and equity (to tackle underachievement and early-leaving) at the heart of reforms of its educational policy over the last 5 years. The reforms aim to meet the diverse needs of learners, including pupils with disabilities and special educational needs, refugees and students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

More specifically, a framework for inclusive education has been designed and numerous programmes are being implemented at all levels of education and vocational training by the Institute of Educational Policy (IEP), such as the Erasmus+ ‘Inclusive schools for Roma’ (mentioned above), the UNICEF programmes ‘Pathway to all children in education’, and programmes for multilingual environments. According to the 2022 Eurostat report, moreover, the extension of pre-primary education by 2 years in all Greek municipalities in 2021/2022 was a positive step towards that direction, as the foundations for equal opportunities are laid at the start of education. The establishment of 50 new model and experimental schools in the 2021/2022 school year has also paved the way towards accessible education for all.

3.3.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY APPROACHES BASED ON SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE AND RESEARCH TO ADDRESS UNDERACHIEVEMENT

With reference to the ongoing challenge of ensuring the school attendance and overall performance of refugee students and of students living in remote and/or disadvantaged areas, the following recommendations are particularly pertinent:

- According to the Asylum Information Database, although the refugee education programme implemented by the Ministry of Education (discussed in the section above) seems to be highly welcome, the school attendance rate should be reinforced, while special action should be taken in order for children remaining on the islands and in remote camps to be guaranteed access to education.
- According to the latest Eurostat country report, Greece is one of the EU countries that give financial support to teachers in disadvantaged schools. However, monitoring and further improving the quality in education hinges on the full implementation of the schools’ external evaluation and the evaluation of teachers that is currently underway. This could be especially beneficial for disadvantaged pupils. Indeed, the issue of teacher evaluation constitutes an ongoing battle in Greek education and in the broader society. Between 1982 and 2019, no system of teacher evaluation had been applied on a solid basis, particularly because educational unions had strongly opposed their implementation (Kolympari *et al*, 2020). Some progress seems to have been made in the last few years, however. According to Article 56 of Law 4823/2021, the

evaluation of teachers and schools in Greece is now becoming mandatory, to the chagrin of trade unionists who, as they did last year, are seeking to set up barriers to the initiative, declaring their refusal to take part in the procedures ([EKathimerini, 2021](#)).

- The issue of underachievement has recently also been addressed in educational studies programmes across the country. Such primarily quantitative studies, that focus on specific, underprivileged regions and that analyse educators' and teachers' perspectives on the matter, emphasize the following issues and broader policy areas in need of reform: inappropriate building infrastructure, lack of logistical infrastructure, lack of innovation and lack of incentives for personal and professional development of teachers (Tsirba, 2018). Similarly, teachers themselves further highlight how, in spite of the recent wave of developments, school curricula directly affect school performance, since they do not take into account the learning abilities of students. According to such findings, school performance is not meritoriously monitored or valued by the national education system (Davou & Raikou 2021).

4.0 KEY TAKEAWAYS

A wave of reforms has been implemented since 2011 in Greece to address the issue of early school leaving and underachievement (particularly in remote areas, but also amongst migrants and Roma students).

The reforms can be narrowed down to three overall strategies: the creation of ZEPs, the creation of "all-day schools" and the change in the curricula and school programmes to ensure migrant integration and to tackle underachievement. All these are directly relevant to the three recommendations promoted by the EC: intervention, prevention and compensation.

The significant decrease in the number of early school leavers in Greece is an indication of the success of these measures. The two issues that seem to persist are: the high-percentage of school dropouts amongst foreign-born students, which suggests that the integration of migrant students is an ongoing challenge that needs to be further supported; and the high levels of underachievement of school students in Greece. In spite of the efficient strategies – particularly through the ZEPs – to tackle early school leaving, further steps need to be taken to address the persistent issues. The same applies to the issue of underachievement: about half of the disadvantaged pupils in Greece are low achievers, a sign that the quality and equity of education need to be further addressed.

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Version 1.0

**REVIEW OF LOCAL, REGIONAL AND/OR NATIONAL POLICIES TO TACKLES EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING –
SWITZERLAND**

Reduce early school leaving and underachievement



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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The EU has set an EU-level target stipulating that the share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 9 % by 2030. Keeping this target in mind, Europe needs to make the most of policies to successfully tackle this challenge.

For achieving this, policies at the local, regional and/or national level that have effectively reduced the rates of ESL in the last 10 years are identified in this report through EUROSTAT (in particular, the statistics about participation in education and training from 2010 to 2020 for all EU-27), the OECD library as well as information provided in each national context.

Switzerland has a highly decentralised education system, reflecting the federal structure of the state. Early school leaving does not appear to constitute a concern. The report discusses some of the key challenges facing the Swiss educational system (low attendance number in ECE, harmonisation of school programmes and curricula across the cantons) and also considers the issue of the small percentage of students who do not transition from compulsory to non-compulsory education levels. The findings suggest that the latter seems to have been adequately addressed with the reform of the vocational education and training (VET) programmes and the different options offered to the students.

Subsequently, a comparative analysis will be carried out aiming at identifying those policies that have obtained best results in achieving the target, and those which have not made a good progress towards it. Following that, an in-depth policy analysis will be performed to examine the scientific evidence, research and theory underlying the most successful policies. A preliminary version of Report Policy approaches based on scientific evidence and research to address underachievement will be carried out.

2.0 POLICY/POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

Country context

Switzerland is a multilingual country with four official national languages. It has a federal structure, characterized by a cantonal autonomy in the education system and by the decentralised organisation of schools.

Compulsory education generally starts at the age of four and lasts a total of eleven years. 95% of students in Switzerland complete compulsory education at a state school in the commune in which they live. Roughly 5% attend a private school. State schools play an important role in integration. Children with different social, linguistic and cultural backgrounds all attend the same school.

Primary level – including two years of kindergarten or a first learning cycle – lasts eight years. In addition to the two compulsory years of kindergarten, the canton of Ticino offers an initial, voluntary year for children from age three. Lower secondary level lasts three years. At lower secondary level, pupils are taught in all or some subjects in classes grouped by ability. In the canton of Ticino, lower secondary level (scuola media) lasts for four years.

Since 2005/06, numbers of pupils in compulsory education decreased until 2012/13 when they rose again (Federal Statistical Office). These variations are largely driven by demographic changes in the corresponding age groups. Moreover, to ensure the high quality of the Swiss Education Area, practically all the cantons, regardless of whether they have joined the harmonisation efforts (see HarmoS Agreement discussed below), have approved legal fundamentals to secure and promote the quality of compulsory schooling.

Following completion of compulsory education, more than 90% of all young people acquire a certificate or diploma at upper secondary level, which facilitates direct entry into the job market or enables them to continue education at tertiary level.

The language of instruction is German, French, Italian or Romansh, depending on the language region, though Romansh-language municipalities represent a special case. Traditionally, language learning has an important role in Switzerland. Students learn a second official language of Switzerland as well as English during their compulsory school years (see more details in the sections below).

Due to the country's federal structure, the 26 Cantons are responsible for compulsory education. In accordance with the Federal Constitution, they are obliged to ensure nationwide harmonisation of important targets and structures. The local communes run the schools. Because education is locally rooted, tailor-made solutions can thus be implemented.

In terms of achievement, according to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results from 2018, students in Switzerland scored not significantly different from the OECD average in reading, higher than the OECD average in mathematics, and higher than the OECD average in science. Compared to the OECD average, a larger proportion of students in Switzerland performed at the highest levels of proficiency (Level 5 or 6) in at least one subject; at the same time a larger proportion of students achieved a minimum level of proficiency (Level 2 or higher) in at least one subject.

As in other OECD countries, equity in education in Switzerland is directly relevant to the socioeconomic and/or immigrant background, as well as to the gender of the school students. As shown already with the PISA results, the cantons do not just differ in terms of pupils' average school performance, but how strongly the children's socioeconomic background is related to individual school performance. As the 2023 Swiss education report notes, however, intercantonal comparison shows that low socioeconomic influence on school performance does not mean that a canton has many substandard pupils, nor that it has fewer very good pupils.

Specifically: according to the 2018 PISA results, in Switzerland, socio-economically advantaged students outperformed disadvantaged students in reading by 104 score points. This is larger than the average difference between the two groups (89 score points) across OECD countries. Moreover, socio-economic status was a strong predictor of performance in mathematics and science in all PISA participating countries. It explained 16% of the variation in mathematics performance in PISA 2018 in Switzerland (compared to 14% on average across OECD countries), and 16% of the variation in science performance (compared to the OECD average of 13% of the variation). Some 9% of disadvantaged students in Switzerland were able to score in the top quarter of reading performance within Switzerland, indicating that disadvantage is not destiny. On average across OECD countries, 11% of disadvantaged students scored amongst the highest performers in reading in their countries. In Switzerland, low-performing students are clustered in certain schools to the same extent as the OECD average, and high-performing students more often clustered. A disadvantaged student has a 13% chance, on average, of being enrolled in a school with those who score in the top quarter of reading performance (OECD average: a 17% chance).

As far as equity in education and immigrant background is concerned, the 2018 PISA findings indicated the following: first, some 34% of students in Switzerland had an immigrant background, up from 24% in 2009. Amongst these immigrant students, about three in seven were socio-economically disadvantaged. The average difference in reading performance between immigrant and non-immigrant students in Switzerland was 52 score points in favour of non-immigrant students. After accounting for students' and schools' socio-economic profile the difference

shrank to 25 score points. On average across OECD countries, 17% of them scored in the top quarter of reading performance in 2018. In Switzerland, 16% of immigrant students performed at that level.

Background to the policies/strategies – main challenges in the Swiss education system

The major challenges in the Swiss education system – some of which relate, albeit to different degrees, to the number of students attending and continuing their school education – are the following:

(1) Low enrolment rates in ECE.

Switzerland is the only OECD country where enrolment was low in 2015 (less half of 3-5 year-olds were enrolled in education) and there has not been any significant progress since. This is due to the lack of public provision and the high financial cost of ECE for parents (OECD, 2020), despite the fact that pre-primary education is compulsory for children aged 4 and over.

More than 40 percentage points separate the regions with the highest (86%) and lowest (38%) enrolment rates of 3-5 year-olds in Switzerland. Low levels of enrolment may be due to more limited provision of ECE and the inability of some families to travel to the nearest ECE setting in certain regions, particularly the more rural ones.

(2) Harmonisation of compulsory education.

According to the 2010 Swiss Education report, education planners have been faced with the major challenge of striking a balance between the constitutional mandate to harmonise the compulsory education sector and the need to adapt compulsory education to local conditions.

All education policy measures are aimed at providing a coherent education system that guarantees permeability, accessibility between the different levels of education, and quality, for both compulsory and subsequent education. In a state organised along federal lines, these multiple considerations place stringent requirements on the coordinating bodies and institutions that deal not only with structural aspects but also with initiatives affecting the content of education (curriculum development, language instruction, quality improvement, etc.).

According to the same report (and as mentioned above), the most significant education policy challenges in the harmonisation of structures within the Swiss education system relate to the question of entry into pre-school and primary school, namely, the age at which compulsory education should start and how the school entry phase should be configured.

(3) Transition from compulsory to non-compulsory education.

The main challenge in relation to school leaving in Switzerland concerns the transition from compulsory (lower-secondary) to upper-secondary education.

Still, in Switzerland, the number of young people who are no longer in education or training stands at 6.3% of 15-29 year olds (90,000 people), according to the latest Swiss Federal Statistical Office (FSO) published on February 8 2022. This is among the lowest in Europe, as the Eurostat graphic below shows.

Among the reasons why Switzerland fares so well compared to other European countries is its good public education system, and excellent vocational training – its dual track apprenticeships (which combine training and vocational school) are chosen by two thirds of young people ([Swissinfo 2022](#)).

According to the FSO, moreover, even the number young people no longer in education in Switzerland has actually been falling over the past decade: in 2010, it stood at 8.1% of those aged 15-29.

The upper-secondary level in Swiss schools is the start of post-compulsory education and pupils normally start this phase at 15 to 16 years old. However, not everyone decides to transfer directly from compulsory to upper-secondary schooling. The transition comes with a choice – vocational education and training (VET) or general education. General education includes baccalaureate schools and upper-secondary specialised schools. The decision is determined by academic ability, personal preferences, social background and cantonal educational offering.

At present, just under 90% of students who have completed compulsory education in Switzerland go on to successfully obtain an upper-secondary level qualification. This latter qualification, however, is a key requirement for a student's future educational and job career, and the rate of just under 90% is still quite a long way off the target of 95% which has been set for 2015 in education-policy terms.

A more detailed examination of upper-secondary graduation numbers shows that, although the gender gap to the detriment of females has steadily narrowed over the past few years, female students still achieve fewer upper-secondary level qualifications, even though they are not at an academic disadvantage compared with males at the end of their lower-secondary education. This target graduation rate of 95% is, however, achieved by male and female students who were born in Switzerland and have thus completed their entire education in Switzerland, irrespective of their nationality. This would suggest that more intensive efforts need to be made to ensure that students not born in Switzerland who, in some cases, have only completed a couple of years of their education in Switzerland, acquire an upper-secondary level qualification. This task poses a challenge for both education and integration policy.

(4) Decline in number of students at primary school

A further challenge in compulsory education in Switzerland – which is not directly related to early school leavers – concerns the decline in the number of students at primary school due to demographic factors, which has, since 2010, started to affect lower-secondary education as well. With just a few exceptions (Geneva, Zug, Zurich), all the cantons, and especially those located in rural areas, are being forced to discontinue classes or even shut down schools. Many cantons are attempting to prevent this or combine it with structural or educational reforms. Declining student numbers represent a special challenge for the multiplicity of structures in lower-secondary education in the different cantons, since school systems based on ability grouping are the ones that suffer first when student numbers become too low. Because these differentiated types of systems are well accepted among the populace, it should not be the case that pupils are allocated to different lower secondary level paths on the basis of maintaining school numbers rather than on the basis of entry requirements for the various ability-based programmes. The move towards more cooperative and integrated models could provide a solution in this respect.

2.1 HarmoS Agreement

Some of the policies and strategies that have been implemented as a means to address the issues mentioned above include the following:

Intercantonal Agreement on Harmonisation of Compulsory Education (HarmoS Agreement)

According to the 2023 Swiss Education Report, the joint education policy goals of the Confederation and cantons (EAER & EDK, 2019) comprise the following areas for harmonisation of compulsory education: starting age, compulsory schooling, duration of education levels and transitions and national education targets. At the cantonal level, the HarmoS Agreement, signed in 2009, regulates (EDK, 2007) their implementation and contains details about the duration of school levels, language teaching and national education targets.

By 2010 – one year following the coming into force of the agreement – fifteen cantons had joined. This number has not changed over the past 12 years. In 2019, the EDK evaluated the progressive harmonisation of the structure and targets for all the cantons for the second time. As reported in the first assessment in 2015, 17 cantons incorporated the two years of kindergarten or the first two years of an entry level cycle into compulsory schooling. The other cantons broadened the mandatory offer in kindergarten or brought forward the cut-off date for starting school to 31 July. While the primary level in Switzerland is six to eight years and secondary school lasts a standard three years, the main intercantonal differences still arise in the first two school years at primary level.

To ensure the high quality of the Swiss Education Area, practically all the cantons, regardless of whether they have joined the HarmoS Agreement, have approved legal fundamentals to secure and promote the quality of compulsory schooling. While external evaluation as such is not so established in French-speaking Switzerland, cantonal performance tests (épreuves communes, épreuves cantonales or épreuves de référence) are common. The cantons in German-speaking Switzerland ensure quality mainly through a combination of in-school quality management, external school evaluation and school supervision. In recent years, different cantons have realigned the external evaluation, for example as focus evaluation whereby a selected quality area is evaluated, such as school management, the special needs offering or promotion of interdisciplinary competencies. Two thirds of German-speaking cantons are members of the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Externe Evaluation von Schulen (argev), which supports the cantons in developing external school evaluation and quality assurance

The HarmoS agreement may also have an impact on student enrolment and participation in ECE. Very little is known about precisely which children are not attending pre-school (Moser, Stamm & Hollenweger, 2005). It is conceivable that, given the lack of daycare facilities, parents in full-time employment find individual solutions to their day-care problem and therefore do not send their children to preschool. In cantons and communities that do not provide multi-year preschool facilities, long-term attendance is denied to all those who depend upon (free) state-run facilities. The provision in the HarmoS Agreement for compulsory attendance of pre-school in the same way as for primary school, coupled with quality assurance in these fields, will seek to guarantee that all children will have access to educational institutions of a comparably high quality.

2.1.1. LANGUAGE TEACHING AND INTEGRATION OF STUDENTS WITH IMMIGRANT BACKGROUND

It is important to note that, due to the potential challenges that migrant students (who may also come from a low socio-economic background) may face in terms of their performance and achievement in schools (see PISA results mentioned above), the HarmoS agreements has also sought to enhance the language skills in the education systems across the different cantons.

According to the 2023 Swiss Education Report, as regards language teaching, the main key principles are in the national language strategy approved by the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK) in 2004. These principles form the basis for the corresponding articles in the HarmoS Agreement and in the Federal Act on the National Languages and Understanding between the Linguistic Communities. These key principles cover the promotion of the local national language at all school levels, the promotion of a second national language and

another foreign language during compulsory schooling, then the promotion of the first language of pupils with a migration background through instruction in the native language and culture and finally the promotion of language exchange with classes from different linguistic regions.

By 2015, 23 of the 26 cantons had implemented the provision in the languages strategy involving teaching a national language and another foreign language to primary level pupils. The harmonisation has progressed further in the meantime. 24 cantons are implementing the 5/7 model, i.e. the first foreign language starts in the 5th school year and the second foreign language in the 7th year of compulsory schooling. The review regarding the achievement of the basic competencies at the end of compulsory schooling in 2023 will enable comparison of competencies in both foreign languages.

The HarmoS cantons are committed to supporting the voluntary native language and culture (HSK) teaching outside the compulsory curriculum, provided it conforms to religious and political neutrality (EDK, 2007). As the 2023 Education Report explains, the organisation and financing is privately funded (e.g. local entities, associations). The Confederation has made its position clear in the Languages Act, which enables it to provide funding for cantonal measures to promote the first language cantons. The review of quality criteria or the neutrality principle is, however, hardly institutionalised. Individual cantons (such as Basel-Stadt and Zurich) have a recognition procedure for sponsoring bodies.

2.2 Reforming the VET (vocational education and training) Programme

Seventy percent of all students coming out of compulsory education enroll in a VET (vocational education and training) school and 30% in a school providing a general education, with these shares remaining relatively constant. Of this first proportion, a more or less constant 90% enrol in a dualtrack VET programme.

Most pupils still transition to vocational education and training on completing compulsory schooling. Over two-thirds of pupils in the first upper-secondary year opt for vocational education and training.

In addition, a general increase in pupil numbers is expected over the coming years due to the rise in birth rates since 2004 (FSO, 2021). The increase forecast by the Federal Statistical Office (FSO) between 2019 and 2029 amounts to 18% in general education and 14% in vocational education and training. Regarding vocational education and training, the predicted increase in pupil numbers is more uncertain than in general education. The low FSO scenario for VET only forecasts 1.5% growth, while the high scenario is almost 27%. In general education, the growth forecast for the low and high scenarios comes to 11% and 25%, respectively. The forecast for vocational education and training is more uncertain than with general education because the VET pupil numbers are a lot more exposed to short-term (e.g. economy) and long-term developments (e.g. structural change).

Transition from Secondary to Upper-Secondary Education

At present, 10% of all students coming out of compulsory education do not obtain an upper-secondary level qualification by the time they reach the age of 25. Between 3 and 4% experience failure upon enrolment in upper-secondary education, either failing to be accepted in the general education sector or failing to find a suitable apprenticeship or other follow-on solution. The stated educational policy objective of raising the proportion of students with upper-secondary level qualifications from 90 to 95% throughout Switzerland by 2015 (EDK, 2006) will require optimisation of the transition from lower secondary education to the upper-secondary VET sector.

3.0 POLICY REVIEW

3.1 Policy Review as in academic literature.

Since the apprenticeship crisis in the mid-1990s, the situation in the VET sector has improved considerably, both in terms of the number of apprenticeships available and the way in which VET programmes are able to adapt to social and economic needs. This is highlighted by three different factors: first of all, more than three-quarters of all students who enrol in a dual-track VET programme consistently state that they are following the apprenticeship of their choice. In other words, the dual-track VET programmes provide a clear majority of VET students with the training they wish to receive.

A second factor indicating the healthy state of the VET sector is the introduction of a new two-year VET programme leading to the Federal VET Certificate. An increasing number of training companies are taking part in these two-year programmes. Unlike the previous two-year apprenticeship model, which did not lead to any formal qualifications, students completing a certified two-year VET programme obtain a qualification that enables them to continue their training at a higher level within the VET sector.

Even though it is still too early to draw a definitive conclusion regarding these certified two-year VET programmes, the initial experience seems to indicate that dropout rates among students enrolled in certified two-year VET programmes are lower than expected.

The third indication of the healthy state of the VET sector is the steadily increasing number of VET students who obtain the Federal Vocational Baccalaureate (FVB). The popularity of the Federal Vocational Baccalaureate shows that the VET sector is able to offer opportunities for further development to even the most gifted learners and that VET programmes are in considerable demand. What is unclear, however, is why the number of male Federal Vocational Baccalaureate holders enrolling in a Swiss university of applied sciences has declined sharply. The economic growth of past years may partly explain this, since Federal Vocational Baccalaureate holders would have a greater incentive to enter the job market rather than take their education and training to a higher level. A partial answer to this question will doubtless emerge over the next few years, as we observe (Education Report 2010).

Indeed, according to the FSO (see above), the number of 16-year-olds, i.e., pupils in Switzerland of an age to transfer to upper-secondary level will, according to the FSO reference scenario, rise by 14% between 2019 and 2029. The expected increase in 16-year-olds thus more or less corresponds to the expected increase in pupil numbers. Rising pupil numbers can mainly be attributed to population growth, as most young people in Switzerland complete upper-secondary education at some stage in their life (Education Report 2023).

Repetition of classes and Equity in education

Lastly, the individual characteristic of students who repeat a class (in primary and secondary education), including the effects of this process in ensuring equity in education in Swiss schools are also an issue discussed in national education reports. As the latest Education report notes, a trend that in repetition that already becomes apparent in primary school continues at lower-secondary level: boys, adolescents with migration backgrounds and adolescents from less educated families repeat classes more frequently than other pupils. However, this pattern only applies if repetition of the 11th school year is not included in the analysis. This is because it is mainly pupils in classes with advanced requirements who repeat the 11th school year. This group contains a significantly higher proportion of children whose parents have a tertiary qualification than parents with a lower qualification. Of the children whose

parents have a tertiary qualification, every twelfth child (FSO, 2021) repeats the class, with this repetition mostly being related to the transition to baccalaureate school.

The 2023 report suggests that this finding naturally raises questions about the effectiveness and efficiency of such repetitions, but that the factor of equity must also be considered. The fact that more children from educated families repeat a school year in connection with the transition to baccalaureate school poses the question of whether it is right to enable socioeconomically better-off adolescents to get into baccalaureate school by repeating school years. The equity question also arises in relation to the high repetition rates among children with migration backgrounds, although there is a significant difference between the first and second generations of the migrant population in this regard. The questions that still need to be addressed thus include the following: Could such repetitions, which also generate considerable costs for those affected, be avoided? Conversely, if repetitions are assumed to be an effective and efficient means of improving school performance, the question of why children without migrant backgrounds benefit from this measure less often also remains unanswered ([Swiss Education Report 2023](#)).

3.2 Comparative Analysis of successful and less effective policies

3.2.1 POLICY ANALYSIS IN THE LIGHT OF EUROPEAN COMMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS

Prevention

As discussed in detail above, the issue of students who do not transition from compulsory to non-compulsory education levels seems to have been adequately addressed with the reform of the vocational education and training (VET) programmes and the different options offered to the students.

Intervention and Compensation

The harmonisation efforts (most notably the HarmoS Agreement discussed above), have approved legal fundamentals to secure and promote the quality of compulsory schooling and school attendance (particularly in ECE but also beyond that). They thus fall along the lines of intervention and compensation targets, as they seek to harmonise key aspects of the education systems across the country, while also seeking to enhance the language skills in the education systems across the different cantons (an important intervention parameter in the school enrolment, attendance and overall performance of foreign students).

3.3 Policies, gaps and solutions

3.3.1 GAPS IDENTIFIED IN EXISTING POLICIES

As mentioned above, a perceptible gap relates to the specific attention that should be devoted to helping vulnerable young people to choose and be accepted in a VET programme. Based on eleven different sets of guidelines, the project run by the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK) entitled Nahtstelle obligatorische Schule-Sekundarstufe II (Interface between compulsory education and upper-secondary education) is coordinating 18 projects designed to optimise the transition processes.

3.3.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY APPROACHES BASED ON SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE AND RESEARCH TO ADDRESS UNDERACHIEVEMENT

According to the OECD 2018 Country Note (Equity in Education: Breaking Down Barriers to Social Mobility), in Switzerland, social background is more closely linked to success at school than it is in many other countries. About 16% of the variation in students' science performance in PISA 2015 was accounted for by differences in students' socio-economic status (OECD average: 13%; among OECD countries with above-average performance the

relationship is weakest in Estonia and Norway [8%]. Between 2006 and 2015, equity in science performance remained stable in Switzerland (on average across OECD countries, equity in science performance improved during this period). As the Country Note further explains, the mean science score in PISA 2015 among socio-economically disadvantaged students in Switzerland was 455 points, while among advantaged students it was 561 points. This gap of 106 points is larger than that observed in many other countries (OECD average gap: 88 points; the gap is only 69 points in Estonia) and represents the equivalent of approximately three-and-a-half years of schooling. Such findings suggest that reducing the gaps related to socio-economic status in what students learn during compulsory schooling could boost upward educational and social mobility.

The Country Note subsequently makes the following policy recommendations:

- Policies and practices aimed at providing more equal education opportunities for all children can be implemented at the classroom, school and education-system levels. For example, countries can promote greater access to early childhood education and care (which as we have seen is already an effort under way in the country), particularly among disadvantaged families, as these programmes both provide more equitable learning environments and help children acquire essential social and emotional skills.
- Countries can also set ambitious goals for and monitor the progress of disadvantaged students, target additional resources towards disadvantaged students and schools, and reduce the concentration of disadvantaged students in particular schools. They can also develop teachers' capacity to identify students' needs and manage diverse classrooms, promote better communication between parents and teachers, and encourage parents to be more involved in their child's education. Teachers and schools can foster students' well-being and create a positive learning environment for all students by emphasising the importance of persistence, investing effort and using appropriate learning strategies, and by encouraging students to support each other, such as through peer-mentoring programmes.

Lastly, and according to the 2023 Swiss education report, it seems young people who perform poorly during their compulsory education are not only more likely to drop out of upper-secondary level education and training (such as not finishing an apprenticeship and/or VET programme), they are also more likely to experience difficulty in finding an apprenticeship and/or VET programme to begin with. They are more likely to find themselves in an interim solution between lower-secondary and upper-secondary education. While interim solutions certainly provide young people with a more effective preparation for upper-secondary education, they may also severely delay their progression towards obtaining an upper-secondary qualification. These interim solutions, which are neither part of compulsory education nor lead to an upper-secondary qualification provide those who have finished their compulsory schooling and are experiencing problems in finding general or vocational upper secondary education with a means of bridging the gap.

As the report argues, at present, there is no standard definition throughout Switzerland for interim solutions. The report thus makes the following policy recommendations: these can include additional school years to prepare young people for a specific vocation, pre-apprenticeships, motivation semesters, a tenth school year, or even language stays or au pair work abroad.

4.0 KEY TAKEAWAYS

Switzerland has a highly decentralised education system, reflecting the federal structure of the state. While one of the main challenges in education has been the harmonisation of school curricula and programmes across the different cantons, early school leaving does not appear to constitute a concern. Indeed, with the exception perhaps

of the small number of students attending ECE, the issue of the small percentage of students who do not transition from compulsory to non-compulsory education levels seems to have been adequately addressed with the reform of the VET programmes and the different options offered to the students.

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Version 1.0

REVIEW OF LOCAL, REGIONAL AND/OR NATIONAL POLICIES TO TACKLES EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING – [ITALY]

Reduce early school leaving and underachievement



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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The objective of this Report was to reconstruct a national picture of the policies implemented in Italy to tackle underachievement in studies and early leaving of education and training, shedding light on the archipelago of specific publicly financed interventions and their management.

The analysis of public policies was conducted taking into account the international and national literature on educational policies in Italy and on the basis of the identification of some dimensions considered relevant, including the European classification into prevention, contrast and compensation measures, the type of funding (European, national and regional), the connection between centralized and local policy levels, and the relevance of educational institutions experience and expertise in combating early leaving of education and training. All the information collected, for each policy action examined in the desk phase and for general policy analysis, was included in a structure prepared ad hoc for the SCIREARLY project, subsequently used for the delivery of the findings.

In terms of methodology, research paths were developed along two lines: an on-desk analysis of strategic documentation on combating early leaving of education and training (legislative/regulatory acts, guidelines, calls and projects aimed at combating early leaving of education and training in Italy) and an on field analysis, based on the conduct of qualitative interviews with contact persons of CESIE and privileged witnesses (mainly education stakeholders and implementers of interventions), aimed at clarifying discordant information and data acquired and at integrating and enriching the wealth of information collected.

1.1 Country context - Education and training system

The Italian educational and training system is organized based on the principles of subsidiarity and autonomy of educational institutions. The State has exclusive legislative competence for general regulation about education (in it.: *norme generali sull'istruzione*) and for determining the minimum levels of performance that must be guaranteed throughout the national territory. Furthermore, the State defines the fundamental principles that the Regions must respect in the exercise of their specific competences.

The Regions have concurrent legislative authority in the field of education and exclusive authority in the field of vocational education and training.

Schools are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and Merit, with different arrangements based on their legal status (state public schools, accredited private schools, private schools). Schools have didactic, organizational, research, experimentation, and development autonomy.

In this policy report it was therefore necessary to examine the legislation on education and training issued not only at a national level but also at a regional level (here limited to the Sicily Region alone).

The Italian education and training system is fundamentally structured into three Education cycles: Primary education, Secondary education, and Higher Education. There is also a non-compulsory integrated Early Childhood Education system that lasts a total of 6 years.

1.1.1 Integrated 0-6 System¹ (ISCED 0²)

The Integrated Education and Instruction System is aimed at ensuring equal opportunities for all children, from birth to 6 years old, to develop their potential in relationships, autonomy, creativity, and learning, in order to overcome inequalities, territorial, economic, ethnic, and cultural barriers.

It is structured into a series of pathways, including:

- **Early Childhood Education services**, managed by Local Authorities, either directly or through agreements with other public entities or private entities, further structured as follows:
 - **Nurseries and Micro-nurseries (in it.: *Nidi e micronidi*)**, which accommodate children between 3 and 36 months and have different opening hours, capacity, functioning methods, and fee structures from one municipality to another (typically providing meals and rest);
 - **”Spring” Sections (in it.: *Sezioni primavera*)**, which accommodate children between 24 and 36 months and are associated with state or accredited preschools or nurseries;
 - **Integrative Services**, with highly flexible organization and diverse functioning methods. They can be categorized as follows:
 - Play Spaces for children aged 12 to 36 months, without meal service, with flexible attendance up to a maximum of 5 hours per day;
 - Centers for Children and Families, accommodating infants along with an accompanying adult from the early months of life, without meal service, with flexible attendance;
 - Educational Services in a Home-based Context for a limited number of children aged 3 to 36 months.

¹ *Sistema integrato 0-6*. (n.d.). Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito - Miur. <https://www.istruzione.it/sistema-integrato-06>

² UNESCO. (2012). *International Standard Classification of Education - ISCED 2011*. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:International_standard_classification_of_education_\(ISCED\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:International_standard_classification_of_education_(ISCED))

- **Preschool (in it.: *Scuola dell'Infanzia*)** (from 3 to 6 years), which can be state-run or accredited and managed by public or private entities. Attendance at state preschool is free; families are responsible for meal costs and any services requested individually (such as school bus, before-school care, extended hours).

The 0-6 system is not compulsory in Italy. The offer of Early Childhood Education facilities is regulated by the Region, which set standards for structures, services, human resources, access and quality. Facilities can be public or private and usually they stay open for 5 days a week and 6 or 8 hours per day from September to June.

Access to public structures – which in Italy cover only the 49,1% of childcare provision – is by entering a ranked list. Seats are reserved for children who enrolled in the previous years. Extra places are given considering family situation – measured by the Equivalent Financial Position Indicator (ISEE)³ which takes into account income, wealth and family composition, presence of social disadvantage, handicap, children being in alternative care or living with a lone parent (the parent who: has recognized the child, is widow/widower, is related to a detainee, holds parental responsibility).

The Italian Early Childhood Education system meets the needs of only a very small proportion of children: in 2019/2020 the coverage (defined as the number of places in Early Childhood Education services per 100 resident children under the age of 3) was only 27,2%.⁴

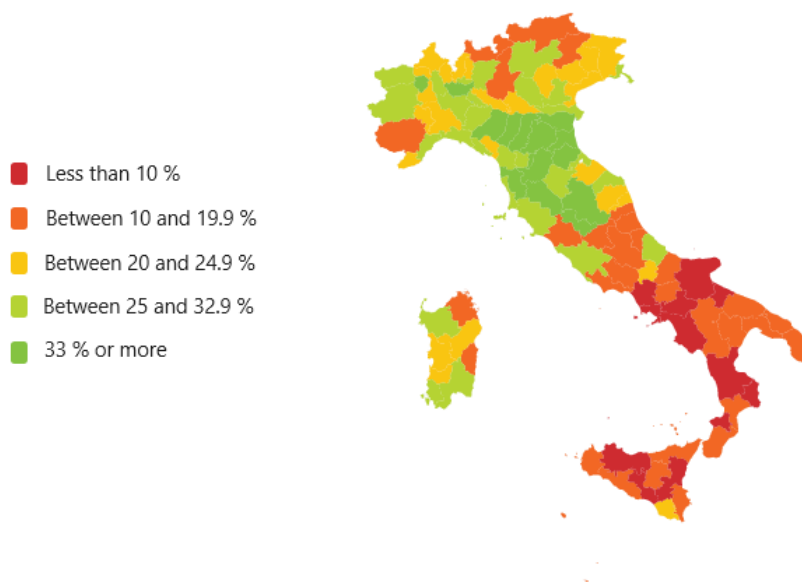


Figure 1 - ECEC places per 100 residents 0-2 years, [Source: openpolis - Con i Bambini - elaboration on Istat data, 2023]

³ How to fill in the DSU and request the ISEE. (n.d.). Sito ufficiale di INPS (Istituto Nazionale Previdenza Sociale). <https://www.inps.it/en/en.information-english.income-and-assets.issee-equivalent-economic-situation-indicator-how-to-fill-in-the-dsu-and-request-the-isee.html>

⁴ Istat. (2022). *Offerta di nidi e servizi integrativi per la prima infanzia | Anno educativo 2020/2021* (Statistiche Report). <https://www.istat.it/it/files/2022/10/report-asili-nido-2020-2021.pdf>

In terms of the availability of services on the territory, there are still very large gaps to the detriment of households residing in the South and in smaller municipalities. In Sicily there is little more than one place for every 10 children.

So, Italy still does not even reach the original European target set in 2002⁵ of providing childcare to at least 33% of children under 3 years of age by 2010 and set by Legislative Decree 65/2017⁶. After the Covid-19 emergency, the target was updated to 45%.

When turning towards private facilities (covering 50,9% of childcare provision), the average out-of-pocket monthly fee may reach range from 250 € to 400 € per month that, considering 10 months of use of the service, bring the annual cost per family to more than € 3000 (in Sicily they are 30% more expensive than rest of Italy). Because of the high costs, families are likely to become in default of payment, and in fact in 2016 19% of families left private childcare facilities, withdrawing their children before the end of the educational year or after only 3 months of attendance.

The scarcity of childcare for young children is mainly a reflection of the structure of the Italian care regime, which relies on a minimal supply of services, cultural factors as family solidarity and gender division of labour, and financial transfers meant only for to those most in need. This situation contributes to disparities between the rich and poor, not only because poorer families cannot afford the cost of childcare but also because the cost serves as a disincentive for mothers to job-hunting, keep their job or re-enter education or training.

It must be specified here that facilities continue to be in short supply despite funding allocations (the latest linked to the Next Generation Europe EU initiative – in Italy implemented through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan – PNRR 'Italia Domani'). This happens because the allocations finance the facilities but not the activities: for many regions in financial distress, it is not worthwhile to participate in tenders for facilities because they would lack resources for ordinary and extraordinary maintenance as well as for the selection, training and remuneration of staff.⁷

⁵ European Commission. (2013). *Barcelona objectives - The development of childcare facilities for young children in Europe with a view to sustainable and inclusive growth*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://doi.org/10.2838/43161>

⁶ Istituzione del sistema integrato di educazione e di istruzione dalla nascita sino a sei anni, a norma dell'articolo 1, commi 180 e 181, lettera e), della legge 13 luglio 2015, n. 107., Decreto Legislativo No. 65 (2017, May 16) (Italia). Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana, 195. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2017/05/16/17G00073/sg>

⁷ *Un aggiornamento sulla situazione degli asili nido in Italia* | Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. (n.d.). Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. <https://osservatoriocpi.unicatt.it/ocpi-pubblicazioni-un-aggiornamento-sulla-situazione-degli-asili-nido-in-italia>

1.1.2 First Cycle of Education (ISCED 1 and 2⁸)

It covers the first 8 years of compulsory education.

- **ISCED 1 - Primary School (previously called Elementary School) (in it.: *Scuola Primaria*):** Children start formal education at the age of 6 (or 5 and a half) at Primary School – lasting 5 years – whose aim is to provide pupils with basic learning and the basic tools of active citizenship. Law 169 of 2008 established that the educational offering of primary schools could be structured as a single teacher system of 24 hours or divided into different hourly proposals, such as 27 hours, 30 hours, and 40 hours, including lunch and after-lunch activities. As for the educational aspect, the main subjects introduced to students are: Italian language, foreign language, mathematics, science, history, and geography.
- **ISCED 2 – First Grade or Lower Secondary School (in it.: *Scuola Secondaria di Primo Grado*)** (previously called Middle School, in it: *Scuola Media*): Children attend Lower Secondary School for 3 years till they are 14, where they acquire the fundamental knowledge and skills to develop basic cultural competence. Possible hourly proposals within the educational offering include a standard 36-hour schedule or an extended 40-hour schedule. Differences in hours correspond to various subjects, including Italian, history, geography, literary subjects, mathematics, sciences, technology, English, second language, art, physical education, music, and (catholic) religion. At the end of the Lower Secondary School they have to be admitted and pass a State examination in order to receive the first-cycle State leaving certificate (in it.: *Diploma di licenza conclusiva del primo ciclo di istruzione*) (EQF level 1⁹), enabling access to the second cycle of education.

1.1.3 Second Cycle of Education (ISCED 3)

Once out of the first cycle of education, students attend Upper Secondary School (in it.: *Scuola Secondaria di Secondo Grado*). Teachers formulate a formal track recommendation at the end of Lower Secondary School, which is not binding. Students have the opportunity to choose between:

⁸ UNESCO. (2012). *International Standard Classification of Education - ISCED 2011*. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:International_standard_classification_of_education_\(ISCED\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:International_standard_classification_of_education_(ISCED))

⁹ *The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) | Europass*. (n.d.). Europass | European Union. <https://europa.eu/europass/en/europass-tools/european-qualifications-framework?langcode=en>

- **Licei** ^{10 11}: *Licei* provide 5-years General upper secondary education programmes directed at students aged 14 to 19. They are developed in two two-year periods (in it.: *biennii*) and in a fifth year that completes the subject pathway. Students may choose among the following fields of studies: Artistic, Classical, Linguistic, Music and dance, Scientific, Scientific – applied sciences option, Scientific – sports option, Humanities, Humanities – economic and social option. The routes realise the educational, cultural and professional profile of the student specialising in the field of studies. General education is mostly academic in nature, with less attention devoted to technical-practical education. Work experiences have been recently included in curricula but they are a residual part of the educational programme. Students who pass the final State examination receive a Diploma (in it.: *Diploma Liceale*) (EQF level 4¹²), recognised as entrance qualification for university and upper post-secondary vocational education and a basic step for access to the labour market.
- **Technical Schools (in it.: *Istituti tecnici*)**: Technical and vocational institutes offer 5-years courses aimed to provide students with competences specific of a professional sector. Organisation and student assessment and final evaluation follow mostly the same procedures as General education. Students who pass the final State examination receive a technical education diploma (in it.: *Diploma di istruzione tecnica*) or a vocational education diploma (in it.: *Diploma di istruzione professionale*) (EQF level 4).
- **Vocational Schools (in it.: *Istituti professionali*)**: Regional Vocational Education and Training is addressed to 14/17-year olds who wish to enter the labour market after a short period of training, and it is organised and run by private or public vocational training agencies and upper secondary vocational institutes accredited by the Regions in agreement with the State (thus being different from a Region to another). These organisations issue a vocational qualification for a 3-year course

¹⁰ lycèon (or lycius) adj. [from Gr. *Λύκειος* or *Λύκιος*, Latin *lycēus* or *lycius*]. - In Greek mythology, an epithet of Apollo, the origin of which is variously explained by ancients and moderns: either by linking it to the fact that Apollo was believed to have exterminated wolves (*λύκος*), or to the fact that Apollo, immediately after his birth, was supposedly transported by his mother to Lycia (*Λυκία*), or finally, assuming Apollo to be a solar deity, by linking it to the root *λευκ-*, *λυκ-* 'whiteness, light'. In ancient Greece near Athens there was a sanctuary of Apollo Lyceum and where Aristotle had a school in which he taught philosophy. Later the term generally designated public places where literary and philosophical exercises were held, and eventually became by extension the name of high schools.

¹¹ *Licei* are also commonly referred to as “High Schools”. However, for the purpose of this publication, the author prefers to depart from this definition. Students self-select into the different types of Upper Secondary education (and into early leaving of education) on the basis of their previous achievements and their close family members' (mainly parents or guardians) occupation and educational qualification. This mechanism leads to a segmentation of the student population (e.g. between *Licei* and Technical or Vocational schools) strongly correlated with the social classes of origin: upper class students are strongly overrepresented in the academic track of *Licei*, whose students display much higher rates of university enrolment to and completion of higher education than students attending the other two tracks. Conversely, working class, immigrant, low-performing students are significantly overrepresented in the vocational track and, to a lesser extent, in the technical track. This generates, in the common perception, two channels of education, one league A and the other league B. This misperception has meant that for a long time only the *Licei* were called “High Schools”, even though both Technical and Vocational Schools fall under Upper Secondary Education.

¹² *The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) | Europass*. (n.d.). Europass | European Union. <https://europa.eu/europass/en/europass-tools/european-qualifications-framework?langcode=en>

(EQF level 3¹³) or a vocational diploma for a 4-year course (EQF level 4) with direct access to higher technical education.

Students have very limited choice regarding school subjects once they have chosen a track. By the fifth year, students are expected to have fully developed the knowledge, competences and skills acquired in the first cycle of education and reached the specific learning objectives for each branch of specialist study. The final evaluation consists in a State examination (in it.: *Esame di Stato* or *Esame di maturità*) which foresees written and oral tests (verifying proficiency in main language, testing of the main subjects of the programme and knowledge of the course programmes).

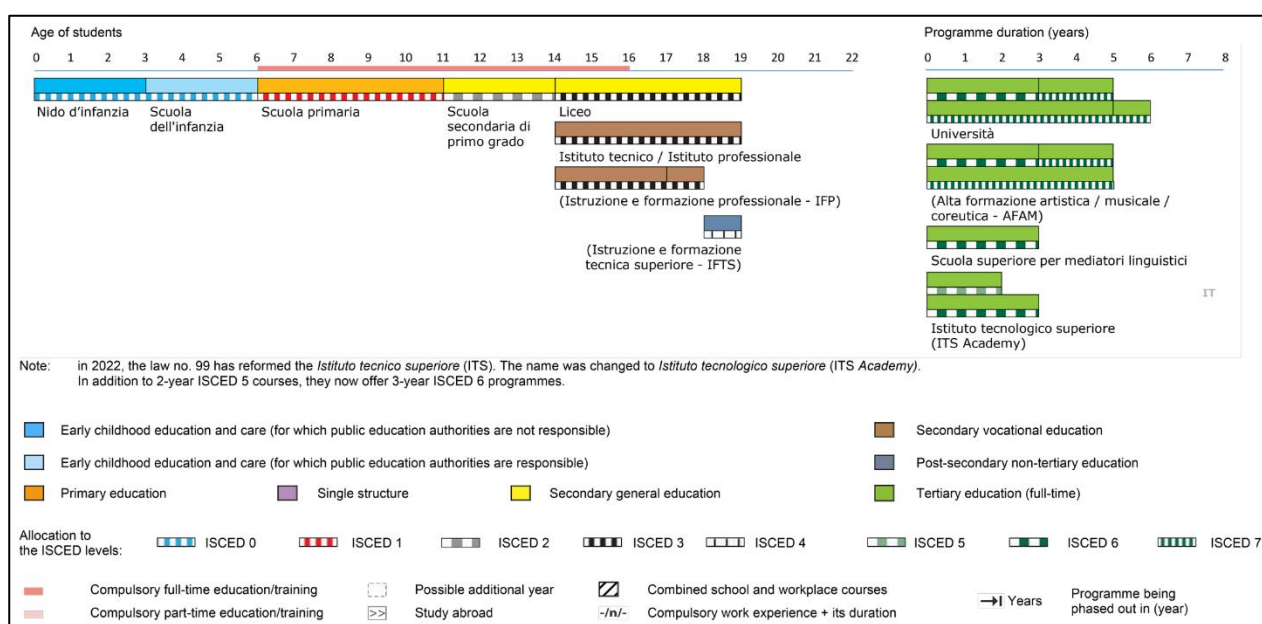


Figure 2 - Structure of the national education system (Source: Eurydice, 2023)

The education system in Italy involves not only state schools but also encompasses private schools. Following the enactment of Law 62 of 2000¹⁴, the private school sector has been reorganized into an **integrated public system**. As a result, every student has the choice to enroll in either a state school or a private school. This arrangement ensures that within the integrated system, students have the opportunity to attain the academic qualification associated with their chosen field of study.

¹³ The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) | Europass. (n.d.). Europass | European Union. <https://europa.eu/europass/en/europass-tools/european-qualifications-framework?langcode=en>

¹⁴ Norme per la parità scolastica e disposizioni sul diritto allo studio e all'istruzione, Legge No. 62 (2000, March 21) (Italia). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 67. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2000/03/21/000G0099/sg>

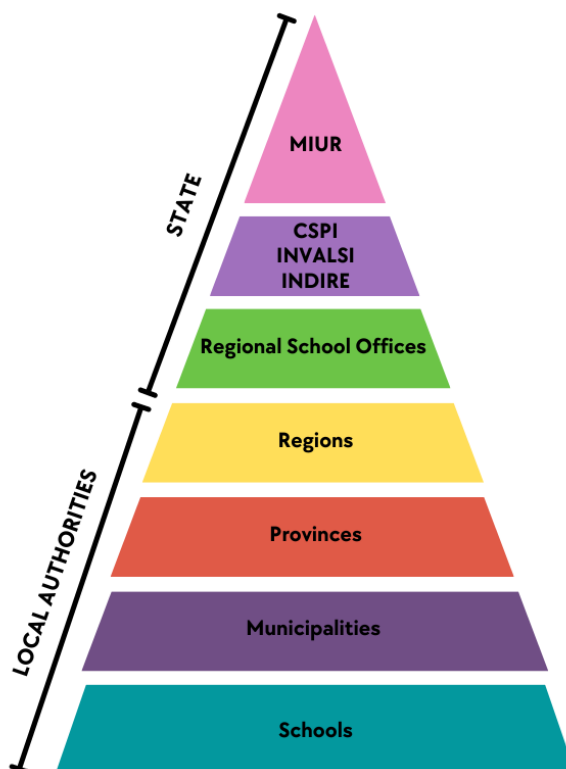


Figure 3 - Pyramid of Education Governance in Italy (developed by CESIE based on review, 2023)

1.2 Country context - Governance system

The Italian Governance system for Education and training can be seen as a pyramid that starts from the state and reaches down to the territory, thus extending to the citizens. Because of the decentralisation system, significant differences emerge in terms of operating rules of education and training systems: the ways in which education and training are provided varies from region to region.

1.2.1 Ministry of Education and Merit (MIUR)

The functions and responsibilities pertaining to the State in the field of education are attributed to the Ministry of Education and Merit. The activity of the Ministry is primarily directed towards:

- Defining regulations, curricula, national guidelines, and guidelines as a framework for the curricular design of educational institutions within the national education and training system.
- Managing the overall organization of school education, legal status of school personnel, training of school administrators, teaching and educational staff, as well as administrative, technical, and support staff.
- Establishing criteria and parameters for implementing social interventions in schools, supporting disadvantaged areas for territorial balance in the quality of educational services.

- Conducting research and experimentation for functional innovations in response to educational needs.
- Recognizing academic qualifications and certifications at the European and international levels, and implementing education policies common to European Union countries.
- Providing guidelines for the National Evaluation System.
- Identifying objectives, standards, and educational pathways for Higher Education and advanced technical training, and managing relationships with regional educational systems.
- Setting guidelines for private schools and non-state educational institutions and courses.
- Overseeing activities related to student and parent associations.
- Ensuring the right to education and family services, promoting student status, study and career guidance.
- Managing international relations, both bilaterally and multilaterally, and promoting the internationalization of the educational and training system.

The Ministry is organized into two Departments (per Prime Minister's Decree (DPCM) dated September 30, 2020, No. 166¹⁵), with their Heads responsible for coordination, management, and oversight of the general management offices within each department. They are also accountable for achieving results in alignment with the Minister's directives:

- Department for the Educational System of Education and Training, consisting of 4 General Management Offices:
 - a. General Directorate for interventions in school construction, management of structural funds for education, and digital innovation.
 - b. General Directorate for school regulations and evaluation of the national education system.
 - c. General Directorate for school personnel.
 - d. General Directorate for student affairs, integration, and participation.
- Department for Human, Financial, and Instrumental Resources, consisting of 3 General Management Offices:
 - a. General Directorate for human and financial resources.
 - b. General Directorate for information systems and statistics.
 - c. General Directorate for organizational design, administrative process innovation, communication, and contracts.

¹⁵ Regolamento concernente l'organizzazione del Ministero dell'istruzione, Decreto No. 166 (2020, December 14) (Italia). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 309. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/12/14/20G00178/sg>

1.2.2 Higher Council for Public Education (CSPI)

The Higher Council for Public Education (in it.: *Consiglio Superiore della Pubblica Istruzione – CSPI*) is the guaranteeing body for the unity of the national education system and provides technical and scientific support for the exercise of Ministry's functions. It consists of 36 members, half of whom are elected from among teachers, school administrators, and administrative staff, while the other half is appointed by the Minister.

It assists the Minister in the planning and supervision of educational policies by formulating proposals and issuing obligatory but not binding proposals on:

- the guidelines for defining school personnel policies.
- directives from the Minister of Education and Merit regarding the evaluation of the education system.
- the objectives, directions, and standards of the education system established at the national level, as well as the national portion of curricula.
- the overall organization of education.

1.2.3 National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education and Training System (INVALSI)

The National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education and Training System (in it.: *Istituto Nazionale per la VALutazione del Sistema educativo di Istruzione e di formazione – INVALSI*)¹⁶ is a research institute with legal public status. INVALSI is under the supervision of the Ministry of Education and Merit, which defines strategic priorities that the Institute considers when planning its activities.

The institute manages the overall evaluation of the Italian school system. Since its establishment in 1999, it covers the tasks carried out by the former Observatory on Early leaving of education and training.

1.2.4 National Institute for Documentation, Innovation, and Educational Research (Indire)

The National Institute for Documentation, Innovation, and Educational Research (in it.: *Istituto Nazionale di Documentazione, Innovazione e Ricerca Educativa – Indire*) is an institution overseen by the Ministry of Education and Merit, specializing particularly in educational research. It is MIUR's main institute for education research and innovation.

¹⁶ The INVALSI assessment has always had little support among teachers for various aspects, including the use of tests that are the same for the entire peninsula and for all schools, despite the fact that it represents an assessment system that is part of a European reference framework, which sees assessment in its various forms (from pupils to teachers, passing through the school institution) as one of the necessary tools for the development of the school system.

Besides being a part of the national evaluation system, INDIRE conducts research and documentation activities in education and the use of technology for in-service training of school personnel. A specific task of the Institute within the National Evaluation System is to support schools in their process of improvement and educational innovation. Furthermore, Indire develops online learning environments for newly appointed teachers in their roles.

1.2.5 Regional School Offices

The Regional School Offices are peripheral branches of the Ministry of Education and Merit. They are either at the level of general management or, depending on the student population of the respective region, at a non-general level. Typically, the Regional School Office is organized both functionally and territorially, with offices at the provincial level (Territorial Areas). They have the following responsibilities:

- Monitors compliance with general education regulations and essential performance levels, the implementation of school regulations, effectiveness levels of educational actions, and adherence to planned standards.
- Implements national policies for students within their territorial competence.
- Handles administrative and accounting management of general, contractual, and conventional activities common to regional administrative offices.
- Activates national educational policies on the territory, supporting organizational, educational, and research flexibility of educational institutions, and integrates its actions with municipalities, provinces, and the region.
- Promotes identification of educational needs and development of corresponding offerings in collaboration with the region and local authorities; manages relationships with regional administration and local entities for integrated educational offerings, adult education, as well as higher technical education and school-work relationships within its state competence.
- Exerts supervision over non-state private and non-private schools, as well as foreign schools in Italy.
- Conducts verification and surveillance activities to assess the efficiency of educational institution activities.
- Evaluates the degree of implementation of the educational offer plan.
- Allocates personnel resources to educational and instructional institutions and exercises all competences, including union relations, not assigned to educational institutions or reserved for the Central Administration.
- Ensures information dissemination; exercises authorities and assumes passive legitimacy in relevant judgments concerning disputes involving school personnel; provides support to state education and training institutions, in coordination with the General Directorate of Human and Financial Resources, regarding fund allocation to these institutions.
- Also handles activities related to procedures for criminal, administrative-accounting, and disciplinary responsibilities of administrative personnel in service at the Regional School Office, excluding first-tier managers.

1.2.6 Regions

Italy is organised into 20 regions, which work with the central state on most issues related to education through the State-Regions Conference (it.: *Conferenza Stato-Regioni*). Article 117 of the Italian Constitution¹⁷ defines the division of legislative powers between the central State and the Regions allowing them to define and regulate key education issues within their territories. This has substantial implications for the organization, management, and regulation of the education system. Administrative tasks of the Regions include:

- Planning and programming of educational and vocational training offerings within their territory, tailoring educational policies to local and regional needs. Regions may have the authority to influence the definition of curricula and educational programs, adapting them to cultural, linguistic, and territorial specificities. This can result in variations in the educational content taught in schools at the regional level.
- Regional planning of the school network based on provincial plans, coordinating with the programming mentioned in the first point.
- Division of the regional territory into functional areas for enhancing the educational offering, considering proposals from relevant local entities.
- Establishing the school calendar.
- Providing financial contributions to non-state schools.
- Initiatives and promotional activities within the scope of conferred functions.

1.2.7 Provincial School Offices

In Sicily, the regional legislature, by Regional Law No. 8 of 24 March 2014¹⁸ and the subsequent Regional Law No. 15 of 4 August 2015¹⁹, abolished the regional provinces. However, the reform has never been fully implemented and Provinces have kept some of their competencies. In Education, they are responsible in providing buildings but also for upper secondary schools. Administrative tasks of provinces in relation to upper secondary education institutions include:

- Establishment, aggregation, merger, and closure of schools in line with planning tools.
- Development of plans for organizing the network of educational institutions.

¹⁷ *Constitution of the Italian Republic*. (n.d.). Homepage | Senato della Repubblica. https://www.senato.it/documenti/repository/istituzione/costituzione_inglese.pdf

¹⁸ Istituzione dei liberi Consorzi comunali e delle Città metropolitane, Legge regionale No. 8 (2014, April 26) (Italia). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 3a Serie Speciale - Regioni (17). <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/atto/regioni/caricaDettaglioAtto/originario?atto.dataPubblicazioneGazzetta=2014-04-26&atto.codiceRedazionale=14R00164>

¹⁹ Disposizioni in materia di liberi Consorzi comunali e Città metropolitane, Legge regionale No. 15 (2015, August 7) (Italia). *Gazzetta ufficiale della Regione Siciliana*, 32. <http://www.gurs.regione.sicilia.it/Gazzette/g15-32o/g15-32o.pdf>

- Organizational support services for education for students with disabilities or in disadvantaged situations.
- Plan for the utilization of buildings and equipment, in coordination with educational institutions.
- Suspension of classes in severe and urgent cases.
- Initiatives and promotional activities within the scope of conferred functions.
- Establishment, oversight, and supervision, including dissolution, of school collegial bodies at the territorial level.

1.2.8 Municipalities

Municipalities work in collaboration with regional and national education authorities to implement educational policies and ensure alignment with broader educational goals.

Administrative tasks of municipalities include:

- Similar responsibilities as provinces, but pertaining to the first cycle of education.
- Allocation of Resources, including personnel and funding, to support local educational institutions.
- Early Childhood Education: Municipalities often manage and fund preschools.
- Adult education.
- Integrated actions for school and career guidance: after-school programs, extracurricular activities, and recreational services to complement formal education and support working parents or guardians; cultural and educational events, workshops, and initiatives to promote learning and community engagement.
- Initiatives aimed at achieving equal educational opportunities. Municipalities provide support and services for students with disabilities or special needs, including organizing individualized education plans and providing necessary accommodations.
- Integrated actions for preventing early leaving of education and promoting health education.
- Maintenance and upkeep of school buildings, ensuring a safe and conducive learning environment for students.
- School Transportation: Municipalities may be responsible for arranging school transportation services to ensure that students can safely travel to and from school.

1.2.9 Schools

Schools from pre-primary to secondary level have an autonomy within the general objectives and standards set by the Ministry²⁰. This autonomy is defined as ‘functional’ meaning that many activities and functions that were previously carried out by the peripheral levels have been attributed to the educational institutions. Each school has the ability to organize itself in terms of teaching, organization, administration, and decision-making, leading to differentiated approaches from one school to another. Plus, with functional autonomy, educational institutions can exercise ‘private law’ capacities, i.e. they have a real legal personality and also participate together with other public bodies in the pursuit of public interests. Schools have a school director (it.: *Dirigente Scolastico*), a director of general and administrative services (it.: *Direttore/Direttrice dei Servizi Generali e Amministrativi – DSGA*) and several committees and boards. Students and parents (or guardians) are also represented in the school system.

Different aspects of this autonomy include:

- **Teaching Autonomy:** Schools make didactic choices within class councils and teaching boards, pursuing the general education system's objectives while adapting them to their specific context, thus organising themselves independently of other schools. This autonomy respects the constitutional principle of teaching and educational freedom, allowing families to choose an educational offer and approach that suits their preferences, since schools create their own educational offerings. This teaching autonomy is aimed mainly at ensuring that each student achieves their own personal educational success.
- **Organizational Autonomy:** Schools can organize themselves to achieve objectives and goals, structuring their educational offerings in terms of flexibility, diversification, efficiency, and effectiveness. Depending on their specific needs, context, available resources, and educational choices made within their respective collegial bodies, schools can autonomously organize themselves.
- **Research, Experimentation, and Development Autonomy:** Each school has the opportunity to innovate and experiment, contributing to the educational and didactic debate within the country. However, this autonomy has often been sacrificed or underutilized, as the trend in recent decades has leaned toward top-down reforms rather than bottom-up experimentation.
- **Administrative and Accounting Autonomy:** Schools manage functions that were historically handled by central and peripheral administrations, including administrative and accounting tasks. This aspect has faced difficulties, particularly due to a lack of training and appropriate staffing. Investment in training and staffing is crucial for effective and efficient administration.

School autonomy does not concern either the expansion of school buildings, premises and related equipment, or related maintenance operations, including safety protection measures: nursery and first-cycle school buildings are Municipalities’ property, while secondary schools

²⁰ Regolamento recante norme in materia di autonomia delle istituzioni scolastiche, ai sensi dell'art. 21 della legge 15 marzo 1997, n. 59, Decreto No. 275 (1999, August 10) (Italia). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 186. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1999/08/10/099G0339/sg>

belong to the Provinces. School autonomy does not concern the recruitment of the school director, which is done by competitive examination, nor the recruitment of teachers, which is done through different rankings.

The autonomy of Italian schools, on the other hand, concerns operating expenses, including the acquisition of computer equipment, following specific procedures on public procurement.

2.0 POLICY/POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

2.1 Policies - Compulsory Education

The principle of compulsory education was outlined in **Article 34 of the Italian Constitution**²¹ and represents a fundamental element in the country's legal framework. The founding fathers demonstrated extraordinary vision by foreseeing a compulsory education of at least 8 years. This measure aimed to ensure that every citizen had access to a level of education that provided a solid foundation for active participation in society and the job market. This provision reflected their deep recognition of the crucial role of education in reducing inequalities, promoting equal opportunities, and fostering cultural and economic evolution.

In the following decades, compulsory education has been expanded beyond the initially established 8 years. This reflects a proactive response to the changing dynamics of modern society and the complexities of the global economy. Policymakers and educators recognize that a more extended period of compulsory education better equips individuals with the knowledge, skills, critical thinking abilities, and adaptability necessary to navigate the complexities of contemporary life in an increasingly interconnected world and contribute effectively to the nation's economic growth and cultural advancement.

Furthermore, increased compulsory education aligns with efforts to address the phenomenon of early leaving of education, the persistent inequalities and improve social mobility.

Main reforms over the years were:

Law 20 January 1999, No. 9²²

- **Level:** National Law.
- **Year of Implementation:** 1999.
- **Fundamental Principles:** It aims to extend compulsory education lengthening the duration of mandatory schooling from 8 to 10 years, obliging children in Italy to attend school from elementary school (primary school), through middle school (lower secondary education), up to additional two years of compulsory Upper Secondary education. This change was introduced to ensure a stronger educational foundation for young students and to promote access to education for a longer period of time.

²¹ Constitution of the Italian Republic. (n.d.). Homepage | Senato della Repubblica. https://www.senato.it/documenti/repository/istituzione/costituzione_inglese.pdf

²² Disposizioni urgenti per l'elevamento dell'obbligo di istruzione, Legge n. 9 (1999, January 27) (Italia). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 21, 4–8. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/gu/1999/01/27/21/sg/pdf>

- **Proposed and Adopted Measures:** The law and its following regulation for the application of the law²³ provided for measures to support schools in planning actions to accommodate those students who did not choose to spontaneously pursue their studies in Upper Secondary education. This related to adaptation of school facilities (adding classrooms, implementing educational programs), information and engagement campaigns addressed to society and families, as they had the responsibility to ensure their children's participation in school.
- **Characteristics and Processes behind the implementation:** Implementation of the law required changes in the Italian education system. This involved planning and allocation of resources to accommodate schools to this new requirement.

Legislative Decree 19 February 2004, No. 59²⁴

- **Level:** Legislative Decree²⁵.
- **Year of Implementation:** 2004.
- **Fundamental Principles:** It established that the minimum required attendance to be admitted to the next year is three-quarters of the customised annual schedule. The law emphasized the importance of personalizing the school schedule, (approximately 50 days of absence per school year) allowing educational institutions to tailor schedules based on individual students' needs, taking into account factors such as their abilities, interests, and learning needs.
- **Proposed and Adopted Measures:** The decree encouraged the adoption of a continuous assessment system, which evaluates students' abilities and skills throughout the school year, rather than relying solely on final exams. Measures to support students with special educational needs or learning difficulties were introduced to ensure equal learning opportunities for all.
- **Characteristics and Processes behind the implementation:** Schools had to adjust their programs and schedules to comply with the provisions on minimum required attendance. The obligation of continuous assessment necessitated teacher training to implement a competency-based assessment system.

²³ Regolamento recante norme per l'attuazione dell'articolo 1 della legge 20 gennaio 1999, n. 9, contenente disposizioni urgenti per l'elevamento dell'obbligo di istruzione, Decreto No. 323 (1999, Settembre 16) (Italia). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 218, 16-25. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/gu/1999/09/16/218/sg/pdf>

²⁴ Definizione delle norme generali relative alla scuola dell'infanzia e al primo ciclo dell'istruzione, a norma dell'articolo 1 della legge 28 marzo 2003, n. 53, Decreto legislativo No. 59 (2004, March 2). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 51. <https://archivio.pubblica.istruzione.it/riforma/allegati/dl190204.pdf>

²⁵ A Legislative Decree is a source of Italian legislation that is used to regulate complex and specific matters that would cause slowdowns or delays in parliamentary work, due to the complexity of the ordinary procedure for passing laws. It can only be issued when the Government has been previously authorised by Parliament by means of a delegation law.

Legislative Decree 15 April 2005, No. 76²⁶

- **Level:** Legislative Decree.
- **Year of Implementation:** 2005.
- **Fundamental Principles:** It affirms that students have a right and duty to education, as foreseen by the Law 28 March 2003, No. 53 "Riforma Moratti"²⁷. It specifies that compulsory education and training must be provided for at least 12 years – beyond the age of sixteen or until the attainment of a 3-year course qualification by the age of eighteen.
- **Proposed and Adopted Measures:**
 - Establishment of a National Student Registry System (it.: *Anagrafe Nazionale degli Studenti* – ANS) for the first and second cycle of education, which collects and manages data on educational pathways. Each school institution is required to enter and update student data on a specific database (called SIDI).
 - Supervision of the fulfilment of the right-duty to education and related sanctions: parents or guardians are responsible for compliance, while the Municipality, school principal, and province have monitoring roles. Sanctions are foreseen in case of non-compliance.
- **Characteristics and Processes behind the implementation:** The ANS data constitute an indispensable information asset for the fulfilment of the Ministry's institutional tasks and for the evaluation of the school system. However the ANS was created with totally or partially different objectives from those of regional student registries. This initiative created havoc and overburdened schools with tasks, especially in the Regions that had already started the construction of regional registers.

Law 27 December 2006, No. 296, Article 1, Paragraph 622²⁸

- **Level:** National Law. Provisions for the creation of the annual and multiannual State budget (2007 Budget Law).
- **Year of Implementation:** 2006.
- **Fundamental Principles:** It reduces the lasting of compulsory education from 12 to 10 years; it should lead to the attainment of an upper secondary school diploma or a 3-year course

²⁶ Definizione delle norme generali sul diritto-dovere all'istruzione e alla formazione, a norma dell'articolo 2, comma 1, lettera c), della legge 28 marzo 2003, n. 53, Decreto legislativo No. 76 (2020, May 5) (Italia). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 103. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2005/05/05/005G0100/sg>

²⁷ Delega al Governo per la definizione delle norme generali sull'istruzione e dei livelli essenziali delle prestazioni in materia di istruzione e formazione professionale, Legge No. 53 (2003, April 2) (Italia). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 77. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2003/04/02/003G0065/sg>

²⁸ Ripubblicazione del testo della legge 27 dicembre 2006, n. 296, recante: «Disposizioni per la formazione del bilancio annuale e pluriennale dello Stato (legge finanziaria 2007)», corredato delle relative note. (Legge pubblicata nel supplemento ordinario n. 244/L alla Gazzetta Ufficiale - serie generale - n. 299 del 27 dicembre 2006), Legge No. 296 (2007, January 11) (Italia). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 7. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2007/01/11/07A00183/sg>

professional qualification by the age of eighteen. It switches the perspective from compulsory schooling to compulsory education, recognising the technical and vocational schools' pathways.

- **Characteristics and Processes behind the implementation:** Although its main purpose was to establish the state budget and financial measures for the year 2007, this law was used to introduce various amendments and provisions in various areas, including education. In Italy it is common for budget laws to include provisions on various issues in addition to tax and financial matters.

Ministerial Decree 22 August 2007, No. 139²⁹

- **Level:** Ministerial Decree.
- **Year of Implementation:** 2007.
- **Proposed and Adopted Measures:** The ministerial decree establishes that compulsory education must last at least 10 years (from 6 to 16 years of age) and furtherly stress this duty is aimed at ensuring the achievement of an upper secondary school diploma or a 3-year course professional qualification by the age of eighteen.
- **Characteristics and Processes behind the implementation:** This ministerial decree was issued in implementation of Law 27 December 2006, No. 296, Article 1, Paragraph 622 and describes also competences and knowledge that pupils are expected to have acquired at the end of compulsory education.

Law 4 November 2010, No. 183³⁰

- **Level:** National Law.
- **Year of Implementation:** 2010.
- **Fundamental Principles:** In order to resolve the contrast with compulsory schooling (Law 28 March 2003, No. 53 "Riforma Moratti") raised to 10 years and thus the raising of the minimum age for starting work to 16, this law confirm the possibility of complying with compulsory education through employment with an apprenticeship contract.
- **Proposed and Adopted Measures:** Apprenticeship, in all sectors of activity, both private and public, can also be employed for the fulfilment of compulsory education for young people aged 15 years and up to their 25th year of age (24 years and 364 days) who have not yet completed their education. The duration, established by the regions, is determined in relation to the qualification

²⁹ Regolamento recante norme in materia di adempimento dell'obbligo di istruzione, ai sensi dell'articolo 1, comma 622, della legge 27 dicembre 2006, n. 296, Decreto No. 139 (2007, August 31) (Italia). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 202. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2007/08/31/007G0154/sg>

³⁰ Deleghe al Governo in materia di lavori usuranti, di riorganizzazione di enti, di congedi, aspettative e permessi, di ammortizzatori sociali, di servizi per l'impiego, di incentivi all'occupazione, di apprendistato, di occupazione femminile, nonché misure contro il lavoro sommerso e disposizioni in tema di lavoro pubblico e di controversie di lavoro., Legge No. 183 (2010, November 9) (Italia). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 262. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2010/11/09/010G0209/sg>

or diploma to be obtained and in any case cannot exceed three years, or four in the case of a four-year regional vocational diploma. It is an alternative pathway to school training but is supplementary to compulsory education for at least 12 years and in any case up to the age of 18.

Ministerial Circular 30 December 2010, No. 101³¹

- **Level:** Ministerial Circular.
- **Year of Implementation:** 2010.
- **Fundamental Principles:** It establishes that compulsory education in Italy covers the age range between 6 and 16 years.
- **Proposed and Adopted Measures:** The circular clearly defines the age range for compulsory education, obliging parent or guardians to ensure their children attend school within this range.
- **Characteristics and Processes behind the implementation:** This ministerial circular aims to clarify and specify the period of compulsory education, setting the age by which children must attend school. It is a directive addressed to schools and families to ensure compliance with compulsory education.

Most recent measures

On Thursday, 7 September 2023, following a trail of crime incidents in which the protagonists were minors, the Italian Council of Ministers has approved a Decree-Law³² establishing urgent measures to combat youth distress, educational poverty and juvenile crime (known as Decreto “Caivano”)³³. This choice is motivated by the impact of school dropout on society, as young people who are early leavers of education and training are more likely to engage in deviant actions.

In relation to compulsory schooling, in the case of a child who never enrolls in compulsory education despite a warning, a penalty of up to two years' imprisonment is introduced for their parents or guardians; in the case of school dropout before completion of compulsory schooling, the penalty is up to one year's imprisonment. Moreover, parents or guardians lose the right to money benefits from the social welfare system.

As a result of this reform process, today in Italy all young people must attend school for a minimum of 10 years, until they are 16 (**compulsory education**). This is combined with an **educational obligation**, which is the right/duty of young individuals who have completed compulsory schooling to attend educational activities until the age of 18, based on their interests and abilities, through the school education system or the vocational training system whose

³¹ Iscrizioni alle scuole dell'infanzia e alle scuole di ogni ordine e grado per l'anno scolastico 2011/2012, Circolare ministeriale No. 101 (2010) (Italia). https://www.dirittoscolastico.it/files/cm101_10.pdf

³² Decree-laws are regulatory sources used by the Italian government to deal with urgent and extraordinary problems. It must be converted into law by parliament within 60 days. Otherwise, it has a maximum duration of 60 days, after which it loses effect from the moment it is enacted.

³³ Misure urgenti di contrasto al disagio giovanile, alla povertà educativa e alla criminalità minorile, nonché per la sicurezza dei minori in ambito digitale., Decreto-legge No. 123 (2023, September 15). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 216, 4–12. https://www.sistemapenale.it/pdf_contenuti/1694988058_dl-1232023-caivano.pdf

authority lies with the Region and Province, through an apprenticeship program, or at a Provincial Center for Adult Education.

The aim of this system is that young people should not leave education and training without at least a minimum qualification to enter the labour market: an Upper Secondary School certificate or a professional qualification awarded on completion of vocational courses of at least 3 years' duration (International Standard Classification of Education – ISCED 3³⁴, European Qualifications Framework – EQF level 4³⁵).

Anyway, **obligation is certainly ambiguous**. Italian law provides penalties for parents or guardians not providing education to their children: article 731 of the Italian Criminal Code³⁶ punishes anyone who, vested with authority or entrusted with supervision over a minor, omits, without justifiable reason, to provide them with primary education. However, in 2010 it was eliminated the provision that allowed extending the scope of this offense to also cover the violation of the compulsory education of lower secondary school. This means **there are no penalties for failure to complete the compulsory schooling cycles**: students who reach the age of 16 may drop out of school with no qualifications just because they have completed 10 years of continuous schooling – even if they are still in the first cycle of education, or if they have repeated grade levels – because the obligation to stay in education no longer exists. This situation makes the obligation of obtaining a qualification a mere moral obligation.

It is also worth mentioning that while Legislative Decree no. 59 of 2004³⁷ **has effectively limited absences, it has also produced negative effects**: apart from the necessity to invest more resources in dealing with disengagement in in-class activities, it was interpreted by a considerable number of students as a legitimisation to manage school attendance according to criteria of personal convenience, being vigilant only to ensure that the number of days of absence does not exceed the prescribed threshold, thus in many the paradoxical effect of increasing the number of hours of absences of each student.

2.2.1 Procedures for prevention and recovery

³⁴ UNESCO. (2012). *International Standard Classification of Education - ISCED 2011*. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:International_standard_classification_of_education_\(ISCED\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:International_standard_classification_of_education_(ISCED))

³⁵ *The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) | Europass*. (n.d.). Europass | European Union. <https://europa.eu/europass/en/europass-tools/european-qualifications-framework?langcode=en>

³⁶ Codice penale, Regio decreto No. 1398 (2023) (Italia). <https://testolegge.com/codice-penale/articolo-731>

³⁷ Definizione delle norme generali relative alla scuola dell'infanzia e al primo ciclo dell'istruzione, a norma dell'articolo 1 della legge 28 marzo 2003, n. 53, Decreto legislativo No. 59 (2004, March 2). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 51. <https://archivio.pubblica.istruzione.it/riforma/allegati/dl190204.pdf>

The articles 111-114 of Legislative Decree No. 297 of 1994³⁸ regulate the matter of complying with compulsory education and entrust the task of overseeing compliance with this duty primarily to the Mayor. At the beginning of the school year, the Mayor sends the list of students subject to this obligation, along with the names of their parents or guardians, to the school directors. If, at the start of the school year, there are inconsistencies between the lists of minors and the actual attendees, the school requests that the list of non-compliant students be posted on the municipal notice board for one month. After this period, the Mayor warns the non-compliant person, urging them to comply with the law. If the situation does not change within one week of the warning, the Mayor may proceed to report the offense to the Public Prosecutor or a judicial police officer. This action applies to unexcused absences that constitute a violation of compulsory education.

In addition to the role of the Mayor, the responsibility for monitoring compliance with the obligation of education also falls on school directors, in accordance with Ministerial Decree No. 489 of December 13, 2001³⁹. They periodically verify the attendance of students throughout the school year and identify cases of both justified and unjustified absences. In the latter case, in the presence of students with repeated and unjustified absences, school directors, after consulting with the class councils⁴⁰, are required to take action. If these circumstances persist, school principals will involve municipal authorities to initiate specific procedures.

In the most serious cases, when the violation of compulsory education is repeated and unjustified, responsible individuals are sanctioned in accordance with the applicable laws on non-compliance with the duty of education and training. It goes without saying that sanctions to combat the phenomenon of school dropout are a last resort. In addition to the law punishing the violation of compulsory education, all efforts are made to promote the culture of education, so that compliance with compulsory education is not merely an obligation to avoid sanctions but a journey of growth undertaken with full awareness that will positively influence the individual's entire life. This choice is motivated, as previously seen, by the fact that school dropout, in addition to having economic implications, also has social implications. Indeed, young people who drop out of school prematurely are more likely to engage in deviant actions.

³⁸ Testo Unico delle disposizioni legislative vigenti in materia di istruzione, relative alle scuole di ogni ordine e grado, Decreto Legislativo No. 297 (1994, May 19) (Italia). *Gazzetta ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 115. <https://www.miur.gov.it/documents/20182/111723/Decreto+Legislativo+297-1994.pdf/6127918b-8dab-448f-a262-7f5fa6365edd?version=1.2&t=1495211786845>

³⁹ Regolamento concernente l'integrazione, a norma dell'articolo 1, comma 6 della legge 20 gennaio 1999, n. 9, delle norme relative alla vigilanza sull'adempimento dell'obbligo scolastico, Decreto No. 489 (2002, April 12) (Italia). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 86. https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/atto/serie_generale/caricaDettaglioAtto/originario?atto.dataPubblicazioneGazzetta=2002-04-12&atto.codiceRedazionale=002G0084

⁴⁰ The Class Council is an advisory and decision-making body that operates within a school and is composed of teachers and, in some cases, other school staff members. Its main purpose is to discuss and make decisions on matters related to the management and organization of the class and the progress of the students.

This is why the Local Police plays an important role, as it possesses a comprehensive and direct view of the territory and the presence of critical situations.

It is the responsibility of the Local Police to ascertain the causes of school dropout, in addition to their surveillance functions related to compliance with this obligation, adherence to school and career guidance actions, and all interventions against school dropout, prepared in collaboration with other institutions. In cases of repeated and unjustified absences, the Local Police are tasked with collecting information about the minor's family and social living conditions, allowing the Judicial Authority to take civil action to protect the minor when it is determined that the individual is morally or materially abandoned or placed in dangerous contexts.

The competent Juvenile Court at the territorial level will initiate the most appropriate investigations to determine parental capacity and the suitability of the family environment. If the court's investigation reveals a state of abandonment, the Local Police will be obliged to place the minor in a safe location, utilizing social services to find the most suitable placement. The Local Police will provide detailed and immediate reports to the Juvenile Court, which will proceed to both validate the removal and cancel it after conducting the necessary investigations. In these cases, the Local Police will autonomously decide on the methods and timing of intervention, keeping in mind that the duty magistrate is not authorized to intervene.

If the investigation reveals offenses in which the minor is a victim, the Local Police will compile a report for the Ordinary Court and take immediate protective measures for the minor's safety.

2.2 National Policies

To make an analysis of school-related interventions in Italy, it is inevitable to begin with the 1990s, because it was precisely in those years that the foundations for school autonomy were laid. The various interventions that followed were aimed at enabling appropriate and rapid responses to locally emerging needs, to provide schools with a leading role, claiming and obtaining appropriate resources and spaces of freedom. The implementation should have provided, even to the problem of school dropout, a new and different framework of analysis and intervention, both didactic and organisational.

Law 8 Agosto 1994, No. 496⁴¹

- **Level:** National Law

⁴¹ Conversione in legge, con modificazioni, del decreto-legge 10 giugno 1994, n. 370, recante interventi urgenti in materia di prevenzione e rimozione dei fenomeni di dispersione scolastica, Legge No. 496 (1994, August 12) (Italia). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 188. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/gu/1994/08/12/188/sg/pdf>

- **Year of Implementation:** 1994.
- **Fundamental Principles:** Known as the Framework Law for Lifelong Learning in Italy (in it.: *Legge-quadro per l'istruzione permanente in Italia*), it was enacted with the aim of promoting lifelong learning and the prevention of early leaving of education and training.
- **Proposed and Adopted Measures:**
 - Establishment of the Observatory for School Dropout t the Ministry to monitor, study, and address the phenomenon of school dropout in Italy. The main objective of the Observatory is to identify the underlying causes of school dropout, develop strategies and measures to counter it, and promote effective educational practices to prevent the phenomenon.
 - Psycho-pedagogical and Didactic-Educational Activities: The Observatory was responsible for promoting activities in schools to prevent school dropout. These activities aimed to identify and address students' difficulties, promoting targeted educational practices to enhance academic success.
 - Coordination with Schools: The Observatory had the role of coordinating school dropout prevention activities among schools. This was achieved through the planning and implementation of shared initiatives involving teaching and administrative staff.
 - Strengthening Lifelong Learning Actions: The law aimed to promote lifelong education, allowing individuals to acquire knowledge and skills throughout their lives. This approach aimed to counter school dropout by providing continuous learning opportunities, even for those who had prematurely left the educational path.
 - Inclusion and Equality: It emphasized the importance of promoting inclusion and equality in access to education. Through the Observatory and the activities envisaged by the law, efforts were made to create a more inclusive school environment to prevent dropout.
- **Characteristics and Processes behind the implementation:** The implementation of Law 496/94 required collaboration and coordination among various stakeholders, including educational institutions, local authorities, and community organizations. The law likely encouraged partnerships to ensure a comprehensive and holistic approach to preventing school dropout.

Decree of the President of the Republic (DPR) 10 October 1996. No. 567⁴²

- **Level:** Decree of the President of the Republic
- **Year of Implementation:** 1996.

⁴² Regolamento recante la disciplina delle iniziative complementari e delle attività integrative nelle istituzioni scolastiche, Decreto No. 567 (1996, November 5) (Italia). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 259. https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/atto/serie_generale/caricaDettaglioAtto/originario?atto.dataPubblicazioneGazzetta=1996-11-05&atto.codiceRedazionale=096G0589&elenco30giorni=false

- **Fundamental Principles:** It regulated complementary initiatives and supplementary activities within educational institutions aimed to provide students with extra-curricular and support opportunities that could contribute to their involvement, motivation and success in their education.
- **Proposed and Adopted Measures:**
 - Schools, within the scope of their autonomy, define, promote, and evaluate complementary and integrative initiatives for students, tailored to their age and maturity.
 - Creation of gathering spaces for young individuals, advocating for the utilization of equipped premises for extracurricular activities, allowing utilization on holidays and during summer breaks.
 - Schools' involvement in the cultural and social life of the community through collaborations with local authorities, associations, and projects.

Law 8 March 1997. No. 59, "Legge Bassanini"⁴³

- **Level:** National Law.
- **Year of Implementation:** 1997.
- **Fundamental Principles:** It originated from drives for the harmonisation and administrative unification of the apparatuses of the various EU member states. It was essentially aimed at giving the government the power to issue delegated decrees in order to develop a vast activity of innovation and reform of the entire Italian administrative system. It reformed the Italian school system by organising it on the basis of a network of educational institutions endowed with functional autonomy. It loosened the hierarchical relationship between the Ministry of Education and schools. The former kept hold of the general governance of the system, outlining general principles of education and establishing threshold performance levels besides defining the national curricula and managing financial and professional resources through its regional administrative offices. The latter were no longer seen as mere providers of a service, following central guidelines on administrative and curricular issues. School ceases to be the passive terminal of rules, circulars and regulations, and becomes a service delivery centre, a key player able to design and plan school paths, develop new methods and fulfil research and experimentation tasks. All this must of course take place in compliance with national and regional regulations.
- **Proposed and Adopted Measures:** New spaces of autonomy were opened up for schools. Firstly, they became entitled to outline the Annual Educational School Plan (in it.: *Piano Offerta Formativa* – POF), within which they can plan individual/distinctive school projects, define local curricular priorities and outline at least in part their internal organisation. Secondly, schools were

⁴³ Ripubblicazione del testo della legge 15 marzo 1997, n. 59, recante: "Delega al governo per il conferimento di funzioni e compiti alle regioni ed enti locali, per la riforma della pubblica amministrazione e per la semplificazione amministrativa", corredato delle relative note., Legge No. 59 (1997, April 29) (Italia). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 98. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1997/04/29/097A3158/sg>

strongly encouraged to build partnerships with other public and private actors, in order to pursue their educational mission. Partnerships were explicitly identified as a potential channel through which to gain public or private extra-resources and enrich the educational provision.

Decree of the President of the Republic (DPR) 8 March 1999. No. 275⁴⁴

- **Level:** Decree of the President of the Republic.
- **Year of Implementation:** 1999.
- **Fundamental Principles:** It regulates school autonomy as a 'guarantee of cultural pluralism, which is embodied in the design and implementation of interventions of education, training and instruction aimed at the development of the human person, adapted to the different contexts, the demands of families and the specific characteristics of the subjects involved'.
- **Proposed and Adopted Measures:** It grants schools four types of autonomy: teaching autonomy, organisational autonomy, research, experimentation and development autonomy, and financial autonomy (see Section 1.2.9 of this document).

Law 28 March 2003, No. 53 "Riforma Moratti"⁴⁵

- **Level:** National Law.
- **Year of Implementation:** 2003
- **Fundamental Principles:** Aimed to restructure and modernize the education system, addressing both the structure and duration of compulsory education. It adopts a model called 'demandist' (i.e. based on the expectations of the world of work), interactive (based on the ability to learn) and 'personalist' that placed educational institutions at the service of the individual, harmonising Italian schools with the common objectives of European training systems. The key principles that underpinned the Moratti Reform include accessibility, inclusivity, quality, and adaptability and is characterised by the principle of customisation: the centrality of the person in the educational process is reaffirmed and the educational offer is also differentiated in terms of content and methodology.
- **Proposed and Adopted Measures:**

⁴⁴ Regolamento recante norme in materia di autonomia delle istituzioni scolastiche, ai sensi dell'art. 21 della legge 15 marzo 1997, n. 59, Decreto No. 275 (1999, August 10) (Italia). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 186. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1999/08/10/099G0339/sg>

⁴⁵ Delega al Governo per la definizione delle norme generali sull'istruzione e dei livelli essenziali delle prestazioni in materia di istruzione e formazione professionale, Legge No. 53 (2003, April 2) (Italia). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 77. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2003/04/02/003G0065/sg>

- The entire education system is organised into two cycles: first second cycle. Primary school (ISCED 1) and lower secondary school (ISCED 2) ⁴⁶ are merged into a single school order. The primary school leaving examination that allowed the transition from primary school to lower secondary school is then abolished.
- School Autonomy: The law aimed to promote the autonomy of schools, giving them more control in the management of financial and decision-making resources. Schools would be able to set their own educational programmes, hire teaching and non-teaching staff, and manage funds more flexibly.
- Drawing up and implementation of Annual Educational School Plan (in it.: *Piano Offerta Formativa* – POF) by schools, which define in detail the educational, cultural and didactic activities offered. These plans must respond to students' needs, take into account their potential and promote the achievement of meaningful learning through innovative teaching approaches.
- With regard to subjects of study, since first year of primary school the teaching of a foreign (EU) language was introduced and the use of computers became compulsory. For these two aspects and for the school-to-work system – which provided working experiences for students over 15 years of age, planned by the school and evaluated as part of the study course – the reform was also known as the three 'i's': English (in it: *inglese*), Internet and enterprise (in it: *impresa*). In Lower Secondary School, a second foreign language was introduced for all classes.
- Evaluation of teachers and schools: More emphasis was introduced on evaluating the performance of teachers and schools. Procedures have been implemented to assess the effectiveness of teachers and school leaders in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning.
- **Characteristics and Processes behind the implementation:** The Italian education landscape underwent a significant transformation with the introduction of the "Moratti Reform." The reform has taken significant steps to establish a single education system educational system where *licei* and vocational education and training institutes had equal dignity, being certainly different in terms of curricula and methods but convergent in their aims, which tend to ensure the citizen lifelong learning. The implementation of the Moratti reform required the active involvement of schools in the decision-making process. Schools were to develop three-year development plans and implement measures to improve the effectiveness and quality of education. The implementation of the law required a system of constant monitoring and evaluation of schools and teachers; this included the use of performance indicators and quality standards to assess progress. In 2008, with the return to the Berlusconi government, the Moratti reform was shelved

⁴⁶ UNESCO. (2012). *International Standard Classification of Education - ISCED 2011*. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:International_standard_classification_of_education_\(ISCED\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:International_standard_classification_of_education_(ISCED))

because it was considered too costly in terms of investment and staffing, given the need to rationalise public spending, understood as staff reduction.

Legislative Decree 15 April 2005, No. 76⁴⁷

- **Level:** Legislative Decree.
- **Year of Implementation:** 2005.
- **Fundamental Principles:** Apart from ensuring the right and duty to education, the Decree regulates guidance interventions against early leaving of education. It states that students need to stay in education beyond the age of sixteen until the attainment of a qualification lasting at least three years by the age of eighteen.
- **Proposed and Adopted Measures:**
 - Actions for educational success and prevention of dropout: the Ministry of Education adopts guidelines for plans of orientation, prevention, and recovery from school dropout. Lower secondary schools may organise orientation and information initiatives aimed at ensuring the attainment of the final qualification.
 - Monitoring: The Ministry in cooperation with INVALSI shall annually monitor the state of implementation of this decree and every three years the Ministry shall submit to Parliament a report.

Law 27 December 2006, No. 296, Article 1, Paragraphs 605 and 622⁴⁸

- **Level:** National Law. Provisions for the creation of the annual and multiannual State budget (2007 Budget Law).
- **Year of Implementation:** 2006.
- **Proposed and Adopted Measures:** To enhance education effectiveness actions are established for:
 - a) revising class formation criteria to enhance autonomy and reduce student-teacher ratios;
 - b) identifying staff based on actual needs via collaboration among regions, school offices, health agencies, and certifications;

⁴⁷ Definizione delle norme generali sul diritto-dovere all'istruzione e alla formazione, a norma dell'articolo 2, comma 1, lettera c), della legge 28 marzo 2003, n. 53, Decreto legislativo No. 76 (2020, May 5) (Italia). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 103. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2005/05/05/005G0100/sg>

⁴⁸ Ripubblicazione del testo della legge 27 dicembre 2006, n. 296, recante: «Disposizioni per la formazione del bilancio annuale e pluriennale dello Stato (legge finanziaria 2007)», corredato delle relative note. (Legge pubblicata nel supplemento ordinario n. 244/L alla Gazzetta Ufficiale - serie generale - n. 299 del 27 dicembre 2006), Legge No. 296 (2007, January 11) (Italia). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 7. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2007/01/11/07A00183/sg>

- c) planning indefinite-term hiring of teachers and administrative personnel with monitoring and evaluation;
- d) tracking short-term substitutes and reducing absences;
- e) training primary school teachers for English teaching via intensive courses;
- f) improving vocational education by reducing weekly teaching hours, enhancing flexibility, professionalism, and territorial connection.

Also, in alignment with the general and specific learning objectives of the cycles of education, educational pathways and projects can be established through collaboration between the Ministry and regions, with the aim to prevent and address disengagement and drop out and to foster successful attainment of compulsory education.

- **Characteristics and Processes behind the implementation:** Although its main purpose was to establish the state budget and financial measures for the year 2007, this law was used to introduce various amendments and provisions in various areas, including education. In Italy it is common for budget laws to include provisions on various issues in addition to tax and financial matters.

Law 6 August 2008, No 133 “Riforma Gelmini”⁴⁹

- **Level:** National Law.
- **Year of Implementation:** 2008.
- **Fundamental Principles:**
 - Streamlining of Education Levels: The reform aimed to streamline the education system by reducing the number of years in primary and secondary education. It aimed to bring the Italian education system more in line with international standards.
 - Autonomy of Schools: The reform sought to increase the autonomy of individual schools, allowing them more control over curriculum design, teaching methods, and decision-making processes.
 - Merit-Based Hiring: The reform introduced a merit-based system for hiring and promoting teachers, with an emphasis on evaluating teachers' skills and performance.
 - Curriculum Changes: The reform introduced changes to the curriculum, including increased focus on core subjects such as Italian, mathematics, science, and foreign languages.

⁴⁹ Conversione in legge, con modificazioni, del decreto-legge 25 giugno 2008, n. 112, recante disposizioni urgenti per lo sviluppo economico, la semplificazione, la competitività, la stabilizzazione della finanza pubblica e la perequazione tributaria, Legge No. 133 (2008, August 21) (Italia). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 195. <https://www.parlamento.it/parlam/leggi/08133l.htm>

- **Proposed and Adopted Measures:** The national Invalsi test for Italian and mathematics is introduced in the final middle school exam."
- **Characteristics and Processes behind the implementation:** The reform was implemented gradually over a period of several years, with different components being phased in at different times.

Legislative Decree 12 September 2013, No 104 “Istruzione Riparte”⁵⁰

- **Level:** Decree-Law.
- **Year of Implementation:** 2013.
- **Fundamental Principles:** It addresses combating and preventing early leaving of education and training by strengthening learning from basic school.
- **Proposed and Adopted Measures:** Launch of an Integrative Education Programme for reinforcement of basic skills and individual teaching methods and the extension of the timetable for groups of pupils in the realities in which the phenomenon of abandonment and evasion of compulsory schooling is most prevalent, with particular attention to primary schools and the integration of foreign pupils.

Law 13 July 2015, No. 107 “Buona Scuola”⁵¹

- **Level:** National Law.
- **Year of Implementation:** 2015.
- **Fundamental Principles:** Aimed to fully implement school autonomy and enhance the educational offerings of schools, its main purpose was to introduce some elements, including flexibility in school organization and the possibility of receiving a (strengthened) staff.
- **Proposed and Adopted Measures:**
 - Three-year plan of educational offerings: every three years, schools are invited to develop a new plan for educational offerings that logically follows a careful evaluation of the improvement plan and their Self-Evaluation Report (in it.: *Rapporto di Auto-Valutazione – RAV*).
 - Introduction of the so-called "strengthened staff": however this measure was not based on schools' requests or proposed educational plans, but rather on the necessity to progressively exhaust all existing ranking lists in order to initiate new recruitments. Many

⁵⁰ Misure urgenti in materia di istruzione, università e ricerca, Decreto-Legge No.104 (2013, September 12) (Italia). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 2014. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2013/09/12/13G00147/sg>

⁵¹ Riforma del sistema nazionale di istruzione e formazione e delega per il riordino delle disposizioni legislative vigenti., Legge No. 107 (2015, July 15). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 162. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2015/07/15/15G00122/sg>

teachers were transferred to schools well into the school year, and additional subjects were introduced that might not have been requested by the schools.

- The law introduced a new system for recruiting teachers based on national competitions, aiming to bring in high-quality educators. This system included a new path for initial training consisting in a sort of three-year apprenticeship contract, including both training and actual work periods, designed for teachers to gain practical experience in preparation for their teaching profession.
- The law introduced the requirement for upper secondary students to spend a certain number of hours in practical training in companies ("alternanza scuola-lavoro"), in order to foster a better connection between education and the world of work.

Decree law 20 giugno 2017, No. 91, "Decreto Sud"⁵²

- **Level:** National Law.
- **Year of Implementation:** 2015.
- **Fundamental Principles:** Makes it possible to activate interventions aimed at networks of schools in agreement with local authorities, third sector subjects, territorial structures of the Italian National Olympic Committee, national sports federations, associated sports disciplines and sports promotion bodies or public educational services for children, in order to plan and implement two-year educational interventions in favour of minors in areas characterised by accentuated juvenile educational poverty and school dropout, as well as by a high rate of organised crime phenomena. Schools thus become the beating heart of the city communities and the place where it is possible to effectively combat juvenile educational poverty and school dropout in the areas covered by the decree, thanks to the synergy that can be activated with various public and private actors.

Next Generation EU and FUTURA "The School for tomorrow's Italy" [in it.: *La scuola per l'Italia di domani*]⁵³

FUTURA is the framework programme of actions for an innovative, sustainable, safe and inclusive school financed by national and European resources through the Next Generation Europe EU initiative (in Italy implemented through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan - PNRR 'Italia Domani'). Among the reforms envisaged for schools, the FUTURA programme identifies lines of investment concerning students' competences, equal opportunities and the reduction of territorial gaps, technical and vocational education, and the development of digital, multilingual and technical-scientific skills. In relation to early leaving of education and training, we specifically mention:

⁵² Disposizioni urgenti per la crescita economica nel Mezzogiorno., Decreto-Legge No. 91 (2017, June 20). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 141. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2017/06/20/17G00110/sg>

⁵³ FUTURA – LA SCUOLA PER L'ITALIA DI DOMANI. (n.d.). FUTURA – LA SCUOLA PER L'ITALIA DI DOMANI. <https://pnrr.istruzione.it/>

- **Full-time⁵⁴ and canteen extension⁵⁵ plan – Mission 4-C1 – Investment 1.2:** finances interventions targeted at increasing the educational offer and preventing school dropout through the extension of school hours; this involves a rethinking of the educational offer during the whole day and the introduction of activities aimed at strengthening students' transversal skills, as well as improvement of the overall school services.
- **Reducing territorial gaps – Mission 4-C1 – Investment 1.4⁵⁶:** finances interventions targeted at territorial contexts and customised to the needs of students, aimed at promoting educational success and combating school dropout. Particular attention will be paid to schools with the greatest difficulties in terms of performance.
 - Among the actions that can be activated are: individual mentoring and orientation paths for disadvantaged students, strengthening of basic skills and motivation, extracurricular training and workshop, school and professional guidance comprising family involvement, creation of teams for the prevention of dispersion, risk detection, planning and evaluation of interventions.
 - This measure also aims to encourage: networking experiences between schools and with the territories (projects can be developed through co-design and cooperation between the school and the local community), a better relationship between parents or guardians and teachers with opportunities for training and participation, integration between school and out-of-school by expanding educational time in all-day school spaces.

The schools, having autonomy, plan the overall activities deciding on which intervention they want to invest in, the format of activities, in compliance with the minimum standards laid down. Institutes may enter into network agreements with other schools, even those not financed by FUTURA, in order to extend their range of action.

Finally, mention should be made of **'M5C3 – Investment 1.3: Structured socio-educational interventions supporting the Third Sector to combat educational poverty in southern Italy'**⁵⁷ of the PNRR 'Italia Domani'. This investment supports the Third Sector by promoting the implementation of socio-educational and cultural interventions aimed at minors in the Regions of southern Italy. Third sector organisations play an important role in supporting and complement the public sector in the provision and innovation of basic services, particularly in the most fragile areas of southern Italy.

⁵⁴ *Estensione del tempo pieno – FUTURA.* (n.d.). FUTURA – LA SCUOLA PER L'ITALIA DI DOMANI. <https://pnrr.istruzione.it/competenze/estensione-del-tempo-pieno/>

⁵⁵ *Mense – FUTURA.* (n.d.). FUTURA – LA SCUOLA PER L'ITALIA DI DOMANI. <https://pnrr.istruzione.it/infrastrutture/mense/>

⁵⁶ *Riduzione dei divari territoriali – FUTURA.* (n.d.). FUTURA – LA SCUOLA PER L'ITALIA DI DOMANI. <https://pnrr.istruzione.it/competenze/riduzione-dei-divari-territoriali/>

⁵⁷ *Interventi socio-educativi strutturati per combattere la povertà educativa nel Mezzogiorno a sostegno del Terzo Settore – Italia Domani.* (n.d.). Home – Italia Domani – Portale PNRR. <https://www.italiadomani.gov.it/it/Interventi/investimenti/interventi-socio-educativi-strutturati-per-combattere-la-poverta-educativa-nel-mezzogiorno-a-sostegno-del-terzo-settore.html>

2.3 National Operational Programmes (in it.: *Programmi Operativi Nazionali – PON*)

Since 1994, educational institutions at all levels can benefit from specific seven-year National Operational Programmes financed by the European Structural Funds (namely the European Social Fund – ESF⁵⁸ and the European Regional Development Fund – ERDF⁵⁹, which are EU-funded initiatives, thus not burdening national public finances) to improve the effectiveness of the educational offer and the quality of school facilities, with a view to raising pupils' skill levels and reducing school dropout rates. The programme allows institutions to implement specific projects to compensate for their own contextual weaknesses that severely compromise service quality. The aim is to enable the full achievement of the common objectives of development, competitiveness, equity and cohesion defined at national and EU level.

Resources are allocated through public calls for funding to the entire national territory. However, while some PON target the entire national area, others only specific regions, all depending on their objective. It reflects the different intensity of the problems affecting the country's territorial areas:

- Less developed regions: Calabria, Campania, Sicily, Puglia and Basilicata;
- Transition Regions: Abruzzo, Molise, Sardinia;
- More developed regions: Val d'Aosta, Piemonte, Liguria, Lombardia, Veneto, Trentino Alto Adige, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Emilia Romagna, Tuscany, Marche, Umbria, Lazio.

The choice of intervening on more than one category of regions (less developed regions, transition regions, more developed regions) makes it possible to strengthen the impact and effectiveness of the intervention strategies, foreseeing uniform types of actions on the territory, but declined with a different intensity of intervention according to the distribution of resources among the three categories of regions, the needs expressed by the territories and the complementarity with the intervention choices and priorities adopted at a regional level.

The actors running PON projects are not only schools, but also companies and non-profit organisations. Beneficiaries of the projects may be students, teaching staff or administrative staff or external. The PON funded by the ESF may target also external people, such as young people, women, the long-term unemployed and those at risk of exclusion from the world of work.

PON 2000/2006 “School for Development” (in it.: “La Scuola per lo Sviluppo”)⁶⁰

This was the first National Operational Programme giving specific attention to the problem of school dropouts. Measure 3 ‘Prevention of school dropout’ allowed the implementation of

⁵⁸ *European Social Fund Plus*. (n.d.). European Commission. <https://ec.europa.eu/european-social-fund-plus/en>

⁵⁹ *Inforegio - European Regional Development Fund*. (n.d.). European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/funding/erdf_en

⁶⁰ *Sito PON Scuola - Fondi Strutturali - Programma Operativo Nazionale “La Scuola per lo Sviluppo”*. (n.d.). Home page. <https://archivio.pubblica.istruzione.it/fondistrutturali/documenti/docriferimento/progop.shtml>

initiatives and actions for the prevention and recovery of school dropout aimed at reducing social marginality, calibrated and differentiated according to the characteristics of the subjects and the conditions of social and cultural hardship of the family and the territorial contexts of reference.

- Action 3.1 – Prevention and recovery of school dropout of basic school pupils in areas with the highest risk of cultural and social exclusion;
- Action 3.2 a – Interventions for the prevention and recovery of school dropout of upper secondary school pupils and for the return of dropouts;
- Action 3.2 b – Interventions against school dropout and social discomfort to be implemented at the school dropout resource centres

PON 2007/2013 “Competences for Development” and “Learning Environments” (in it.: “Competenze per lo Sviluppo” and “Ambienti per l’Apprendimento”)⁶¹

The National Operational Programme 2007/2003 was meant to support specific and targeted planning in schools aimed at achieving:

- An in-depth study of the mechanisms of school failure and early leaving of education and training through appropriate field analyses and adequate detection tools so that counteracting actions could be improved. In this regard, the aim is to establish a close connection with the General Directorate for Information Systems of this Ministry, in order to make use of the information assets of the student registry and acquire monitoring data.
- An increase in the number of Resource Centres against early leaving of education and training, especially in the most disadvantaged areas.
- An increase in the attractiveness of schools, connected to a more active participation of students.

Schools were then encouraged to plan initiatives and interventions related to:

- the transition from Lower Secondary School to Second Cycle of Education.
- the involvement of families at all school levels, with training courses to make them aware of the work of the school, the study and problems of youth and the parental function in general.
- school orientation and reorientation paths.
- Induction activities: initial tutoring activities, information desks, orientation interviews with student and families.
- Student support activities: individualised pathways aimed at strengthening basic skills and/or the acquisition of a study method; psychological support and counselling conducted by external experts; peer-to-peer tutoring; activities for the integration of foreign students and the disabled.

⁶¹ PON - Fondi Strutturali Europei - 2007/2013 - Miur. (n.d.). Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito - Miur. https://www.istruzione.it/archivio/web/istruzione/pon/2007_2013.html

- Activities in the fields of drama, music, arts, multimedia languages to combine subject content with the informal and non-formal knowledge of young people.
- Legality education activities, as there is a link between demotivation to school and lack of citizenship and distrust in the institutions.

PON 2014/2020 “For the School – competences and learning environments” (in it.: “Per la Scuola – competenze e ambienti per l’apprendimento”)⁶²

The 2014/2020 National Operational Programme has contributed to the implementation of the EU 2020 strategy promoting a strategy for a profound revision and innovation of the educational processes aimed at effectively influencing skill levels and having an impact in terms of socio-cultural development and growth of the country. The main goals were: tackling school and training dropouts; strengthening pupils' key competences; professional development of teachers, strengthening adult skills; disseminating digital skills in schools; upgrading of school buildings; institutional capacity building. An additional objective 'Promoting overcoming the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and its social consequences and fostering a green, digital and resilient recovery of the economy' was added as a result of the allocation of additional resources from the Recovery assistance for cohesion and the territories of Europe (REACT-EU)⁶³.

School dropout and school performance were addressed mainly in 2 Actions, where the following initiatives could be funded:

- ACTION 10.1 “Reducing early education failure and early leaving of education and training”:
 - Interventions to support students characterised by particular vulnerabilities, including people with disabilities (tutoring and mentoring actions, educational support and counselling, integrative activities including sports activities, during extracurricular hours actions aimed at their families, etc.).
 - Second Chance Education
 - Training of teachers and trainers also on innovative approaches and methodologies for tackling school dropout and for the effective integration of specific targets in school life
 - Guidance, continuity and support actions for the choice of training paths
 - VET training paths, accompanied by communication actions and adaptation of the offer in coherence with the economic and entrepreneurial development guidelines of the territories in order to increase their attractiveness

⁶² PON - Il PON. (n.d.). Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito - Miur. <https://www.istruzione.it/pon/ilpon.html>

⁶³ REACT-EU. (n.d.). European Commission. https://commission.europa.eu/funding-tenders/find-funding/eu-funding-programmes/react-eu_en

- Reinforcement of the analyses on the school population and on the determinants of dropout, with reference to gender components, socio-cultural, economic and local contexts (also with declination at territorial level)
- ACTION 10.2 “Improvement of pupils' key competences”
 - Actions for the integration and enhancement of the basic subject areas (Italian language, foreign languages, mathematics, science, new technologies and new languages) with particular reference to the first and second cycle and also through on-line paths
- Training actions for teachers, school staff, trainers and staff, also in an international dimension, with particular regard to
 - methodological and disciplinary innovation
 - key and disciplinary competences
 - individualised learning
 - learning about assessment methodologies
 - competences for service quality and school management (also through pathways in other countries, summer schools, mobility, scholarships)
- Systemic actions for the definition of innovative models, contents and methodologies (also with declination at territorial level)

National Programme (PN) School and Skills (in it.: *Scuola e Competenze*) 2021 – 2027⁶⁴

It contributes to the achievement of Objective 4 of the Cohesion Policy, "A more social Europe"⁶⁵, by aiming to improve the quality, inclusiveness, effectiveness and labour market relevance of education and training systems; promote equal access to and completion of inclusive and quality education; and to enhance lifelong learning. As previous PONs, it is divided into four priorities, two of which include interventions related to early leaving of education and training and school performance:

- **Priority 1 - "School and Skills (ESF+)"**, aiming at improving the inclusiveness and effectiveness of education and training systems, promoting equal access and lifelong learning.
- **Priority 2 - "School and Skills Facilities (ERDF)"**, aiming to improve equal access to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning services through the development of accessible infrastructure, including by promoting the resilience of online and distance education and training.

⁶⁴ *Programma Nazionale 2021-2027*. (n.d.). Programma Nazionale 2021-2027. <https://pn20212027.istruzione.it/>

⁶⁵ *Inforegio - New Cohesion Policy*. (n.d.). European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/2021-2027_en

2.4 Regional policies

2.4.1 A Focus on Observatories against Early leaving of education and training

In Sicily, monitoring of early leaving of education and training is carried out through the system of Area Observatories: the organisational model is coordinated by the Regional School Office and has been operational for several years throughout the region. The model aims to emphasize the importance of the "context" both in determining school dropouts and, conversely, in the strategies for resolution that need to be implemented. This specifically entails viewing the school as a crucial "hub" within a necessary operational network that must be activated to prevent and address various school dropout phenomena.

The intention is to create an "operational" inter-institutional architecture against early school living, with all levels operationally intertwined: macro level (regional and provincial); meso level (micro-area: networks of neighbouring schools, districts and districts), micro level (individual school units and the micro-territory to which they belong). All levels are interrelated, in a constant interweaving of actions that allows for the optimisation of resources and the overcoming of constraint/obstacle situations, thanks to the involvement of the various institutional partners. This, also in order to provide guidance to the intervention policies of the various agencies, according to common objectives.

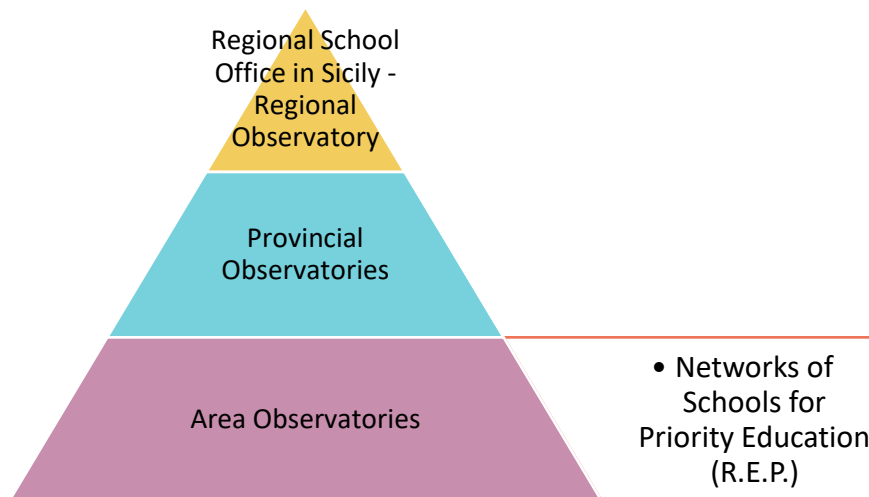


Figure 4 - Regional system of Area Observatories, developed by CESIE based on review, 2023

The Provincial Observatories

The provincial Observatories are made up of professional figures representing the various institutions in the territory: Ministry, territorial ambits, Local Authorities, Juvenile Court, Prosecutor's Office at the Juvenile Court, Juvenile Social Service Office of the Ministry of Justice, Juvenile Office of the Police Headquarters, Provincial Health Authority, School Trade Unions and

have the task of favouring and supporting the relationship between schools and the Authorities operating in the territory, in order to implement the maximum integration of interventions for the realisation of the educational and training offer.

Specific tasks are:

- drawing up a provincial plan to combat school dropout;
- identifying criteria for setting up networks of schools (Area Observatories) in territorial areas characterised by socio-economic-cultural hardship, risk of school dropout and juvenile deviance;
- monitor the phenomena of school dropout, also for the establishment/implementation of databases;
- to foster and support the relationship between schools and organisations operating in the territory;
- promote refresher and training courses for the operators of the various services involved in the fight against school dropout;
- promote and support inter-institutional initiatives aimed at protecting and preventing the abuse and/or mistreatment of minors.

The Area Observatories

The **Area Observatories** (38 in Sicily in September 2023) are located within a school institution selected by the Regional School Office and generally situated in the areas most affected by dropout. Area Observatories are supported by Territorial Psycho-pedagogical Operators (OPT - teachers utilized in projects aimed at addressing school dropout phenomena) and are made up of representatives of the institutions in the area, in particular:

- the school directors of the networked institutions;
- the Teachers used in psycho-pedagogical activities on networks of schools or on individual schools, or engaged, within the individual school institutions, in tasks supporting the prevention of phenomena related to school dropout;
- Representatives of the Local Authorities, and of the social-health services present in the territorial area;
- Representatives of the organised Voluntary work present in the territorial area;

in order to:

- prepare a network agreement including a map of resources to tackle the phenomena of school dropout and socio-educational discomfort in the area
- collect quantitative-qualitative data to monitor the needs of the socio-educational community and to rationally orient the development of actions;
- identifying and activating links with agencies that provide socio-medical and educational services;

- promote an "anti-dropout" culture, favouring the circulation of information and the involvement of pupils, parents or guardians and teachers in the area;
- identify priority intervention objectives and formulate integrated area plans that favour the implementation of networked interventions, also with reference to ERDF, National and Regional Operational Programmes funds, etc;
- maintain a systematic connection with the Provincial Observatory and promote initiatives to facilitate the educational success of all students;
- monitor and evaluate the planned ongoing interventions and, if necessary, reformulate the objectives and strategies on the basis of feed-back.

Area Observatories are organised by **Priority Education Networks (REP)**. REPs are configured as specific micro-networks for schools in the same territory identified for a high dropout rate which are responsible for conception and implementation of integrated intervention actions to reduce the risk area. They serve as the operational hub where the inter-institutional teams, comprised of professionals from various involved institutions, carry out their activities. In each area, there can be as many Priority Education Networks as needed based on territorial requirements (risk situations).

Territorial Psycho-pedagogical Operator

Territorial Psycho-pedagogical Operators (OPT) are 49 teachers whose assignment does not involve any additional or supplementary compensation. The staff engaged in territorial psycho-pedagogical activities are assigned to the school that serves as the Observatory's headquarters and the working hours amount to 36 hours per week. The OPT provides support to schools through various levels of intervention:

- **For each School Unit:** OPTs serve as resources that support change through engagement with all stakeholders involved in the development of the Educational Offer Plan and the School Self-Evaluation Report. They act as a bridge between the institutional entities in the area and the school in which they operate, aiming to establish and strengthen the necessary connection among School-Family-Community. They also encourage research and the development of methodological and educational innovation to prevent and address learning difficulties. Lastly, they support groups of teachers engaged in guidance and tutoring activities related to meeting compulsory educational obligations.
- **For the territory:** In relation to the territorial scope, teachers involved in psycho-pedagogical activities will facilitate the creation of networks of schools and inter-institutional networks.
- **Networks for Priority Education (REP):** The Coordinators of the Area Observatories, in collaboration with the School directors within the Area Observatory and the teachers engaged in psycho-pedagogical network activities, can activate Networks in their respective territories.

2.4.2 Regional Plan for preventing school dropout

A phase of the monitoring procedure, aimed at assessing the extent of school dropout in the area, is the list compiled by educational institutions containing all the data related to cases of non-compliance with compulsory education. This list is sent to the Municipalities, which, by the end of the school year, forward it to the Regional Education Office. Subsequently, by August 30 of the same year, the Regional Education Office provides the Region and the Province with the collected data. Once this information has been received, by September 30 of each year, a plan for preventing school dropout is developed. The plan is jointly prepared by the Municipality, the Region, the Province, and the Regional Education Office, and if necessary, with the involvement of public or private entities, primarily from the third sector. As for 2023-2024, the prevention plan set the following Guidelines on how to report early school leavers⁶⁶:

⁶⁶ Indicazioni sulle modalità di segnalazione degli alunni in situazione di dispersione scolastica (2023) (Regione Sicilia) (Italia). <https://www.usr.sicilia.it/indicazioni-sulle-modalita-di-segnalazione-degli-alunni-in-situazione-di-dispersione-scolastica/>

- **Non-schooling:** the situation of a minor who, despite being obliged to attend school, never enters the educational circuit and therefore is not known by the educational institution;

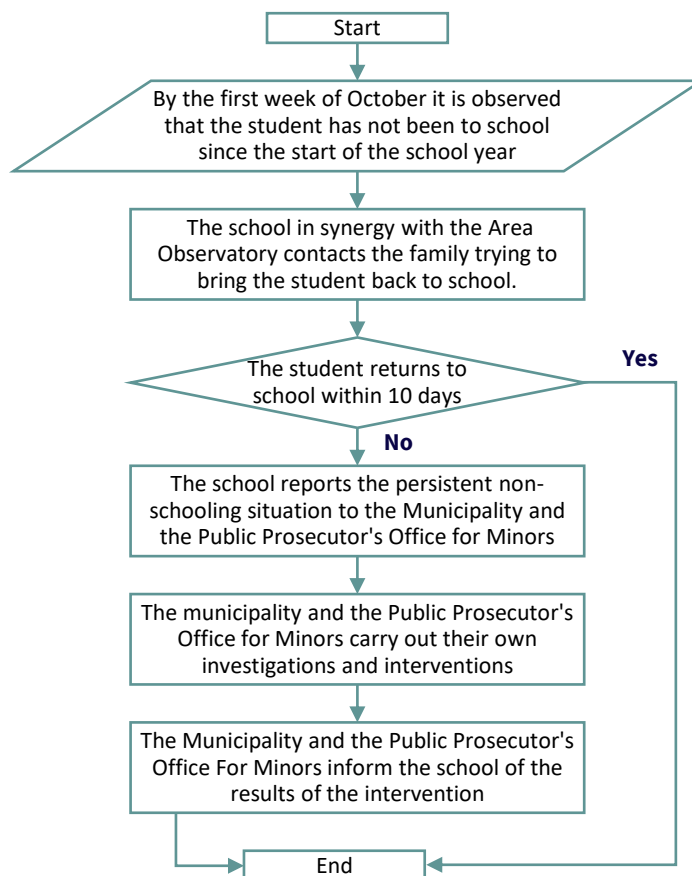


Figure 5 - Non-schooling reporting procedure, Source: Ufficio Scolastico Regionale per la Sicilia, 2023

- **Early dropout:** situation of the minor who, after having attended school for a certain school for a certain period, prematurely and arbitrarily interrupts attendance;

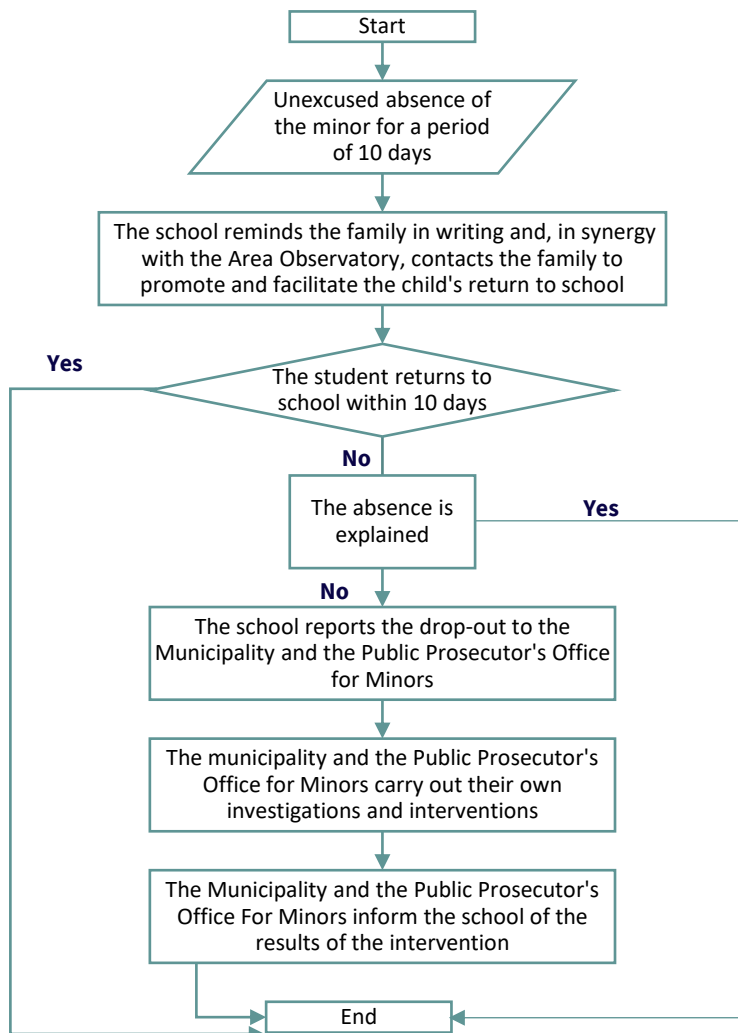


Figure 6 - Early dropout reporting procedure, Source: Ufficio Scolastico Regionale per la Sicilia, 2023

- **Irregular frequency or absenteeism:** situation of the minor who, although not abandoning school, attends irregularly, compromising the continuity of the educational process).

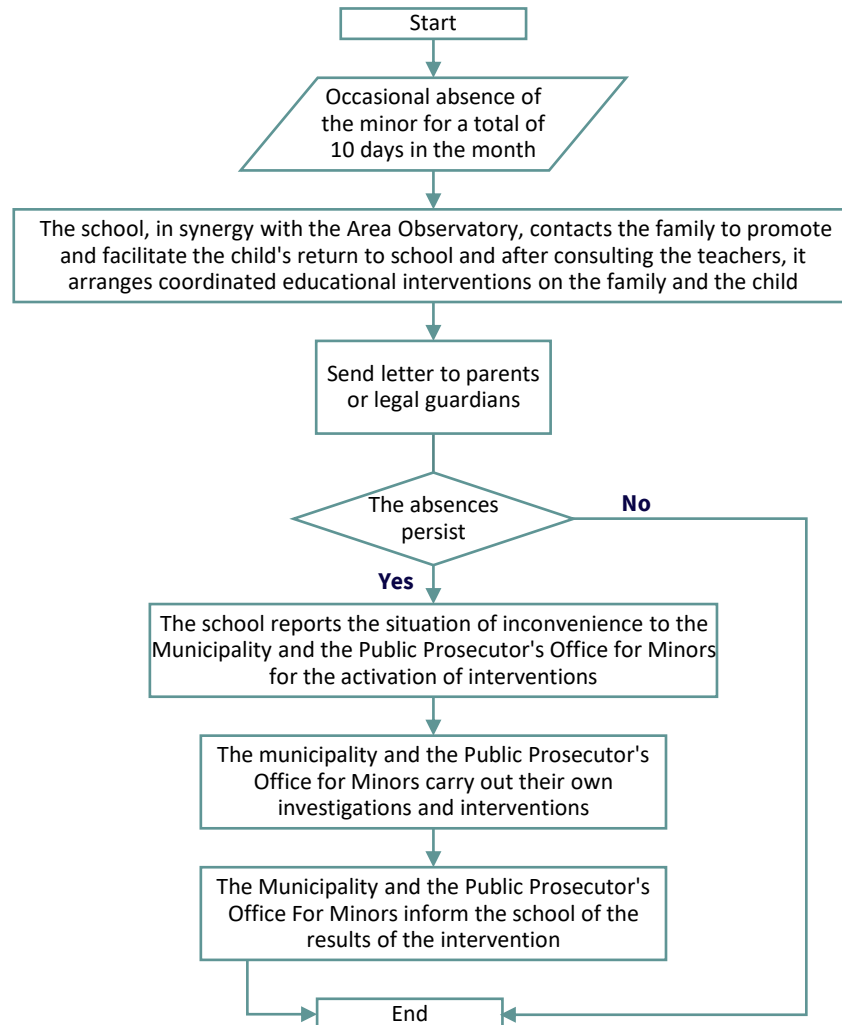


Figure 7 - Irregular frequency or absenteeism reporting procedure, Source: Ufficio Scolastico Regionale per la Sicilia, 2023

3.0 POLICY REVIEW

3.1 Policy Review as in academic literature

Early leaving of education and training and Underachievement have always been a persistent concern for the Italian Ministry of Education. The issue was further emphasized with the introduction of the Europe 2020 strategy, as Italy aimed to improve its position within the European Union. The cost and risks associated with increasing disparities among students and the relative competitiveness of Italy's human capital were clearly articulated as significant challenges at the beginning of the XXI century.

However, the focus national policies have had on autonomy of Educational Institutions – which potentially was supposed to provide appropriate and swift responses to locally emerging needs – has weakened the efforts, hindering effective interventions, precisely because of structural deficiencies and the way autonomy is implemented.

Underinvestment

To "provide quality, equitable and inclusive education and learning opportunities for all" (Goal 4 of Agenda 2030⁶⁷) requires, among other things, increased funding in education. It must be noted that up to the present day, education in Italy has experienced a significant lack in funds. Italy is, among European countries, the one that spends the least on education. Unrestricted funds⁶⁸ were progressively decreased in years 2006-2014, and then raised slightly in the last years, but still in 2021 public spending on education in Italy accounted for 4.1 percent of GDP, compared with an EU average of 4.8 percent. Even the funds coming from the Next Generation Europe EU initiative (in Italy implemented through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan – PNRR 'Italia Domani'), will be just over 6 billion additional per year, still too little compared to the figures achieved by other European countries. Once distributed, even these funds will become insufficient to solve the many problems that stem from the underfunding of education and non-structural.

⁶⁷ Goal 4 | Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (n.d.). Home | Sustainable Development. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>

⁶⁸ Educational institutions receive unrestricted funds for their regular teaching and administrative activities, or for project interventions; allocation depend on specific parameters, including: the number of pupils enrolled, the number of SEN students, the number of classes, etc. This funding system, has often been accused of favouring schools already advantaged, which attract more students, or have in-house staff with the necessary professional skills (particularly that of putting in place effective project design), further increasing inequalities and creating A and B schools.

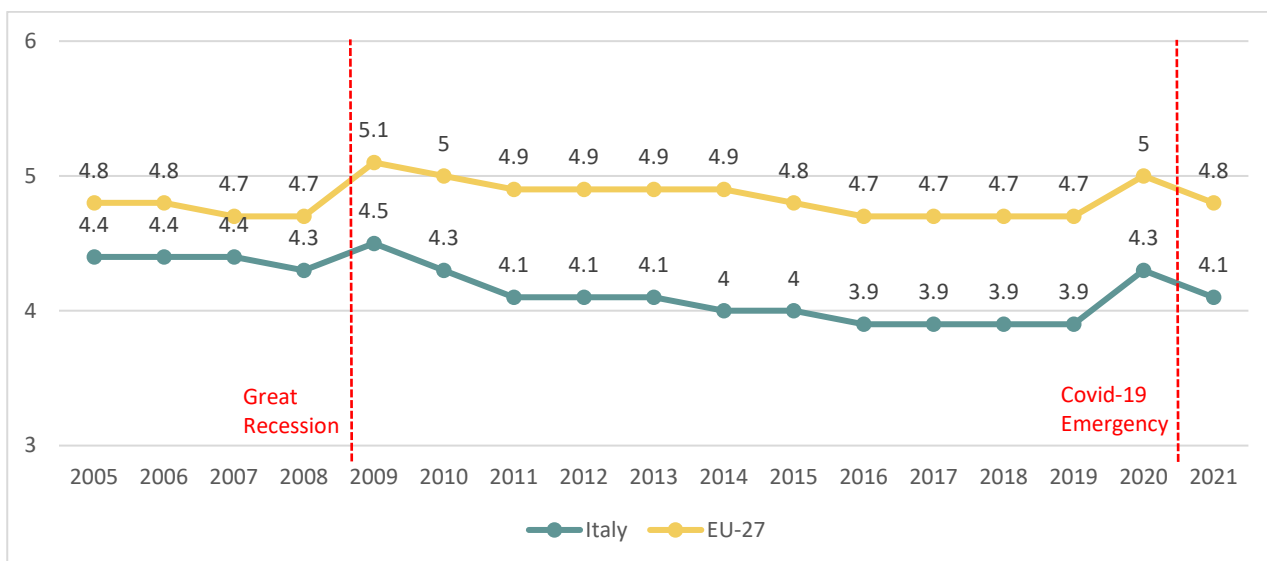


Figure 8 - Percentage of spending on education relative to GDP (2005-21) - Source: CESIE reprocessing openpolis data - With Children on Eurostat data, 2023

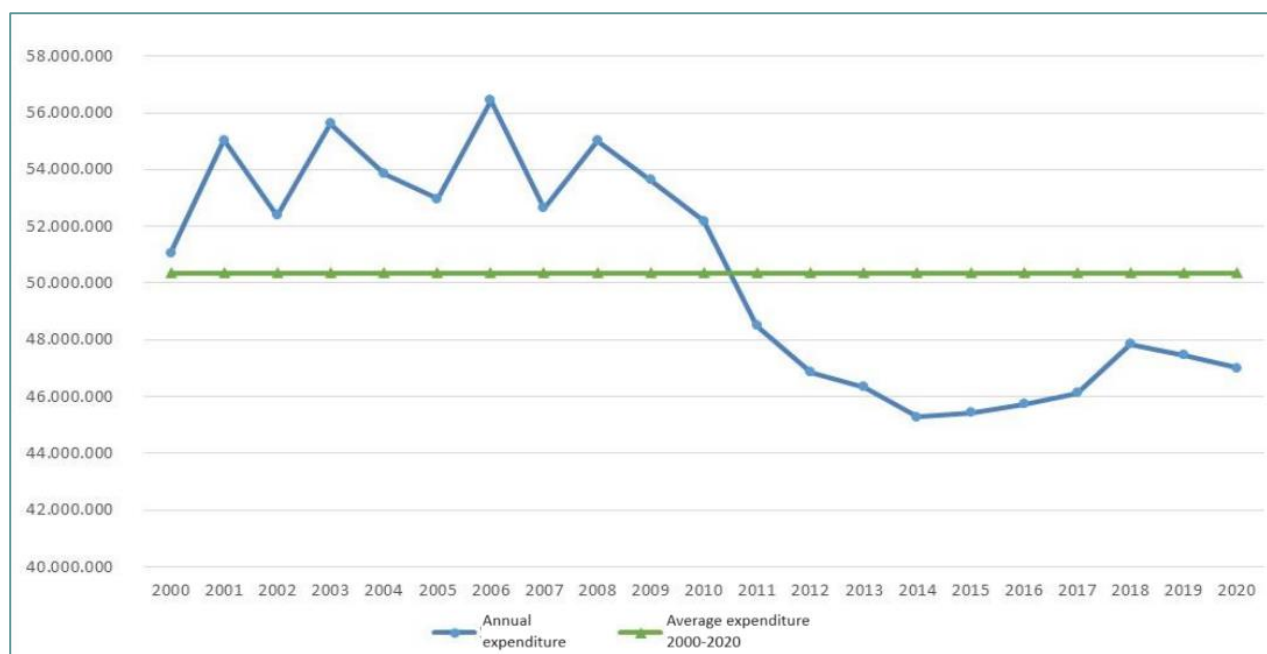


Figure 9 - Primary expenditure net of financial items in the Education sector - Italy years 2000-2020 (thousands of € in 2015 prices) - Source: elaborations on data from System of Territorial Public Accounts, 2023

A belated awareness of the phenomenon

Early leaving from Education and Training has never been addressed as structural priority, and for years it might have been considered an endemic issue, the price to pay for a democratic opening of education to all citizens.

Over time public policies have been inefficient they lacked a comprehensive and updated reading of the phenomenon of early leaving of education and training. In Italy, research on the phenomenon has traditionally focused on the rate of continuing education after lower

secondary school and the rate of completion of upper secondary school. This concept of early leaving of education and training has at least two limitations:

- it assumes as a reference population the target of individuals at least 18 years of age, so has no predictive value, in relation to the possibility of developing prevention and intervention policies on young people at risk while they are still within the educational cycles;
- it focuses on the outflow of young people from the educational system alone, without taking into account the many manifestations of the phenomenon, which can be traced back to:
 - overt or actual dropout: total unschooling (school evasion); dropout (permanent interruption of studies); repetition (failures); delays (temporary interruption)
 - covert or hidden dropout: loss of interest with increasingly low academic achievement; failure to attain adequate skills despite acquiring the final qualification for the educational cycle attended.

The result is that pending the creation of the nationwide student registry (mentioned in policies for a decade now but never fully implemented), where lists exist that identify drop-auth, these lists underestimate the phenomenon. That is very worrying given Italy's already poor records.

Decentralization of interventions and lack of strategic vision

The level at which policies to combat early leaving of education and training are implemented is the school. But despite the strong organisational autonomy of the institutions, the trend towards school autonomy has led to a very loose central steering system, which essentially works on two levels: the definition of major strategic objectives by the Italian Government and the practical implementation of these objectives falling on local authorities and educational institutions, with the predominance of a funding model where financial resources are made available to educational institutions on a project basis, leaving.

Educational institutions interventions outside the basic didactic and administrative needs are primarily financed through these national and regional calls for tender, often matched by European funds (such as PONs or new projects related to the Next Generation Europe EU initiative). This funding model often leads to measures structured around specific categories and types of action, where educational institutions have little or no ability to fully adapt planned expenditures to the most pressing needs and must remain "within the purposes and limits of the call for funding".

Also, the massive and regular use of European funds to support educational activities and to implement forms of countering early leaving of education and training is not an indicator of the centrality of the phenomenon's emergency to policy makers over the years and financial attention at the national level. European funds do not burden national public finances.

A phenomenon of such complexity would instead deserve more structurally oriented interventions and a change in pedagogical, cultural, and institutional perspective. Instead in

Italy the fight against early leaving of education and training is not the subject of a coordinated strategy by the public authorities, particularly the Ministry of Education. Policies against school dropout and underachievement in Italy have never formed an organized and comprehensive set of decisions and interventions. Rather the system favours small-scale and occasional interventions, based on the availability of additional funds.

Besides, it must not be underestimated the lack of coordination of educational policies implementation without other no less important policies related to social welfare, healthcare, youth work, juvenile delinquency prevention, employment.

However: non-convenience of fully implementing a top-down approach

Early leaving of education and training represents a very broad phenomenon affected by numerous variables related to three macro-areas: institutional, socioeconomic and child-specific contexts. When focusing analysis on Italian territories, the extent and characteristics of the phenomenon are very different, and such must therefore be the interventions to be implemented, making indeed the school level the most efficient one for implementation of policies to combat early leaving of education and training.

In studying the relationships between the phenomenon and the social, cultural and economic characteristics of young people's background, it appears evident how standardized policies would not fully work as well: the phenomenon requires knowledge of the territory and its dynamics, awareness of contextual factors, as well as of the background of each individual student. In short, flexibility. Planning and implementation of interventions should be done according to the needs of the school and its target community, native and non-native.

The previous in-depth point must be confirmed: the current arrangement of school autonomy and funding system does not allow for efficacy and efficiency of interventions. Instead of operating through multiple calls for funding, it would be better to proceed with “participatory planning” and the whole school approach, including those actors and stakeholders who, territory by territory, compose the “Educating Community” (in it.: *Comunità educante*).

A difficult impact assessment

The progress in reducing early leaving of education and training in Italy has been notable. Italy managed to decrease the early leaving of education and training rate to 11,5% (2022), showing an 13,6% decrease between 2000 and 2022.

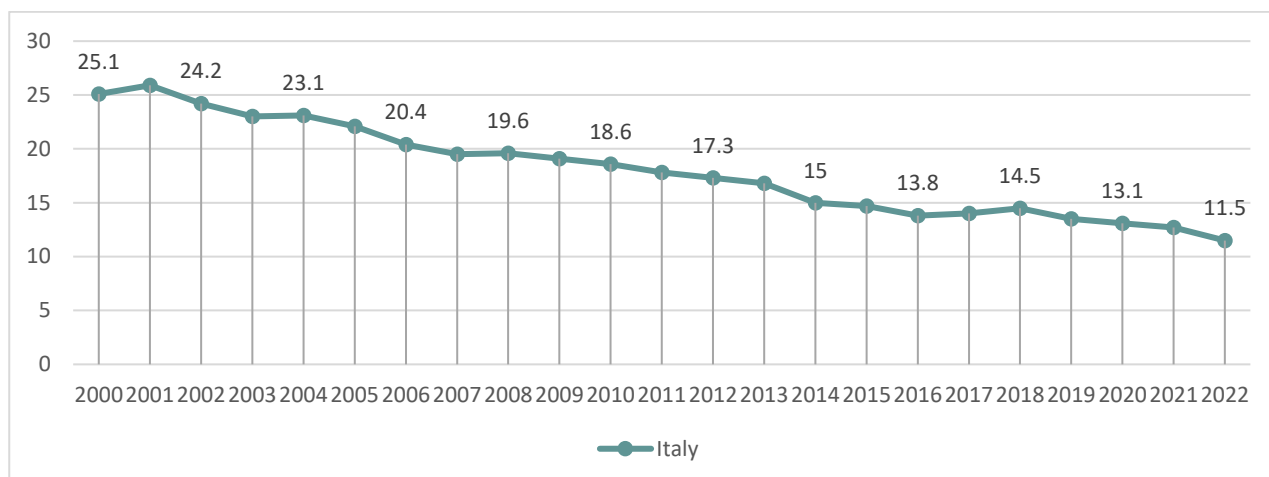


Figure 10 - Early leavers from education and training – Italy – Source of data: Eurostat (online data code: sdg_04_10), 2023

Despite the policies over the years, and despite the evidence that ‘something must have occurred’ to bring about such ESL rate reduction, the neat contribute of each single measure has been untested so far. At a national level there is none ascertained knowledge about what it has been done and how; how much has been spent and to obtain what results. There is a lack of definite publications that are not merely the result of estimates or sample local surveys.

In Italy, the cost-benefit assessments of these measures are rare and the evaluations of the outcome are more unique than rare; and even fewer are the follow-up studies on goals achievement. The studies carried out by the Ministry of Education and other authorities⁶⁹ repeat themselves in being statistical analyses and/or analyses of the nature of the phenomenon, without any impact assessment of previous policies in these analyses. This has to do with the widespread tendency in institutions not to consider cost-benefit assessments, evaluations of the outcome, impact assessment as relevant and a priority in the creation of strategies and planning. An impact evaluation would represent an extremely complex and expensive task because of the required collection of feedback on every single small-scale and occasional initiative implemented.

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3.2 Comparative Analysis of successful and less effective policies

3.2.1 Policy analysis in the light of european commission recommendations

It is thus generally hard to compute what has been put in place in Italy in terms of Prevention, Intervention and Compensation measures versus what has actually worked, given the huge fragmentation and diversification of projects and initiatives (according not only to the local scale of planning but also the episodic, unstable and unpredictable facets of funding).

Many funded projects have been implemented thanks to the participation of single establishments (or networks of institutes) in a wider project coordinated by the local municipality, or a third sector organization; other projects have been formulated and implemented by the school itself with the aid of private contributors; the projects supported by European funds (ESF, PON) have been intermediated by the Ministry of education, with periodical calls for projects, which strictly regulated both partnerships and cost, and the budget is distributed only if the school meets given requirements. As a result, at a national level there is no comprehensive knowledge of what it has been done and how and a comparative analysis is not feasible.

Prevention measures

The national policies of prevention, based on the so-called “preventive approach” have mainly focuses on compulsory education and legal control of school evasion. The enlargement of compulsory education (from 14 to 16 years of age), has shortly reduced dropout ratio. This is due also to the fact that, in line with EU indications, national strategies to combat early leaving of education and training have been geared above all to strengthening the vocational vocation of the vocational education and training system as a whole, through processes of reform of the education system, the empowerment of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector and the introduction of the dual system, aimed at strengthening the link between education, training and work. Vocational training, in fact, where it finds good conditions to function, does not constitute a second-choice training channel compared to the school system, but comes to represent an effective tool for combating dropout.

Intervention measures

As for intervention measures, there is a significant lack of responses at the policy level. Initiatives like targeted support for disadvantaged families and students, mentoring and personal tuition, alternative teaching and innovative educational methods, school-work alternation, etc., are left in the hands of educational establishments.

Compensation measures

In compensation, Italy has organised its interventions fundamentally along 2 axes: a greater articulation of the national education systems, and the strengthening of Vocational Education and Training (VET).

Beside VET, other measures to counter early leaving of education and training in Italy are the Provincial Centers for Adult Education (in it.: *Centri Provinciali per l'Istruzione degli Adulti* – CPIA)⁷⁰, the “evening school”⁷¹, and second-chance schools, but although they also play a crucial role in providing education and training to those wishing to complete their education or improve their skills, their role is perceived as more problem-solving in terms of reducing adult illiteracy (especially of migrants, refugees or asylum seekers) and the need to improve adult employability, than related to early leaving of education and training.

After a decade of experimentation and intense activity, second-chance schools are currently undergoing a downsizing phase, due to the scarcity and precariousness of funds, since the field has not been regulated and provided for in accordance with national legislation.

VET has, on the other hand, seen an increase in the number of trainees in the space of a few years, with a significant presence of those who have chosen it as a second chance after dropping out of secondary school. Over the time especially it has become the privileged way of re-engagement for many of those who have lived a previous drop out. Their function is dual: professionalisation (for those who have immediately made a vocational choice) and re-motivation for learning (for those who have come to vocational training after failing or leaving secondary school).

Guidance

⁷⁰ CPIAs, Provincial Centers for Adult Education, represent a particular type of public educational institution, intended for the adult population, in which they can enroll:

- adults who have not completed compulsory education;
- adults who are not in possession of the final qualification of the first cycle of education;
- those who have reached the age of 16 and are not in possession of the qualification concluding the first cycle of education;
- in some regions, those who have turned 15 can also enroll.

CPIAs play an active role in the realization of Lifelong Learning paths and in insertion or reintegration into the education and training pathway of young people and adults who have recently arrived in Italy (migrants, refugees, asylum seekers) or have dropped out or been expelled early from the school system. The compensation work carried out by these institutions has an educational, but also social and civic value.

⁷¹ Evening schools offer the opportunity not only to make up for lost years of study, but also to shorten the educational path. The courses can be attended by anyone who is a resident of Italy and holds a lower secondary school qualification and they are aimed mainly at working students (who are busy with their job during the day), but also at students who have dropped out of education and want to re-enter and get a qualification, or students who have gotten back by multiple failures in school. They can attend a conventional course of study or a more concentrated and flexible programs, with fewer subjects and fewer hours per week of classes.

In 2013, the European Commission highlighted school and career guidance as an effective measure to combat early leaving of education and training and urged that all countries have strong and well-developed guidance systems. Italy has identified guidance as a key element of policies to counter early leaving of education and training and underachievement. Guidance interventions are mostly implemented in the transition between school cycles and in the start-up phase of vocational training courses (e.g. alternance school-work and dual system, internships and apprenticeships and experiences abroad, start-up of the Youth Guarantee courses).

The systematic adoption of guidance as a transversal tool in the various measures (prevention, intervention and compensation) envisaged to counter the early leaving of education and training is still in progress. A report drawn up by the Ministry of Education underlines how orientation and reorientation procedures are still not widespread; there are few opportunities to realise widespread paths for Skills assessment and training needs and activate suitable study or training opportunities; also, there is little information about existing opportunities and resources that reach the recipients of interventions, especially the most fragile ones.

Whole School Approach

The “Educating Community” (in it.: *Comunità educante*) in Italy is a concept that emphasises the value of partnerships between schools, third sector organisations, public institutions, local authorities and other actors in the fight against early leaving of education and training. These multi-functional collaborations aim to create a comprehensive support network for students, addressing the various challenges that may hinder their educational pathway.

In the various Italian regions, the partnership is implemented in a more or less structured manner and animated by different actors depending on the types of actions implemented. The partnerships take the shape of “Community Educational Pacts” (in it.: *Patti Educativi di Comunità*), formal agreements between schools and other public and private entities to define the implementation aspects of educational and pedagogical projects also linked to territorial specificities and opportunities.

The purposes of these agreements are:

- To encourage the provision of other facilities or spaces, such as parks, theatres, libraries, archives, cinemas, museums, to carry out educational activities that complement traditional ones;
- to support school autonomies, taking into account the different conditions and criticalities of each one, in building collaborations with the various territorial actors that can contribute to the enrichment of the educational offer, identifying the aims, roles and tasks of each one on the basis of the available resources

It is an opportunity for community to be at the service of the School, not only to respond to the emergency needs of the moment, but to act vertically on other priorities such as educational poverty, dropping out of school, the lack of digital skills in schools.

However, despite the policy guidelines, there is no partnership decided at a strategic and centralised level. Local Authorities are entrusted with the task of promoting Community Educational Pacts through the organisation of special Services Conferences (in it.: *Conferenze di Servizi*), with the involvement of school directors, to bring out the needs expressed by schools and assess the cooperation proposals of educational and cultural institutions and the ways of implementing interventions and solutions. However, they are often built according to the activation of calls for tenders and/or regional operational programmes.

The Third Sector plays a more important role. Article 55 of the Italian Third Sector Code⁷² has been a landmark in strengthening the relationship between public bodies and the Third Sector, considering these organizations as "allies" in finding solutions to ensure citizens' rights and respond to their needs.

At the national level, particularly in the most fragile and peripheral areas of the country, the Third Sector's network plays a vital role in the field of education, contributing significantly to achieving Goal 4 concerning education in the Sustainable Development Goals. Approximately 80,000 organizations collaborate with public institutions in various contexts, providing support in areas such as youth distress, assistance to foreigners, socialization, disabilities, and even parental support, all factors contributing to school dropout or underachievement.

The actions of the Third Sector differ from those of the school system and do not always work in synergy. While school initiatives are often directly related to the incidence of early leaving of education and training in their institution, Third Sector organizations work independently of the dropout rate addressing cultural and socio-economic factors. This diversity of approaches is complementary and aims to cover a wide range of educational needs and challenges, thus creating a comprehensive and inclusive educational environment, addressing educational challenges comprehensively and effectively.

3.3 Policies, gaps and solutions

3.3.1 Gaps identified in existing policies

⁷² Codice del Terzo settore, a norma dell'articolo 1, comma 2, lettera b), della legge 6 giugno 2016, Decreto Legislativo No. 106 (2017, August 02). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, 179. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/dettaglio/codici/terzoSettore>

The gaps identified include incomplete data monitoring, a limited understanding of the phenomenon, inadequate strategic action, and the need for a broader, coordinated societal approach to address early leaving of education and training. These gaps highlight the need for comprehensive reforms in the education system.

Monitoring

- **Incomplete Data Registry:** The national registry of pupils was meant more than a decade ago, initiated in 2005 but remains incomplete. It appears the reason lies on the still inadequate digitalization of educational establishment (an issue which has been addressed by some of the policies mentioned in this Report and others not mentioned which would require a similar extensive analysis for being correctly presented to the reader). The absence of comprehensive data makes it challenging to monitor and understand the phenomenon, its causes and its different manifestations.
- **Need for performance data and long-term planning:** The performance data does not help understand whether various policy actions have produced any aggregated effects on reduction of early leaving of education and training (despite evident trends of improvement). Impact assessment data about policy implementation is important for more informed decisions about the continuation, modification, or termination of policies. Instead, a culture of learning and adaptation is still inexistent. This impacts the confidence on institutions.⁷³

Targeting

- **Conventional View of Early leaving of education and training:** Without understanding of the phenomenon, the prevention, intervention and compensation measures are thought and designed for limited categories of “at-risk students”, mainly related to the overt or actual dropout: total unschooling (school evasion); dropout (permanent interruption of studies); repetition (failures); delays (temporary interruption). This approach leaves out the covert or hidden dropout: loss of interest with increasingly low academic achievement; failure to attain adequate skills despite acquiring the final qualification for the educational cycle attended. The issue of underachievement is still poorly addressed by policies.
- **Alternative Paths:** Alternative pathways (VET, SCS, CPIAs, 'evening school') prove to be a valuable tool for compensating early leaving of education and training, but they too suffer from the lack of a national strategy, being the responsibility of the Italian regions. They also suffer from the lack of awareness and support students experience. Academic and career guidance are still

⁷³ Italy is renowned for its governmental instability, impacting the continuity of the policy framework for combating early leaving of education and training. The regular changes in the Ministry of Education are a recurring complaint because of the constant shifts in direction. Each new Minister initiate their own reform, which will bear their name and inevitably lead to a confrontation with students, teachers and their unions and political opposition of course. Ministerial instability is a strong indicator of the lack of persistence and continuity of educational policies. Over 30 years the average tenure of an Italian Minister of Education is less than 2 years. In such a context, it is difficult to establish continuity in objectives and means that would be conducive to a strong public action capable of structurally addressing Educational System issues.

not widespread enough at all educational levels and geographical areas of the country. The lack of information or resources can result in students feeling like dropping out is their only choice. Also, in some areas, there may be limited or inadequate alternative schooling options available, leaving students with few viable choices.

Fostering Social Responsibility Around Early leaving of education and training

- **Need for an empowerment of the “Educating Communities” (in it.: *Comunità educanti*):** Early leaving of education and training is not solely a problem of the education system or individual failure. It has broader societal implications, impacting social cohesion, competitiveness, and the overall future of the country. The Whole School Approach has set the direction but a lot more is to be done to formalise the integration of efforts of the “Educational Communities” so that educational institutes can benefit from the joint efforts of their stakeholders and community.

3.3.2 Recommendations for Policy approaches based on scientific evidence and research to address underachievement

- **Awareness of the emergency must be accompanied a broad perspective and a forward-looking vision** and by a willingness to take long-term and sustainable action. Not just a new law or an additional set of measures but **a serious political direction** based on a shared national pact that serves to recognize what is already working, supports the prospect of consolidating best practices, avoids pursuing and funding unnecessary initiatives, coordinates the many good national, regional, and local measures and actions, and outlines policies and operations tailored to different contexts.
- **A strong national plan supported by the entire community**, concerted with the stakeholders of society to be implemented through a national leadership and local hub for intervention coordination. A plan that is organic, articulated and integrated between the various responsible actors at all levels (the “Educating Communities”, in it.: *Comunità educanti*”), which could benefit from the availability of reliable and open information system to facilitate continuous monitoring of the phenomenon and ongoing processes and of a systematic evaluation of the outcomes and long-term impacts of policies and intervention projects, from the national level to the individual student. A system of political coherence is required, with full agreement from regions and municipalities, and strong oversight at central level.
- **Increase investment in making schools safer, more welcoming and inclusive**, promoting the educational institutions’ role as a full-time community education hubs offering diversified interventions for students and their families in collaboration with various local stakeholders. This could be done through the extension of school opening hours at all levels of education, possibly starting from the most deprived neighbourhoods and depopulated inland areas that have suffered from a lack of integrated services over the years. This requires tackling the age-old issue of territorial disparities that do not

allow schools to become garrisons of education, personal development, physical and mental wellbeing and civic engagement. Move away from tender-based spending logics or at least support educational institutions in accessing, managing, and reporting on prevention, intervention and compensation projects, through increase of pedagogical, organizational, and financial staff trained in project design and financial reporting regulations.

- **Developing a unified, continuous, transversal, and vertical curriculum** covering the educational journey of the students from their entry into preschool throughout their entire growth to adulthood. This curriculum should support personal and professional development, encompassing changes, transitions, milestones, challenges, difficulties, and accomplishments. The personalization of learning, active student engagement, and openness to the external world and its demands are, indeed, the only methods capable of ensuring a solid and lasting learning experience, the development of personal skills and aptitudes, reflection on errors, understanding of one's direction, and what one wishes to pursue. This level of intervention is to be applied to all students and can enhance the quality of educational action, permeating the classroom 'climate,' which has the potential to serve as a protective, engaging and motivating factor.
- **Increase investment in the 'instrumental figures'** dedicated to prevention and intervention against early leaving of education and training, as a coordination point for a multidisciplinary effort and experienced to support teachers in addressing the different Special Educational Needs (SEN).
- **Revise the guidance system with a lifelong perspective**, developing intervention and support strategies disseminated at all levels and specific to the most at-risk groups, focusing on providing support to students in gathering information, aiming for autonomy and self-regulation in decision-making. While adopting a 'vocational' approach (career counseling), this should not limit aspirations to pursue higher levels of education beyond the skills already acquired, thus acting against segregation and exclusion. This should be accompanied by the availability of specialized professional figures and competencies in educational institutions to support the work of teachers, such as guidance counselors, educators, psychologists, social workers, promoting integration between schools and local services (social, educational, socio-health, employment).

4.0 Key takeaways

The key takeaways from this Policy Review include:

- **Incomplete Data Monitoring and Limited Understanding of the phenomenon of early leaving of education and training were identified as gaps in existing policies in Italy:** this gap in information hinders the development of effective policies and interventions to address the issue.
- **There is a need for comprehensive reforms in the education system to address these gaps and improve strategic action.** These reforms should aim to properly set measures for prevention, intervention and compensation at all levels of intervention but also to improve the overall quality of education.
- **Tackling early leaving effectively requires a coordinated societal approach.** This means tailoring solutions to suit the specific needs of each territorial context. It involves collaboration between educational institutions, local authorities, community organizations, and families.
- **The Review emphasizes the importance of a strong national plan** supported by the entire community and implemented through a national leadership and national hub for intervention coordination. Such a coordinated effort can ensure a more systematic and effective response to early leaving.
- To address early leaving of education and training, **investments in making schools safer, more welcoming, and inclusive is crucial**, with a focus on extending school opening hours to provide a safe, engaging and supportive environment for students. Diversified interventions for students, their families, and the community as a whole can help create a positive and inclusive educational setting.
- **Efforts should be made to support teachers in deal with the challenges diversity of backgrounds and Special Educational Needs (SEN) brings into classroom:** teachers play a pivotal role in addressing early leaving of education and training, and they need to be supported in their role.
- **The availability of specialized professional figures and competencies in educational institutions next to teachers, such as guidance counselors, educators, mental health practitioners, project managers and social workers, is essential.** Asking teachers to wear multiple hats has proven to be an inefficient measure, increasing workload and mental stress of teachers. Multiple professionals can support the work of teachers, provide valuable resources, and promote integration between schools and local services.

Overall, the Policy Review highlights that addressing early leaving of education and training in Italy requires a multifaceted and comprehensive approach, involving data-driven policies, societal coordination, strong leadership, investments in school infrastructure, and support for both teachers and students. These key takeaways emphasize the need for systemic changes and collaborative efforts to ensure that all students have access to quality education and the support they require to succeed.

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REVIEW OF NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND/OR LOCAL POLICIES TO TACKLE EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING: ENGLAND

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This review will examine the policy context of early school leaving (ESL) and underachievement in England, UK. In this introduction we talk about how early school leaving is defined and discussed in the UK and provide some contextual information on some of the structures for policy making. We will also provide a brief overview of the UK government's policy of austerity which is having an impact on children's services at the same time as the level of child poverty in the UK has increased.

Whilst reducing rates of early school leaving (ESL) is embedded within European policy and a key ambition of the European Education Area (EEA) 2030 Strategic Framework (Council of the European Union, 2021), ESL as a term is rarely mentioned in the English context. English policy has focused on children missing education (CME), defined as children of compulsory school age who are not registered at a school or receiving suitable education otherwise than at a school (DfE, 1996), or young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). Additionally, focus is on attendance, with concerns around those who are 'persistently absent' (missing 10% or more of school sessions). Compulsory schooling happens between the ages of 5 and 16, with a further period of compulsory engagement in education or training up until 18.

The UK has no unified education policy, with the devolved governments in the 4 constituent countries of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland all establishing and enacting their own policies and programmes which vary widely. For this reason, we will primarily focus upon policy for England, but may refer to the other UK nations for comparative purposes.

In this review we will focus our attention on a range of areas of national policy relevant to the reduction of early school leaving. It is the UK government that has responsibility for education policy for England. Responsibility for implementing policy and carrying out the legal requirements of education is held in different ways at the level of local authorities and schools. The Council as an education authority has a duty to make arrangements for the provision of suitable education at school or otherwise for each child of school age who for reasons of illness, exclusion or otherwise would not receive it unless such arrangements were made. However, the powers of councils to influence educational practice in schools and to roll out bold educational policy have become very limited over the last decade. This is due to the cuts to councils from national austerity measures and from the change in school governance.

Decentralisation in England has provided regional policy making structures but education has largely remained at the level of the council. 11 combined authorities known as devolution deals are in place linking geographically connected councils and providing them additional powers,

funding led by an elected mayor. A combined authority (CA) is a legal body set up using national legislation that enables a group of two or more councils to collaborate and take /collective decisions across council boundaries. One in the region Newcastle University is situated is the North of Tyne authority, which will be expanding to become the North east Combined Authority. Transfer of powers, budgets and responsibilities to mayors has also happened through city deals. Whilst responsibility for children's education has largely remained at the level of schools and councils, all devolved agreements have included some aspect of influence over adult education. Devolution has largely been motivated by economic and industrial goals therefore the new combined authorities have been keen to influence skills as a key driver of economic growth and productivity. All devo deals have actually gone further than this with policies and actions in various aspects of education from early years through to adult education. However, their power and funding have been limited. Despite this there have been imaginative and effective projects. Therefore whilst most of this review will focus on national government policy, we will refer to some educational policy at the level of the combined authority.

There are different types of schools with different governance structures, duties and responsibilities. For example, many schools in England have become an 'academy', or alternatively a 'free school', which enables them to have greater autonomy over the curriculum and some other policies such as admissions. Other schools are maintained and supported by Local Authorities. There are specialist schools for children with the most severe needs, and a private schooling system whereby affluent parents can pay for an independent education for their child that is usually better resourced than state schooling and concentrates on academic success and transition to university study. All schools articulate and implement a range of policies from the way they apply government policies to their own initiatives. Given the number of schools in the UK it is beyond the scope of this review to refer in any comprehensive way to school policy. However we will refer to some specific school policies where particularly relevant in the ensuing sections of this review.

These various levels of policy making carry a range of affordances and challenges when it comes to reducing early school leaving and underachievement. We will make some reference to the structures for policy making as we discuss specific areas of policy. Generally, education policy during the last decade has shifted towards a concentration on school structures and governance, developing a core of knowledge, continuous testing, and punitive sanctions on the parents of those not attending school regularly.

There has been a policy of austerity, a campaign of budget cutting by the Conservative-led government, that began in 2010 in the aftermath of the global financial panic of 2008. This is mentioned from the start as part of the background to all other policy. Budgets for the National Health Service and education were stated to have been protected but investment in both has

fallen short of needs. Government spending was cut across the rest of society: police, road maintenance, libraries, courts, prisons, housing assistance for seniors. Local governments suffered a large fall in revenue and have consequently had to cut back many of their services. The austerity measures were reportedly imposed to eliminate budget deficits from what were stated to be unsustainable levels in the aftermath of the financial crisis. However, the Conservative Party leaders at the time presented a positive side to budget cuts, stating that the Big Society, grass-roots organizations, charities and private companies, would play a larger role in reviving communities and delivering public services more efficiently.

It remains the case, however, that child poverty has increased over the last decade. From falls of roughly 800,000 between 1998 and 2012, there has been an increase of 600,000 since 2012, following the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and the introduction of Universal Credit (still being rolled out), and the use of food banks almost doubled between 2013 and 2017. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has estimated that roughly two-thirds of children living in poverty have at least one parent who works.

We present in this review a range of policies pertinent to reducing ESL and provide critical analysis of these policies as they relate to prevention, intervention and compensation and whole school approaches. Our focus will be on policies at the national level but we will also describe actions at the local and regional levels.

2.0 POLICY/POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

In regard to policy for early school leaving (ESL) the main focus has been the NEET agenda. However, despite long held concern over young people not in education, employment or training, in contrast to other UK nations, England does not have a focused national strategy to directly address issues for the 16+ age group and provision varies widely (Maguire, 2021; Brown et al., 2022). There are policies concerning access to university education and the provision of training to the 16 plus age group.

There are many other policy areas that contribute to ESL. This includes policy in curriculum, academisation, early years, provision for children with special educational needs, pupil premium payments to schools for disadvantaged children and special payments as a response to Covid-19. This section briefly reports current policies plus in some cases the past policy context that has led to these policies. Further policy context will also be covered later, in the analysis section of this report.

2.1 Relevant curriculum

England has a national curriculum which was first introduced by the Education Reform Act 1988 defining four stages of compulsory education based on age groups (5-7, 8-11, 12-14, 15-16). For each stage, the law prescribed which core and foundation subjects would be taught, and set minimum achievement targets. The current iteration of national curriculum policy was introduced in 2014 and implemented from September 2016. All schools that are maintained by local authorities must teach specified programmes, but Academies have more freedom to set their own curricula. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) sets curriculum for children 5 and under.

Attainment is measured through Standardised Attainment Tests (SATs) at key stage 1 and 2 (approximately ages 7 and 11). KS1 tests are expected to become non statutory in 2023/24 school year, to be replaced by a reception baseline assessment (RBA), which became statutory in 2021. The RBA is administered at the point children start compulsory schooling (between ages 4 and 5). These tests are used to measure school performance, and the progress of children throughout their primary education. Schools are expected to ensure children meet and surpass national averages. KS3 progress is monitored through teacher assessments undertaken annually. KS4 attainment is measured by national examinations, primarily General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE's) in specific subjects at age 16.

Ofsted is the body that inspects schools, early years settings, further education settings and many other provisions. It uses a 4 point score from outstanding, good, requires improvement and inadequate. Judgements are made on: the quality of education; behaviour and attitudes, personal development; and leadership and management.

In terms of early years curriculum there is a Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) which sets the standards for promoting the learning, development and safety of children from birth to five years in Ofsted registered settings. The EYFS lays down the legal requirements that early years providers must meet, including:

- **learning and development requirements:** specific areas of learning and development which should shape the activities and experiences you offer
- **assessment requirements:** how you measure children's progress and feedback to parents or carers
- **safeguarding and welfare requirements:** what you must do to keep children safe and promote their welfare

2.2 Academisation

Academisation, proposed by the Academies Act 2010, is the process by which schools in England convert to academy status. Other schools set up by individuals or groups were called free

schools. It is a policy that was designed to give schools more autonomy in spending, teaching and organisation. By way of academisation, publicly funded schools are moved out of the control of local education authorities (municipalities) and into the control of private organisations called charitable trusts. These trusts can run multiple schools (referred to as multi-academy trusts MATS) and are free to choose what they teach without having to follow the National Curriculum. They have control over who they appoint as board members or teachers and how they spend their budget. Their budget comes directly from the Department for Education. They are not permitted to make a profit. By the beginning of 2022 nearly 7,000 schools, including 72 per cent of all secondary schools had been converted into academies, and conversion is ongoing. Originally this was a voluntary change made by schools. However, a large number of schools judged by the Ofsted inspection process to be underperforming have been forced to convert to academies and become part of a Trust.

Sponsor-led academies have been promoted by successive governments as a way to improve the educational achievement of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. As the academies programme has developed, policymakers have increasingly seen academy chains, and especially multi-academy trusts (MATs) as the best way of working to improve the performance of previously struggling schools and the educational outcomes of their (often) disadvantaged pupils.

2.3 Early Years

A government review of early years was carried out in July 2020 focusing on the 1001 critical days through pregnancy through to the age of two. As a result a vision set out action areas: seamless support for families; a welcoming hub for families; giving families the information they need an empowered workforce; continually improving the start for life offer; and leadership for change. In March 2021, the Family Hubs and Start for Life programme was launched into policy. This has led to the creation of a network of 75 family hubs that have funding for two years. They intend to improve access to a wide range of integrated support services for families with children aged 0-19. The family hubs and Start for Life programme is jointly overseen by the Department for Health and Social Care and the Department of Education. The aim is to provide wide-ranging support for those who need extra help to fulfil their potential. The Family Hubs bring together multiple organisations in a 'one stop shop' and encourage professionals to work together to make it easier to get help for families. They are likely to offer advice on a range of areas including infant feeding, mental health support, health visits and parenting classes. The hub itself may or may not be an entity or building – instead, it could be a network of different physical locations in the community, as well as online services. Family Hubs are for families with babies, children and young people from birth until they reach the age of 19 (or up to 25 for young people with special educational needs and disabilities).

Currently in England there is financial support for pre-school childcare. All 3 to 4-year-olds are entitled to get 570 free hours of childcare per year. This is usually taken as 15 hours a week for 38 weeks of the year, but parents can choose to take fewer hours over more weeks. Some 3 to 4-year-olds are eligible for 30 hours free childcare a week. There is also a 2-year-old offer for children in low-income families, or who are looked after by the local authority, disabled, or asylum seeking. The provision of free childcare for 2-year-olds was intended to enable these children to access the curriculum provided by the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework with the aim of reducing the gaps in attainment seen when children start school between these children and more advantaged children. From April 2024, the scheme will also cover two year olds, who'll get 15 hours a week of childcare. From September 2024, that 15 hours will extend to babies over nine months. Finally, by September 2025, all eligible families with kids aged nine months to four years old will get 30 hours of free childcare a week, 38 weeks a year. Parents are eligible if they work more than 16 hours a week and neither they nor their partner earns over £100,000. (There are some further criteria relating to immigration status and whether children live with their parents).

2.4 Supporting special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

SEND stands for special educational needs and disability. A child or young person has special educational needs and disabilities if they have a learning difficulty and/or a disability that means they need special health and education support. The SEND Code of Practice 2014 and the Children and Families Act 2014 give guidance to health and social care, education and local authorities in England and their aim is to make sure that children and young people with SEND are properly supported. This includes responsibilities placed on local authorities and schools and stipulations regarding Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs).

The purpose of an EHCP is to provide clear, structured support for any difficulties that the child or young person has. The EHCP will identify what a school must put in place to help the child or young person and the outcomes necessary to achieve it. An Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) is a legal document for an individual child or young person aged 0-25 years with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), which sets out a description of their educational, health and social care needs and the provision that must be implemented in order to help them. Professionals such as teachers and health professionals provide information for the assessment. If it is concluded that special educational provision is needed to meet a child's needs, the child will get an EHCP.

In March 2022 the British Sign Language Act 2022 was passed. This is a Bill to recognise British Sign Language as a language of England, Wales and Scotland; to require the Secretary of State to report on the promotion and facilitation of the use of British Sign Language by ministerial

government departments; and to require guidance to be issued in relation to British Sign Language. There are an estimated 87,000 BSL users in the UK. This bill gives Deaf people the same rights as other members of the public. It means that they can access information and services in BSL, and that their language will be respected and supported. It also means that BSL must be used in legal proceedings, education and Government.

2.5 Provisions for children living in economically disadvantaged families

In England indeed in all jurisdictions in the UK there has been national government policy over at least the last decade to close the attainment gap between rich and poor children. This was the main motivation for a number of policies over the last decade including the funding of a pupil premium to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children building on the provision of free school meals. Policy at regional and local level has also been strong on closing the gap. There have also been policies from combined authorities aiming to address the impact of economic disadvantage on children's attainment.

2.5.1 Free school meals

Free school meals are provided under the Education Act 1996, and for infants they are provided under the Children and Families Act, which came into force in March 2014. They ensure the most disadvantaged children in society receive a free and nutritious meal each day that they are in school, helping them to concentrate, learn and achieve. Children's families need to be in receipt of one or more of a set of eligible benefits (ie income support, income-based jobseeker's allowance and more) to receive a free school meal. Of the 8.4 million children in English state schools, 3.4 million are eligible to get a free meal at school each day during term-time, costing around £460 per year per child in 2022–23. The amount provided in a free school meal varies across England but is approximately £2.40 per meal. In England all children in reception, year one and year two are now guaranteed a free lunch (and sometimes milk) as part of the universal infant free school meals scheme. In some local authorities all children in primary schools are provided a free school meal regardless of parental income. London's mayor Sadiq Khan has announced free meals will be provided in all primary schools across London for the 2023/2024 academic year. It is a £130 million scheme which will fund free meals for 270,000 children who do not already receive free meals.

2.5.2 Pupil Premium

Pupil Premium Grant instigated in 2011 is a key component of current policy to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in state-funded schools in England. It is extra funding paid directly to schools for eligible children (those eligible for free school meals, or have been in the past 6 years, children looked after, or previously looked after, by local authorities

and children of military families). In the financial year 2023-24, pupil premium spending will increase to almost £2.9 billion. Funding per pupil ranges from £1455/ £1035 (primary/ secondary schools respectively) to £2530 for children who are looked after by the local authority.

Schools are directed to the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) which rates effectiveness of a range of approaches including high quality teaching, targeted academic support and interventions designed to address non-academic barriers. Schools are held accountable for how this funding is spent and are required to publish their pupil premium strategy on their website with evidence that funding meets the requirements of the grant as well as being accountable to the English inspectorate system, Ofsted, and school governors.

2.5.3 Catch-up premium: coronavirus (Covid-19) November 2020 and Recovery premium 2022

The UK government has made additional provision in England and Northern Ireland for time limited grants focused on pupils eligible for pupil premium or in specialist settings. This funding has focused on classroom learning and in particular on the provision of tutoring to enable children to catch up on learning they missed out on due to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions and address rising absence from school. There has been additional funding for state-funded schools (£145 for state school pupil, £290 for children in special schools) only for those eligible for the existing pupil premium (based on those receiving free school meals). This funding is to be used to support the quality of teaching such as staff professional development, provide targeted academic support, such as tutoring or deal with non-academic barriers to success in school, such as attendance, behaviour and social and emotional support.

A significant amount of the UK government funding for educational recovery went on the National Tutoring Programme. Through this programme, tutoring has been available either through a separate delivery partner or school-led tutoring. School led tutoring is where schools can hire tutors directly or use existing members of staff. In the early stages of this policy, the separate delivery partner received most of the funding.

2.5.4 Holiday activities and food programme

Since 2018 (pilot) and 2021 (roll-out), the UK government has provided funding to local authorities for a holiday activities and food programme. This aims to provide support to children in receipt of free school meals through holiday periods. This holiday provision is for school aged children from reception to year 11 (inclusive) who receive benefits-related free school meals. Local authorities are encouraged to make the holiday clubs available to any children not receiving free school meals who can pay to attend. The aim is to provide consistent and easily accessible enrichment activities, to cover more than just breakfast or lunch, to involve children (and parents) in food preparation and to use local partnerships and connections,

particularly with the voluntary and community organisation sector. Minimum provision is set out. For example, it is expected that for local authorities that have a summer holiday that spans 6 full calendar weeks, participating children should be offered at least 4 weeks of face-to-face provision, which cover a minimum of 16 days. There is also provision for easter holidays.

2.6 Specific policies for 16+ age group

There are a few policies that directly relate to the 16+ group, this includes raising the age of compulsory participation in education or training to 18, specific requirements related to young people with special educational needs or a disability, and policies directed at the kind of courses provided in further education. There are also a set of policies relating to higher education to do with its funding and quality that have implications for young people accessing university education.

2.6.1 Raising the age of compulsory participation

A modification to the Education and skills Act 2008 (DfE, 2008) legislated the raising of the age of compulsory participation in education or training for young people in England aged 17 years, who were required to finish the academic year in which they turn 17, from 2013, and from 2015 until their 18th birthday. Accompanying this legislation are broad duties on local authorities to 'encourage, enable and assist young people to participate in education or training' (DfE, 2016), including securing suitable provision and support for young people aged 13-19 and additionally for young people 20-25 with SEND (The Duty to Participate in Education or Training (Miscellaneous Provisions) Regulations, 2013). Local authorities are required to collect and record information about young people's engagement in education and training up to and including 17 and up to 25 years for those with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and to work with schools to identify young people who are in need of targeted support or at risk from not participating post-16 (including young people with SEND, those not in mainstream provision, attend Further Education colleges or alternative provision, in care or youth custody).

The Coalition Government abolished the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) in England, although it remains in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland; this weekly payment of around £30 supported young people (16-18 years) from low income families to stay in education and cover costs such as travel. The EMA was replaced in 2011 with the 16-19 Bursary Fund which provides direct support only to the most vulnerable groups (those in care or have recently local authority care or eligible for Universal Credit), with some limited further support available through schools. Every young person of school Year 11 and Year 12 is entitled to have an appropriate offer of education, employment or training. This offer needs to be in place by the end of the September when they would enter Year 12 or Year 13. This is called the September Guarantee.

2.6.2 Post 16 qualifications

For young people remaining in full time education, options include studying for A Levels (subject specific academic study, most commonly used to access University study), T Levels (new qualifications designed with employers, further information below), technical and vocational qualifications (for particular jobs or sectors), applied qualifications (broad overview of a specific sector) or exam retakes.

For those wanting to combine employment and study, apprenticeships have a long history in England (Hogarth, Gambin, and Hasluck, 2012) and offer practical training whilst in employment with dedicated time for study related to the role (typically around 20% of working hours). There are a number of different levels obtainable within apprenticeships, ranging from Level 2 (GCSE equivalent, level typically taken at 16 yrs) to Levels 6 and 7 (Bachelor's and Master's degree levels). There are minimum requirements for apprenticeships in terms of what is offered and apprenticeship standards developed by 'trailblazer' groups (representing groups of employers and sector organisations); these standards replaced apprenticeship frameworks phased out since 2017/18. An apprenticeship levy was introduced in 2017 for all UK employers with a pay bill over £3 million annually, this levy is paid into an apprenticeship service account with funds spent on apprenticeship training and assessment. Employers' groups have criticised the inflexibility of the fund, which can lead to losing unspent funds, with new apprenticeships substantially falling since the introduction of the levy (Financial Times, 2019). In response to criticism, the government has made some adjustments to requirements, however, new apprenticeship starts remain substantially lower than pre-levy figures. Alternative in work options for 16+ include traineeships (introduced in 2013 and designed to lead to an apprenticeship or employment), supported internships (for young people with SEND) or school leaver schemes (with large companies, similar to graduate recruitment schemes).

Degree apprenticeships introduced in 2014 offer an alternative to a traditional 3-year degree, or masters degree, with apprentices earning a salary and avoiding paying tuition fees.

T Level Qualifications

T Levels were launched in September 2020, and are two-year courses that are intended to be equivalent to the existing system of three A-Levels and have been developed in collaboration with employers. A-levels are a college or sixth form leaving qualification offered in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, introduced in England and Wales in 1951. The A-level, with students taking from 2-4 subjects over 2 years, permits students to have potential access to university if their grade is of satisfactory quality. There are currently 16 T-Levels available nationally, with a current aim to have 24 in total. T-Levels are seen to be a distinct opportunity to apprenticeships, which are predominately employment based, whilst T-Levels are largely classroom based but with a substantial industry placement of at least 315 hours (approximately 45 days or nine

weeks). There is also a T-Level transition programme available, of one year post GCSE study. Funding has been allocated for providers, delivery and capital funding, and funding for other vocational courses in England is being reviewed and gradually withdrawn.

The Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022 (DfE, 2022) act claims to be transforming the post 16 education landscape to enable people to train to get necessary skills for successful and rewarding employment and careers. It includes: legal requirement for colleges and providers to work with local employers to develop skills plans; changes to the student loans system from 2025 to enable learners to access a flexible loan for higher-level education and training; new powers to intervene when colleges are underperforming on outcomes; ensuring that all school pupils meet providers of technical education so that apprenticeships, T Levels and traineeships are promoted alongside A Levels; and prioritisation of green skills training.

2.6.3 Higher Education (HE) Policy

In England, the main focus of educational policy for 16–18-year-olds has been to create a more sustainable HE sector and creating a process to ensure high quality learning. The 2010 government believed the way to do this was by making institutions compete to attract students and the funding they bring with them. Therefore, they created a new funding system for HE where graduates contribute more towards their education. Until 1998, full-time students in England could attend public universities completely free of charge. Two decades later, most public universities in England now charge £9,250 per year.

The Higher Education Act 2004 enabled universities to set their own tuition fees, known as ‘variable tuition costs’. They were introduced from academic year 2006 to 2007. The Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998 gives the Secretary of State power to make annual regulations setting out the support available to students going into higher education, and how and when student loans will be repaid. Since academic year 2006 to 2007 a loan to cover the full cost of tuition has been available to eligible students studying at publicly funded providers, which is repaid only after the student has secured employment. This means that no eligible student is required to pay for their tuition up front. There are a number of partner organisations that administer student grants and loans, runs a student complain scheme, assures standards and improves the quality of higher education, and promotes fair access to higher education by monitoring ‘access agreements’.

The Office for Students (the university regulatory body) now requires all universities to have an Access and Participation Plan in order to be able to charge the maximum fee amount, which outlines how they will remove gaps in access and outcomes for particular groups of students who have been traditionally disadvantaged in some way. Universities are expected to fund and provide initiatives and interventions as part of this plan and evaluate their success. The Higher

Education Funding Council for England (a non-departmental funding body responsible for distributing HE funding) distributed £90m between 2016 and 2018 to enable 29 consortia in local areas of England to improve progression to HE (the National Collaborative Outreach Project).

2.6.4 Activities to develop confidence and skills for post 16 years.

The then Prime Minister instigated in 2011 the National Citizens Service (NCS), piloted in 2011 and 2012 and then rolled out. It is a voluntary personal and social development program for 16–17 year olds in England and Northern Ireland, funded largely by money from the UK Government. A Trust was set up in 2013 to manage NCS outside of government. It largely operates by awarding funding to bodies (mostly NGOs working with young people including outward bound organisations) that bid to be able to deliver their own versions of the NCS programmes. It started with a one- to-two-week residential experience within a four-week programme.

2.7 Integration of newly arrived migrant children

Every child and young person in the UK has the right to get an education. This means that children can go to school or college as an asylum seeker or refugee or if they have an asylum claim that has not been accepted. These rights are protected by The Children Act 1989, The Human Rights Act 1998 and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Asylum seeking children may also have recourse to Social Care support where they do not have sufficient food, heating or clothing. In principle, children should not be detained (according to UNHCR in 2012) but 128 children entered detention in 2014.

Children who have arrived in the UK alone are looked after by children's services in the same way as other looked-after children, under Section 20 of The Children Act. In 2015, 2,168 asylum applications were made by separated children.

3.0 POLICY REVIEW

In this section we return relatively briefly to each policy area to summarise what research says about the success or failure of the policy with respect to tackling underachievement and/or ESL and the social impact of the policy.

3.1 Relevant curriculum

The impact of the combination of a national curriculum, Ofsted, and testing that is high stakes at all ages for children, young people and schools has led in some schools to a narrowing of the curriculum and teaching 'to the test'. There are fewer schools offering diverse languages and more reduction in the curriculum time for arts and creative subjects (Ashton and Ashton 2021)

and the curriculum has been described by some as no longer suited to the needs of an inclusive multi-cultural society but rather reflecting the ideologies of particular governments (Tomlinson 2023). Even the emphasis on core subjects has been critiqued for advocating curricula (and prescribed pedagogies) lacking in a robust evidence base, leading to a decline in mastery (Wyse and Bradbury 2022).

The Department for Education regulates and funds initial teacher training and leadership training for head teachers. Schools and in particular multi-academy trusts take on the continuing professional development of teachers. Prior to the advent of austerity, local education officers provided much ongoing professional development for a wide range of school professionals. However, they now provide very little training.

Schools are expected to reach and surpass the national average (mathematically impossible for all to do this) or face highly negative consequences including forced academisation that often means headteachers and school governors losing job/roles. Teachers are leaving the profession, largely due to stress of high workloads and increased accountability and performativity - one headteacher took her own life in 2023 due to the Ofsted inspection regime (Perryman and Calvert 2020).

At the same time and perhaps as a consequence of the points above there is a flourishing in a minority of schools of curricular alternatives that have not been driven by policy (Parker and Leat 2021). This includes enquiry-based curriculum, forest schools, outdoor classrooms and curriculum.

UK early years curriculum policy from the 60's into the 80's and 90's focused on the whole child, play, talk, flexibility in the curriculum, and the use of the environment. The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project (1997 – 2003) found that the highest quality provision was in maintained nursery schools and Children's Centres based on nursery schools. However there had always been a lack of investment in early years especially in pre-school childcare and in teacher qualifications.

3.2 Academisation

One of the aims of academisation was to improve the educational achievement of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, the process of conversion from local authority schools to academies has been a hugely varied experience. For many schools it has brought them the further funding and greater control that they welcomed. For many other schools forced academisation has led to protests by parents, teacher strikes, and legal challenges and it has been claimed that academies are failing to connect with the local communities they serve (Baxter and Cornforth 2021). Often when forced academisation occurs there is a change in school

leadership and sometimes many other aspects of the school (uniform, structure, school rules and behaviour/ reward systems). Academisation involves moving control of state schools to organisations that are not part of the state and can be in thrall to the values and motivations of single trust managers or CEOs leaving them vulnerable (Simon, James & Simon 2019). While these companies are not allowed to make a profit, their spending, particularly on pay for senior managers, has been controversial and often very high. There have been many examples of possible conflict of interests over governance in terms of the use of funding and with multi-academy trusts (MATs) seeming to have greater access to central government than do local authorities and more likely to have a government minister as a trustee. Although academy trusts should publish the content of their curriculum this is not a requirement. There is little transparency regarding expenditure and procurement.

For academies, the responsibility for Continuous Professional Development (CPD) and continuous education for staff has been moved away from local authorities and is now dependent on what the school or the Multi-academy Trust can provide. This has led to a greater unevenness in professional training for teachers, and variable quality assurance processes, with many school staff receiving very little CPD. Grants for teachers to complete M-level programmes and funding for teacher-driven action research projects have largely disappeared, although there is still funding for school leadership.

Sponsored academies are more likely than other schools to decrease their population of children with SEND and consequently remove support for them (Lui et al 2020). There are also higher exclusion rates for disadvantaged pupils from academies (Gorard 2014). This is being remedied in many local authorities with the creation of boards that bring together all types of schools to plan SEND and exclusion destinations at a local level based on collaborative agreements.

There is no evidence to support the claim that academies are able to secure higher educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. In 2017 the Sutton Trust (Chain Effects report) found that in 12 out of 58 chains disadvantaged pupils had attainment above the national average for all mainstream schools, including three chains which were substantially above that average. However, 38 of the 58 had attainment below the mainstream average, including 8 which were well below average. This mainstream average for disadvantaged pupils is precisely what the sponsored academies programme was envisaged to outperform.

The 2017 results suggest that overall, sponsored academy chains are beginning to improve in relation to national figures. It is important that they have a period of stability to bed in the curriculum changes that they have had to make, and that during this period they have sufficient funding to do this. But it remains the case that there is a huge disparity among the chains. A small number continue to achieve impressive outcomes for their disadvantaged students against a

range of measures, demonstrating the transformational impact on life chances that can be made.

A larger group of low-performing chains are achieving results that are not improving and may be harming the prospects of their disadvantaged students. There is little evidence that sufficient action is being taken to enable these chains to improve, or that the considerable knowledge base about how to improve struggling schools is being effectively passed on to new and underperforming chains. There have been repeated calls for opportunities to be created for school groups to learn from each other. In 2023, now that so many more schools are academies, different kinds of analyses will be needed to look at what is happening within different MATS.

3.3 Early Years Policy Evaluation

In England pre-school care is increasingly unaffordable for most parents and particularly those with low incomes. The provision of free hours of childcare has not addressed this problem since the amounts given in the government vouchers is often not sufficient for the costs of pre-school providers who ask for top-ups from families that many cannot pay. Government funding for pre-school vouchers has not been enough to fund the family support services that many pre-school providers were offering with the result that many of these have been cut. The recent Family Hubs policy will go some way to ameliorate this, but the hubs funding is not on the same scale as the previous SureStart centre policy. They only have funding for 2 years which means that provision will barely have started. However, some high-quality interventions are being implemented in family hubs such as video interaction guidance, an approach that supports families, and this is a good move in the right direction. The HUBS are also offering other interventions triple P baby and circle of security. These are in the right direction but once again need long-term implementation.

Family Hubs have a precedent in the SureStart initiative which was the result of a cross cutting review of services for young children which focused on the importance of the early years for child development and highlighted the problems of multiple disadvantage for young children, the variation in quality of services for children and families, and the need for community based programmes of early intervention. £452m was spent mostly on setting up and running new SureStart centres in England between 1999 and 2002. Sure Start was particularly encouraging as an initiative was to bring together health, education, and welfare services for 0–3 year olds in a coordinated way.

In the new millenium the Department for Education and Skills (which became known in 2007 as the Department for Children, Schools and Families) issued a lot of guidance including the development of ‘Sure Start’ centres. Sure Start was part of the New Labour government's policy to prevent social exclusion targeted at preschool children and their families in disadvantaged

areas. The aim of Sure Start was to work with parents and preschool children to promote rounded development (physical, intellectual, social, and emotional). The programme aimed to ensure that the children who have been in Sure Start programmes are ready to thrive when they get to school. In each area where there was a Sure Start project, locally based programmes were encouraged to build on what already exists to ensure a range of core services including: outreach services and home visiting; support for families and parents; good quality play, learning, and childcare, primary and community healthcare and advice about family health and child development, and support for those with special needs.

Since 2010, the policy of austerity has led to the closure of 1,416 Sure Start centres in England (down from a total of 3,620 in 2010 to 2,204 in 2023) – a figure that doesn't include children's centre sites linked to Sure Start. Now, Rishi Sunak (the current Prime Minister) is boasting that he will open 75 “family hubs” by 2025.

A new Early Years Foundation Stage Framework was implemented in 2021. The revised framework contains three key updates:

- Confirmation that the current statutory minimum staff:child ratios in nurseries and pre-schools in England for two-year-olds will change from 1:4 to 1:5.
- Clarification on the flexibility around childminder ratio rules – specifically, that childminders can care for more than the specified maximum of three young children, providing this number includes their own child(ren) or the siblings of children for whom they already care.
- Further detail around safe eating practices, stating that “adequate supervision” while children are eating means that children must be within sight and hearing of an adult.

Commenting on the update, Neil Leitch, CEO of the Early Years Alliance, said:

“At the Alliance, we believe that changes to ratios will only serve to harm quality and compromise safety, and given the level of opposition to the policy, the fact that the government has pushed ahead with these plans is nothing less than shameful... Its clear that these ratio changes are being implemented at the worst possible time for the early years sector and families. Not only do children need more individual care and attention than ever but coupling the ratio changes with the upcoming expansion of ‘free hours’ risks piling more pressure on a workforce that is already pushed to the limit... Time and time again, the views of the early years sector have been completely disregarded – and changes to ratios are yet another example of this. We remain fully opposed to this change and will continue in our efforts to ensure that this retrograde policy is reversed.”

Further proposed EYFS changes, including changes to staff qualification requirements, remain under consultation and – should they be taken forward – would come into effect at a later date.

Problems highlighted with the revised EYFS include:

- A failure to strengthen the place of the Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning
- Further narrowing of the Early Learning Goals (ELGs)
- Omissions within the goals, in particular space, shape and measure and digital technology, along with aspects of Physical Development being moved to Personal, Social and Emotional Development
- A lack of understanding of child development and early learning, including self-regulation and the idea that very young children will learn through story and other texts
- The failure to trial the educational programmes covering birth to five in any settings, as well as the ELGs being trialled in just 24 school Reception classes.

The EYFS is designed to prepare children for school and assess ‘school readiness’, formalising learning in the early years, moving away from innovative pedagogies for supporting children’s learning and an enriching, holistic early education (Ang 2014; Kay 2022). A review of evidence undertaken in 2019 of the EYFS concluded that attainment for disadvantaged children had not improved in relation to their peers as a result of the framework and suggested that more prominence be given to Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning and personal, social and emotional learning (Pascal, Betram & Rouse 2019). The review also recommended an increased focus on a holistic approach to children’s learning and development in the early years, noting that there was no evidence to support a greater focus on mathematics or literacy than other areas. Furthermore, the framework has been criticised for presenting a normalised view of child development, portraying an ‘ideal learner’ (Bradbury, 2013), not based on evidence, that situates children with SEND as having individual deficits rather than considering the impacts of the social, environmental and cultural factors that may impact upon their learning (Rix & Parry 2014). The EYFS has been described as theoretically confusing, drawing on different notions of children’s development and wellbeing that at times contradict and that together with the focus on measurement and learning goals, undermine children’s learning (Street 2021; Wood 2020). It has also been claimed that assessments using the EYFS framework encourage low teacher expectations of children, particularly those living in socio-economically deprived areas (Bradbury 2014).

3.4 SEND policy evaluation

There are around 1.4 million pupils in English schools who have been identified as having special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Yet, research has revealed that some children with SEND have been missing out on specialist support, a problem which has been exacerbated by chronic underfunding in the sector. As of January 2021, there were 430,697 children and young

people with EHC plans maintained by local authorities. This is an increase of 40,588 (10%) from 390,109 as of January 2020. This is driven by increases across all age groups, with largest percentage increases in the 20-25 age group (17%).

The SEND policy changes outlined in the 2014 Children and Families Act has built on a long history in the UK that has moved away from labels with strong deficit concepts, towards the concept of ‘special educational needs’ and subsequently towards the ‘inclusion’ of all children in mainstream education, and a more joined-up way of working, reflected in structural changes to services.

Despite the best of intentions, the current system is not working. An increasing emphasis on inclusion sits alongside policies designed to give schools greater autonomy (academisation), and a greater focus on the performativity of schools (through curriculum, testing and inspection) in the context of dwindling resources. These policies sit in tension with one another, leading some to suggest that they have created a perverse incentive for schools to exclude children with SEND, or not select them in the first place (Daniels, Thompson and Tawell 2019). These tensions in policy have also been noted to affect the ability of schools to provide for refugee and asylum-seeking children (McIntyre and Hall 2020).

Councils, as convenors of local SEND systems, need to be able to bring education and health partners to the table where everyone is accountable for SEND provision. Having a collective responsibility is crucial in delivering a system that works for children and their families. There are significant funding pressures on local area’s resources for children and young people with SEND and high needs. what partners in local areas can do at the level of the local system to establish and sustain effective practice in identifying needs, providing support, using existing resources to best effect, and achieving the best outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

A report by Ofsted (undertaken before the pandemic) found that some pupils with SEND are having negative learning and development experiences. This was mainly due to gaps in understanding of pupils’ needs and starting points. The report also found that pupils with SEND were more likely to experience social isolation and miss learning opportunities, as they are often taken out of the classroom for intervention activities. This means they “might not be getting all the high-quality teaching that they need to have a chance of succeeding”. Some parents and carers believed that lesson content was not always easily accessible, and their child was not always given the chance to master the basics before being moved forwards. This was sometimes

because schools were not always teaching the curriculum in the right order or matching the curriculum with needs of pupils with SEND¹.

The findings from the Ofsted report come just as figures compiled by the Observer reveal that councils in England are planning spending cuts and services reviews after facing a funding shortfall of more than half a billion pounds. With government rules preventing councils from using certain categories of reserves to help fund the SEND system, campaigners fear children could lose some of their much-needed support. Unless the government steps in, this problem is only going to get worse, as the number of children with SEND and Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans continues to grow year on year. The system is clearly struggling to cope with the rising numbers of children who need EHC plans, which means greater numbers are being educated in inappropriate settings².

The National Educational Union remind the government that the Covid-19 pandemic has worsened the financial situation for many schools, who have had to incur additional costs for higher grade personal protective equipment (PPE), duplicate sensory resources to stop cross contamination, and additional cleaning staff. None of these additional costs have been reimbursed by the government, placing additional financial pressure on a sector which was already severely underfunded.

The funding currently provided by the government is not sufficient to match the increase in SEND demand, with many local councils drastically overspending their SEND budgets. According to The Guardian, Surrey council confirmed it overspent its high needs budget by £35m in 2020-21 and is forecasting a further overspend of £24m in 2021-22. Kent forecast an overspend of £35.8m in 2020-21, and 14 other councils forecast overspends of £10m to £18m. The government has acknowledged this issue and has increased funding, announcing a sum of £730m for 2021-22. But critics say this is not enough given the scale of need.

It is too early to assess the impact of the British Sign Language Bill 2022. However, there is the potential to improve access to services, information, cultural events and more for many BSL users, to improve engagement in public and community life for Deaf people, to enable them to hold organisations to account, and to raise the profile of BSL.

¹ <https://www.learningdisabilitytoday.co.uk/children-with-send-not-properly-supported-or-funded>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/dec/17/schools-crisis-in-england-as-special-needs-staff-quit-in-droves-over-pay>

3.5 Provisions for children living in economically disadvantaged families

3.5.1 Free school meals

The provision of free school meals has been shown to be associated with diet quality, food security and academic performance and improves household income for lower-income families (Cohen et al 2021). However, despite high profile campaigns (such as those by the Child Poverty Action Group CPAG) many children who could benefit from a free school meal are excluded due to inflexible criteria and eligibility only for the very poorest, or for children in early compulsory schooling. CPAG's analysis shows that 900,000 children in poverty in England do not currently qualify for free school meals. Furthermore many parents do not apply for a free school meal for their child, often due to the stigma of having to give financial details to schools, putting further financial pressure on those families.

There is evidence that even when a free school meal is supplied, the funding allowed per pupil is insufficient for schools to provide good quality nutritious food (ITV News, 2022). The ways in which free school meals are administered in schools can also lead to stigmatising children and young people and parents feeling pressure to provide 'top-up' funding, putting pressure on family budgets (Mazzoli Smith & Todd 2019; Laing et al 2023). Any remaining funding that is not spent on a particular day cannot usually then be banked to be spent on another day, meaning young people in poverty have less autonomy and choice over how they spend their money than other young people.

In order to receive a free school meal, children need to attend school, or a designated holiday provision. During Covid-19 lockdowns, a voucher scheme was implemented to enable families to purchase food from supermarkets for those children eligible for FSM. However, there were difficulties in accessing the vouchers, and the vouchers were sometimes only eligible for more expensive supermarkets some distance away from families. There is some evidence that half of all children entitled to a free school meal did not receive one during the first UK lockdown (Parnham et al 2020).

3.5.2 Pupil Premium

The evidence is mixed about whether Pupil Premium (or at least the provision that it has helped to fund) has been effective in raising attainment for children living in poverty (Copeland 2019; Gorard et al 2021; Gorard, 2022). Pupil premium came into operation when other school funding such as for extended schools was withdrawn, and when austerity was imposed on local authorities, meaning that school budgets had to pay for many services that previously were free. As a consequence, some schools used the pupil premium to maintain provision for disadvantaged children rather than add anything new (Carpenter et al 2013). Many schools continue to find they do not have sufficient funds to cater for their pupils especially when they

have a large percentage of children who are minoritized and disadvantaged. Similar to FSM, funding is insufficient per pupil and schools often bundle the pupil premium funding with other sources of funding in order to provide opportunities, and it is not always clear that the right children are receiving support (Morris & Dobson 2021).

3.5.3 Catch-up tutoring following Covid

Efforts to enable children to recover from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic upon learning has focused primarily on 'catch up' actions in respect of their educational attainment, rather than support for their social and emotional development (Carter 2022). The tutoring scheme to enable this educational catch-up has been mired in failure and controversy. Run first by the Education Endowment Foundation and now by Randstad, take-up has been poor, the policy to target disadvantaged pupils was dropped by Randstad, tutoring in a sixth of the schools was found by inspection³ to be haphazard and poorly planned, many arrangements did not fit with school needs, and there has been little evaluation of the impact of the tutoring. The policy has now been changed from September 2023 to only offer school-led tutoring.

All UK education recovery policies have included a large element for catch up tutoring. This has been mostly and differently targeted but the targeting failed in England and Northern Ireland when delivered by an external delivery partner rather than by schools. Part of the Welsh policy is specifically dedicated to addressing the needs of the 16+ age group that includes school leaving and dropout. All policies in England and Northern Ireland are education focused provision primarily aimed at helping children of all ages. Some policies in all jurisdictions have aimed to help those that are economically disadvantaged. This difference in education policy directions across the UK not just in response to Covid-19 has been observed by many including those looking specifically at measures to impact on young people classified at NEET (e.g. Maguire, 2021) and has not been seen as contextualised and appropriate but pulling in different directions.

Whilst all policies following covid have included tutoring, there is an issue with these given data that has shown increasing numbers absent from school or excluded. If children are not in schools, then school-based programmes such as tutoring are of no use. Alternative policies need to be developed looking at who is not in school, what is leading to their non-attendance and their exclusion, what is needed to reverse these trends. As noted in the Timpson review (2019) there is widespread differences in how schools use exclusions, Ferguson (2019) states that guidance on school exclusions is so discretionary and with little oversight that 'frameworks are open to perverse incentives and unintended consequences that are harmful to children at risk of drop-out' (p.14), most notably the results-driven accountability prevalent in England.

3.6 Specific policies for 16+ age group

3.6.1 Further education

T-levels have been strongly criticised by an Ofsted review in 2023 for offering poor value, inappropriate work placements and having high dropout rates³. The report, the first independent evaluation of T-levels commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE), is highly critical of the complex teaching and industry placements required during the two-year courses, which are intended as a vocational equivalent to A-levels in England. Ofsted inspected T-level courses and interviewed teachers and students taking subjects such as healthcare and construction. It found that some colleges were struggling to recruit staff qualified to deliver the curriculum, with the high workload making it “particularly hard to teach everything in the time available”. Ofsted also found that while most students complete their T-level, “many leave before the end of the course, and the number of students who progress to the second year of T-level courses is low in many providers. In at least one provider, no students progressed from the first year of the T-level course to the second year.” The report concludes: “At worst, courses are not at all what students expected, and many students reported being misled and ill-informed about their content and structure.” Only 10,000 students enrolled in the qualification in 2022-23, with colleges unable to fill courses in several subjects.

Whilst there is a long history of apprenticeships in the UK, there remains persistent criticism including a prevalence of Level 2 apprenticeships that tend to offer lower rewards to apprentices, failures in provision offered through apprenticeships disproportionately affecting young people from less advantaged backgrounds, while those accessing the highest level of apprenticeships disproportionately from wealthier families, and a continued perceived lesser value of apprenticeships compared to degrees (Kirby, 2015). Cavaglia et al. (2020) analysed whether there was a positive return for young people enrolling on apprenticeships between the ages of 16 and 18 and concluded that whilst apprenticeships did lead to a positive average earnings return, there was considerable variation between sectors driving the gender pay gap. Dawson and Osborne (2020) highlight the advantages of the degree apprenticeship for apprentices, employers, HEIs and the economy but also the considerable resource needed to deliver work-based learning, cross sector collaboration and professional competence.

3.6.2 Higher education

There has been a large expansion in Higher Education, with increased numbers of young people going to university over the last 2 decades, but the system remains highly stratified.

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/jul/20/vocational-t-levels-england-ofsted-report>

The current higher education funding model is becoming increasingly unsustainable. The annual £9,250 fee for English university students has not been increased for five years, meaning that many universities are seeking to recruit more international students (who command higher fees) at the expense of home students. While more students than ever before are accessing university (Harrison 2019), this growing marketisation of HE provides challenges for ensuring equity (Millward 2023), with students from wealthier families tending to be concentrated in higher-status wealthier universities (Reay 2017), seeing themselves as ‘consumers’ (Woodall, Hiller & Resnick 2014) and students being saddled with enormous amounts of debt once they graduate. There is mixed evidence that the NCOP programme (now known as UniConnect) has resulted in under-represented groups being more likely to consider university study (Harding and Bowes 2022). Substantial inequities still remain (Arday, Branchu and Boliver 2022).

Measures are being taken in Higher Education to improve the access, success and progression of young people and adult learners, primarily through the development of Access and Participation Plans. These plans are bespoke for each University, and offer a variety of supports to address specific risk factors for identified vulnerable groups. Despite the adoption of APPs, there is currently no evidence this is successful in driving effective interventions or that that the substantial funding from the fees that are supposed to be spent on interventions are indeed spent on successful interventions. It has been recognised by the Office for Students that there has been little university evaluation of their spending or their interventions, and going forward the OfS have requested that universities give greater attention to evaluation and utilise theory of change methodologies as a framework for this (Dent et al 2022). It remains the case, however, that people from less socio-economically advantaged backgrounds, or from a minority group are less likely than others to go to university or achieve good grades when they are there.

The semi-marketisation of universities means that students pay loans back for years but there is still a substantial cost to the state, fees are still controlled nationally and some controls are exerted on the university curriculum, and vice-chancellors have high pay levels with many staff on precarious contracts. Higher education staff have launched successive strikes over the last five years over pay and conditions motivated by the need to provide an educational environment that is good for both staff and students. At time of writing a marking and assessment boycott was in process and no signs of the likelihood of being settled.

Covid has had a big impact on students, on their likelihood in receiving the grades required to attend university, on their mental health and on the form of pedagogy that they receive (with some more access to blended teaching and learning. Universities are still responding to the impact of covid on their staff and students.

3.6.3 Activities to develop confidence and skills for post 16 years.

National Citizens Service (NCS) aimed to provide a long program including a residential experience that focused on activities to build confidence and skills for post 16 years. NCS grew rapidly since the programme was piloted in 2011 and 2012, and an estimated 93,000 16- and 17-year-olds took part in NCS in 2016. Participation in NCS did not, however, increase as fast as the Office for Civil Society or the NCS Trust hoped, with none of the annual participation targets met since 2010. Issues for the program has been numbers attending, whether the program reaches those that are most in need, the details of the program, the cost, and the services that are not funded as a result of the costs entailed in NCS. The program was launched at the same time as the government austerity cuts on council budgets led to the a removal of youth services that were provided nationally. Many have therefore complained that a four-week programme is not enough to make up for the systematic removal of youth services

A study on the benefits of NCS found that it had a 'very positive short-term impact' for young people taking part. challenges young people to take on leadership roles, volunteer, campaign and develop diverse friendships. However, changes to the structure led to the practical value of the programme being compromised. Instead of being taught skills in a hands-on way, 60 to 70 children (sometimes more) at a time receive half-day workshops. The structure of these workshops mean that skills are not properly taught; instead, only the concept of the skill is explained. Young people are no longer able to develop fresh interests at a low cost and experience classes that would usually be expensive. Photography, media, drama, sport, music and enterprise are useful and enjoyable pursuits, but financial factors prevent many young people from trying them out.

Almost nine out of 10 of the 1,000 young people aged between 16 and 19 the trust surveyed in 2021 wanted to learn a new skill and gain experience of work. Two-thirds wanted to help their local communities through volunteering and social action. Meanwhile, findings from a survey of 6,000 young people also highlighted the importance of volunteering opportunities, which they cited as one of their top priorities for youth services. This survey also found that residential trips continue to be important to young people, with adventures away from home named another priority.

The National Citizen Service (NCS) Trust announced it was going to offer year-round activities for young people in 2023. Under the overhauled provision, the residential experience of NCS will be revamped to span five days and four nights rather than its traditional offer of a one- to-two-week stay within a four-week programme. Other options will include one-off community-based activities and online learning, and there will also be a strong focus on employability and independent living in addition to social action and volunteering. Delivering programmes amid a cut in funding was also a factor. Shortening the residential trip will reduce administration costs and enable the NCS to maintain the adventures away element amid reduced funding.

Applications for funding to provide digital initiatives will also open in 2023. NCS's new focus on employability and independent living may prompt a review of the trust's charter, which focuses on projects that benefit society and enhance skills including teamwork.

3.7 Integration of newly arrived migrant children

Every child and young person in the UK has rights⁴. However it is not easy to see how these have been upheld for all newly arrived migrant children and young people. A number of different policies contribute to the UK's hostile environment for migrants: "The term 'hostile'—initially coined by Theresa May in a Telegraph interview in 2012—aptly captures the unreceptive environment the UK government has created for its migrants and that, to this day, seeks to encourage migrants in the country to voluntarily leave the UK" (Bianchi and Ioab 2023). Despite this, many Universities including Newcastle take action to achieve the status of Universities of Sanctuary and many councils including Newcastle have similarly become cities of sanctuary. This entails action by staff and additional funding to support refugees and asylum seekers including providing a range of supports (i.e. in education, language, housing, employment, benefits).

It can be difficult to compile accurate statistics of the final outcomes of the asylum process for these children. Many of the children who apply for asylum will have their claims refused but will be afforded discretionary leave to remain (DLR) in the UK, which is usually valid until they reach the age of 17 ½. Disputes over a young person's age may also lead to infringements of their rights; if a child is taken to be an adult, his rights as a child will inevitably not be upheld.

In July 2021, the Home Office began placing unaccompanied, asylum-seeking children in hotels, outside the usual care system. This was intended to be a short-term, emergency measure. Two years later it continues, despite hundreds of children having vanished from these hotels. The following year, new asylum laws were passed, and the government announced plans to forcibly remove people seeking protection from the UK and send them to Rwanda. Despite legal challenges and concern regarding Rwanda's human rights record, the highly criticised plan is set to move ahead in 2023. Now, the introduction of the Illegal Migration Bill risks rolling back hard-won protections and denying children the help and security they need.

The government has stated that the Rwanda plan will not include unaccompanied children. However, with an unreliable and often impulsive system of age assessing refugees, many

⁴ <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/blogs/children-at-risk-under-new-asylum-policies>

children are incorrectly deemed to be adults. Even those who are recognised as children often fail to receive adequate protection. Currently, many lone children are being placed in government contracted hotels without the support that they need. Appallingly, hundreds of children have disappeared from these hotels and currently 200 remain missing, feared to have fallen into the hands of traffickers.

A group of young people known as the YLCSC (Youth Led Commission on Separated Children) are campaigning for every unaccompanied child to have an independent legal guardian who can advocate for them and provide continuity throughout the asylum journey. Children should not be by themselves in hotels. Some children meet new people who assure them it will be safer outside the hotels, but they end up in the hands of traffickers.

‘All we want is for children that are going through the system now, not to go through the experiences that we went through’.

Several universities such as Newcastle University are working with the national NGO Citizens UK in their support for refugees and asylum seekers. Citizens UK aims to have a community approach to the needs of these diverse groups of people. There have been many success stories but widespread effective integration of newly arrived children and young people is not easy without national political will and indeed funding.

4.0 Comparative Analysis of successful and less effective policies

In this section we discuss the English policy landscape within the three-step strategy of prevention, intervention and compensation, alongside whole school approaches proposed by the EC to assess the success and failure of policy in respect of ESL. Here we will also comment on gaps in existing policy. First however we draw attention to some data on children missing from school and suggest the need for continuing research. We also present here a key area that needs addressing that interacts with all policy on ESL, that of child poverty.

4.1 How many children and young people – and what are their experiences?

In Autumn 2022, local authorities were asked to voluntarily submit data on CME, these figures estimated that 94,900 children were missing education at some point during the 2021/2022 academic year (DfE, 2023a). There are a variety of reasons why a child or young person may not be registered in education, including those excluded from school, those awaiting a suitable placement and those in receipt of an unsuitable education. The Timpson review of school

exclusion (2019) highlighted the wide differences in how schools across England use exclusions (both temporary and permanent) and ‘longstanding trends’ of how children with certain characteristics, including children with Special Education Needs (SEN), boys, those supported by social care, certain ethnic groups and disadvantaged children are disproportionately affected (p.9). The report also acknowledged the practice of ‘exclusion in all but name’ where families are put under pressure from schools to remove their child, this practice is also known as ‘off-rolling’ and has been widely condemned as children are denied the support necessary to continue their education (p.11)

In addition, following the Covid-19 pandemic absence rates of pupils in schools has remained high, 7.5% in the Autumn term of 2022/2023, this compares to having been consistently below 5% pre-pandemic, with 24.2% of pupils persistently absent (missing 10% or more of sessions) Autumn 2022/23 (DfE, 2023b). Concerns over increasing absence rates has attracted national media attention with the Education Secretary recently suggesting that head teachers have a duty to pick up absent children for school (Sky News, 2023) and the Association of School and College Leaders responding that such a suggestion is an “unrealistic solution to a serious and complex problem”, citing rising mental health issues and the need for “a concerted effort by policymakers working with the education sector to understand the problem and to provide targeted solutions and support” (The Guardian, 2023). There is increasing awareness that historical policies of making parents legally responsible for their children’s school attendance is not addressing the problems faced by children and families; through Section 444 (1) Education Act 1996 parents can be prosecuted if a child is absent from school without authorisation, an Education Supervision Order can be issued by local authorities with an appointed supervisor under Section 36 Children’s Act 1989 and a School Attendance Order can be issued under Section 437 (3) Education Act 1996 with parents given 15 days to provide evidence that they have registered a child with a school or that they are being home educated. There has been a clear recognition by education providers across the UK that the pandemic has had an enormous impact on children’s education and their ability to access it.

Even where children are accessing education, there are well documented inequalities in the outcomes experienced by economically disadvantaged and minoritised children and young people. We have reported on many of these inequalities throughout this analysis. Ongoing research and evaluation is crucial.

The Sutton Trust with University College London and Kantar Public have set up a longitudinal survey of 13,000 young people across England who were due to take their GCSEs in 2021. The study will follow them through the rest of their education and into the workplace. Initial findings are showing needs in many areas leading to clear policy asks. The first wave findings showed problems for disadvantaged young people in their mental health, incidence of long covid, their

likelihood in changing education and career plans following covid and in their views of the fairness or otherwise of teacher assessments in school. They had all missed a large amount of schooling (Cullinane et al, 2022). Data from such longitudinal surveys need to be combined with other data, such as from school absence, exclusions, poverty levels and also with qualitative action research that involves children and young people in the development of solutions that are appropriate for them.

In terms of the latter, the VOICES project addressed the serious gap in the understanding of the needs of children and young people aged 5-18, living in poverty during Covid-19. In 2020-22 the research team spoke to almost 2,000 youngsters about family, school, friendship and transport, living in North East England with the majority from some of the UK's most deprived neighbourhoods. Some of the project recommendations were produced by the young people. The project carried out actions, co-led with young people, to lobby for change. In one area young people asked transport providers to improve COVID safety on public transport, the provision of masks and greater communication about discounted tickets for young people across transport providers. In May 2023 Arriva and Go North East announced travel for all under 21's for £1 across the region.

4.2 Child poverty in England

There has been a failure over the last decade to tackle poverty in England and this has exacerbated other policy initiatives in terms of prevention, intervention and compensation. The context is that before the austerity budgets, the government achieved progress on childhood poverty. The number of minors living in "relative poverty" fell by roughly 800,000, to 3.5 million, between 1998 and 2012. But the trend began to reverse in 2012, the year Parliament passed the Welfare Reform Act, a central plank of austerity: Since then, about 600,000 children have fallen back into "relative poverty." During the same period, the number of children requiring food handouts from the Trussell Trust, the country's largest network of food banks, has more than tripled. It is not just the jobless and their families who are suffering. Roughly two-thirds of poor children have at least one parent who works, the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said. The Trussell Trust, a charity, did find that the use of food banks picked up much more in areas where a new system for those not working or on very low pay, called universal credit, was in place than in areas where it wasn't.

Announced in 2010, the universal credit system merged six separate social security benefits into a single payment, supposedly to simplify the claims process and to reduce benefits gradually as people earned more from work. All claimants will be on universal credit by the end of 2024. There are several aspects of this benefit that contribute to poverty rather than solving it. One is the two-child limit meaning that benefits are not paid to families for their 3rd, 4th etc children. Scrapping the two-child limit is the most cost-effective way to reduce child poverty. It would lift

250,000 children out of poverty and mean 850,000 children are in less deep poverty. A benefit cap restricts the total amount of support a working-age household can receive from the social security system if they are earning less than the equivalent of 16 hours a week at the minimum wage or not in paid work. 250,000 children live in households affected by the cap. A lone parent with three children is likely to be capped across most areas of the UK, and can be left with as little as £44 a week to live on after paying housing costs.

Child benefit is a payment made to the main carer of a child, with an amount for each child they care for. It is not means-tested, but if someone in the household earns over £50,000 there is a charge to pay – the high-income child benefit charge (HICBC). Increasing child benefit by £20 a week would see 500,000 children pulled out of poverty.

4.3 Prevention

Preventive measures aim to tackle the root problems that may eventually result in ESL. These measures can include aspects such as access to good quality early education, support for transitions, an engaging curriculum, good support for vulnerable populations, parental and family involvement in schools, and effective PPD, for example.

The UK still has many high-quality services and initiatives that are preventive of ESL. This works for many children and young people. There is high quality teaching in many schools, many aspects of the curriculum are engaging, and many teachers work extremely hard to get all children through tests and exams. There is some involvement of children in decision making in school councils and in municipality/local authority youth councils. We have seen evidence of the determined and caring efforts of local authorities and NGOs to make provisions for newly arrived migrant children. Further education colleges have had little time but seek to implement the new T levels and to cater well for young people. Schools, colleges and universities have detailed plans to try to ensure smooth transition for children and young people at all phases of education. Many schools have school counsellors, coaches and family workers to support children and families. The new family hubs are taking on more and more innovative approaches to offer families such as video interaction guidance. In all these areas we can name innovative practice that is serving children, young people and families well. There are some effective ways that post 16 training is connecting with the world of work through apprenticeships and degree apprenticeships.

However, taken as a whole, preventive policies are not working well as we have detailed item by item in the last section looking at each aspect of national policy. To take one key policy, academisation, that has aimed to tackle underlying problems in education. As we have already noted there is no evidence that academisation has improved educational outcomes. Instead it has resulted in patchy CPD provision for staff and a perverse incentive to remove children with SEND from school rolls.

A key aspect of prevention is providing high quality teaching and a rounded curriculum for all pupils. Changes to the National Curriculum seem to have resulted in a narrowing of the curriculum for children and young people, reducing the time spent on modern languages, the arts, and physical education for example, and increasing the focus on mathematics and literacy. The increased focus on performativity for schools has resulted in more schools teaching only what is to be tested, and some schools being nervous about shifting that focus to adopt more innovative pedagogies such as community curriculum making and outdoor learning. Similarly, the Early Years Foundation Stage has resulted in a move to formalise learning for very young children, moving away from holistic approaches to child development and individualising SEND.

We know from a 2022 survey that almost every state school in England was found to be struggling to provide proper support for children with special educational needs because of insufficient support staff. In a poll of 922 special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) coordinators in primary and secondary schools across England, conducted exclusively for the *Observer* national Sunday newspaper by education consultancy Sendco Solutions, only six schools said they did not have a problem with numbers of support staff for children with additional needs. Schools typically employ teaching assistants to support children with SEND. Small group teaching supported by teaching assistants and adapted pedagogical schemes of work are designed to support children to access the curriculum. Much of the individualised support for vulnerable students is provided by these assistants, but the level of training they receive is variable and rates of pay are low. Supporting children in this way means they may be restricted in their access to the high-quality teaching provided by teaching staff in the classroom. However many teachers have become dependent on this kind of support. But in 2023 with a worsening cost of living crisis teaching assistants have been finding their pay squeezed and that they are able to earn more working at their local supermarket. Schools report therefore that crucial support workers are leaving “in droves”, and they cannot find anyone to replace them because the pay is too low. More than half of SEND coordinators polled (57%) said they were trying to recruit teaching assistants but that no one was applying, or that candidates were all unsuitable. Some schools admit they are being forced to hire applicants who are not suited to the job of supporting children with complex needs, simply so that they have another adult in the classroom.

There have been major cutbacks in all areas of prevention. This has in many areas been a consequence of the policy of austerity. In most areas, current policy has therefore been less effective in prevention during the last decade than it was in the decade before last. Child-care has become unaffordable for one in 3 families. The preventive services that used to wrap around childcare have in many cases been massively reduced, including the family workers, speech therapists, and SEND teachers that used to work closely with nurseries. Whilst there remains some good practice in this area, many services that used to be provided through local authorities

via one or other kind of universal taxation now have to be paid for by each school or nursery. Therefore, many preventive services such as welfare officers, school social workers, educational psychologists and counsellors are services which, apart from some statutory duties, are purchased by schools according to what they can afford. The impact of covid is rapidly becoming a root cause of many problems especially non-school attendance. We have reported already on the failure of attempts to tackle the educational impact of the pandemic. And new measures such as the family hubs are inadequately funded only for 2 years.

In terms of tackling the root cause of ESL, one major underlying cause is poverty. We know from our work on poverty proofing the school day (Mazzoli Smith and Todd 2019) that children who are poor are unwittingly stigmatised in multiple ways during the school day with a consequent impact on their learning and wellbeing. Even where schools are free for children to attend, that is, do not require a fee, there are multiple costs associated with attending and accessing a full curriculum (school uniform costs, school food and snacks, visits, sports clothes and equipment, items needed to take part in lessons etc). As we have already stated the last 12 years has seen a rise in child poverty and current policy failing to have any targets to tackle this. Effective policy that addressed poverty would help considerably in addressing ESL. There are also measures that schools can take to lessen the impact of poverty on children as part of a 'poverty proofing process'. We will describe such approaches in the next section 5 on policies gaps and solutions.

4.4 Intervention

Intervention measures are those which aim to combat emerging difficulties experienced by students, by improving the quality of education and training and providing targeted support. Many intervention measures apply to all pupils but are especially beneficial and relevant to those at risk of ESL. Other intervention measures are more student focussed and build on the early detection of support needed for learning and motivation. Such measures include out-of-school activities, the use of strategies in the classroom to meet individual student needs, guidance and counselling, and parental involvement initiatives.

Since the Coalition Government in 2010, the main policy to address disadvantage in schools has been the Pupil Premium Grant (2011), which is paid for eligible children (those eligible for free school meals, or have been in the past 6 years, and children looked after, or previously looked after, by local authorities) to state funded schools and educational provisions. Whilst the funding can be used somewhat flexibly, schools highlight that the number of disadvantaged pupils far exceeds those eligible for the grant with 'in work' poverty widespread.

Schools are encouraged to provide extra-curricular activities (and can use Pupil Premium funding for this, alongside other kinds of intervention), but the provision of these is largely up to

individual school's capacity and budgets, and ability to use the school building after hours, meaning that some schools provide more activities than others. Some schools charge for out-of-school activities, while some schools subsidise these for children from low-income families or who have SEND. Providing access to free out of school activities for all children was part of extended schools and service policy during the decade after the new millennium but has been absent from policy the last 12 years.

Much intervention work with children and young people is concentrated on classroom activity. The numbers of children with SEND are increasing, and schools are struggling to cope with demand with insufficient numbers of support staff. As we have described in earlier sections, where a child is perceived to be in need of this support, schools have to go through a difficult application process to receive funding to provide this (through the EHCP process), with varying levels of success depending on the needs in the local authority area and the availability of funding. The school needs to recognise and demonstrate that the child needs this support, meaning that the support can be delayed by up to a year, while schools collect the evidence. Despite this many teachers, head teachers, school SEND coordinators, parents and other health and social care professionals are working extremely hard and effectively to support the needs of many at risk children. But there are massive stresses on all involved with many, as we reported in the previous section on prevention and in our review of SEND policy, schools not feeling they are coping well.

The Covid pandemic has resulted in increasing numbers of children needing support, and worsened finances for schools. The tutoring provided as part of Covid catch-up premium concentrated solely on teaching to ensure children caught up on the curriculum they had missed, rather than supporting their social or emotional wellbeing.

There is no joined up set of policies in England that provide effective intervention to address ESL. Those that exist (ie Pupil Premium) are much needed by schools but are not sufficient. Despite this, England still has many high-quality services and initiatives open to all but benefitting children at risk of ESL or targeting those in danger of failing to achieve and thrive. This includes much work on guidance and wellbeing in schools, projects empowering parents (an example being the STEPs programme in Newcastle's West End Children's Community) and work in universities on the sense of belonging (an example of this in Newcastle University). However, none of this work has been actively supported by government policy and funding. Indeed, some of this work has previously been central to government policy, such as a focus on parent partnership, and this is now largely absent from educational policy.

4.5 Compensation

Compensation measures create new opportunities for those who have left education and training early to gain new qualifications. The kinds of measures taken include accessible second chance schemes, ensuring access to support (e.g. employability skills, guidance and counselling, financial), high quality teaching and a flexible curriculum. What we find in England is little evidence of effective compensatory policies.

Policy in England is concentrated on enabling people to obtain qualifications, and does little to effectively match skills development to the needs of local employment opportunities. In England, T-levels have a high drop-out rate and the provision of apprenticeships, while offering promising second-chance provision, take a high level of resource to ensure they are meaningful opportunities. Vocational learning continues to be associated with lower-status employment opportunities. England does have some high quality alternative pathways on the labour market and personalised and holistic approach to second chance education (focused on developing life skills and employability skills. These are mostly provided by FE colleges. However there is little effective enabling government policy in this area.

The current higher education system is not easily accessed by adults who missed out first time round. Student numbers have [almost doubled over the past 20 years](#), but during this time there has been a massive decline in the number of mature students – both part-time and full-time. Since 2010 these numbers have [dropped by more than 60%](#). A person is considered a mature student if they are 21 or over at the start of their studies. The average age for a student to [finish their studies is 22](#), and just 10% of mature students are over 40 when they start their courses.

An analysis by Chris Parr⁵ shows a year on year decline in mature students admitted to universities in the UK for the last decade. According to the UK university admissions body UCAS, just 56,590 UK-domiciled students aged 21 or over had been accepted by higher education institutions by 8am on 18 August 2022—down from 68,690 in 2016. In 2021, just over 62,000 mature students were placed on courses, meaning the number has fallen by about 9 per cent in just one year. The decline was particularly prevalent in the 25-to-29-year-old age bracket, which saw numbers drop by 15 per cent to 11,700. The number of 21-to-24-year-olds accepted was also down significantly, dropping by 9 per cent to 25,250. This means that the number of mature students accepted last year was at its lowest point for at least 10 years, with the UCAS website only providing data from the 2012-13 admissions cycle onwards. Parr reports a suggestion by Nick Hillman, director of the Higher Education Policy Institute, a think tank, that the decline could be partly because of the increasing number of 18-and-19-year-olds going to university, which means there are fewer potential students missing out on higher education first time around. However, John Bucher proposes a different analysis⁴. He suggests that for many adults, higher education is simply seen as something for the young, or something that costs a lot of money and that the structure of degrees and the model of funding does not work for many.

[Research](#) shows that many mature students are more likely to be from disadvantaged or underrepresented groups. This could go some way then to explain the low numbers of older people at university. Once again this is an area in which some universities and many colleges have imaginative and effective programmes that really benefit mature students. However there is no enabling policy in this area at present. In conclusion, the university funding model does not encourage flexible modules, evening classes or blended models of learning making it very hard for adults to do a degree later on.

4.6 Whole school approach

Schools cannot address ESL and educational disadvantage alone. Different stakeholders and services, inside and outside the school need to collaborate and integrate efforts. The school is the logical site to initiate community collaboration. This calls for a 'whole-school' approach where all members of the school community (school leaders, middle management, teaching and non-teaching staff, learners, parents and families) feel responsible and take an active role in tackling educational disadvantage and preventing drop-out. The entire school community engages in a cohesive, collective and collaborative action, based on multi-disciplinarity and differentiation, aimed at supporting each learner in the most appropriate way. A 'whole school approach' also implies a cross-sectoral approach and stronger cooperation with a wide range of stakeholders (social services, youth services, outreach care workers, psychologists, nurses, speech and language therapists, guidance specialists, local authorities, NGOs, business, unions, volunteers, etc.) and the community at large, to deal with issues, which schools do not (and cannot) have the relevant expertise for. The concept of a 'whole school approach' allows for the entire system of actors and their inter-relationships in and around schools to be considered, acknowledging that each stakeholder has a part to play in supporting the learners' educational journey and nurturing their learning experience.

While previous policy in England (pre-2010) provided support for a whole-school approach in the form of Full-Service Extended Schools. The more generic form for extended schools might better be termed Comprehensive Community Initiatives (CCIs). CCI's "create a sustained coordination of organizations and agencies that have a shared vision, agenda, and goal(s) for a community,..... match community needs to organizations' capacities, thus building an infrastructure that supports systemic, community-wide change." (Zaff et al 2015).

Policy since 2010, while not mitigating against such approaches, has not provided encouragement for them. Some individual schools have continued to work in this way, believing that it is the most effective way to meet the needs of their communities. Other schools have not, resulting in inconsistencies in what is provided across the country.

Therefore there are currently no national policies that take a whole school approach to disadvantage. The nearest that current policy comes to this is the family hubs since this is a cross-sectoral approach and stronger cooperation with a wide range of stakeholders to deal with issues, which schools do not (and cannot) have the relevant expertise for. However, family hubs do not necessarily make sure that schools are involved. Although they are integrated multi-stakeholder approaches, they are not around the school and they do not necessarily involve the wider community.

5.0 Policies, gaps and solutions

In order to prevent ESL there need to be policies throughout the life course including adulthood. Policies are needed in the early years, during school age, in their years leaving school and moving on and in adulthood. A whole school approach is needed due to the multi-faceted nature of the problem. And there is a need for policies that are preventive, interventionist and compensatory.

England needs again a strong articulation of a range of policy measures for early intervention and prevention (and not just about the early years). Local authorities have been encouraged to fund re-engagement programmes through the European Social Fund (ESF) and Youth Engagement Fund, both of which are no longer accessible since the UK withdrawal from the EU.

Making up for cutbacks in frontline services as a result of long-term government austerity measures many NGOs in the UK are increasingly relied upon to make provisions for children and young people's needs and this has continued in response to the impact of the pandemic. Whilst NGOs often run imaginative and effective interventions this support can be precarious and unsustainable due to the reliance on short term funding. Although action is needed at all ages to address school dropout not just in the 16+ years, key policy responses of the UK government that impacts on England effectively fail to target those in that 16+ age group that are most at risk (Brown et al 2022). Recognising the economic, political and cultural context, France (2016) argues that 'the restructuring driven by economics is reconfiguring not only the future of the young but also their everyday experiences of institutional arrangements and architecture' (p.3).

Poverty is a big factor impeding the effective education of young people. We know that when children are living in poverty every aspect of the school day can be affected – and children are often unwittingly stigmatised (Mazzoli-Smith & Todd, 2019). The increase in child poverty over the last 13 years in England is likely to have compounded the barriers to learning as a result of Covid-19. Interventions such as Poverty Proofing (see [Poverty Proofing© Services - Children North East \(children-ne.org.uk\)](#)) or Cost of the School Day (see [Cost of the School Day | CPAG](#))

have enabled children's views of what needs to change to be communicated to schools – and many barriers have been removed as a result. This has included trying to reduce the additional costs of state schooling (such as for trips and visits, uniform, food, curriculum costs) or find unstigmatising ways for children to access funding from the school. Policy in Wales and Scotland has specifically supported these interventions. Also, policy in Scotland to address child poverty (the child payment of £25) has already led to evidence of its decrease. In England, after very vigorous campaigning during Covid-19 free school meals were provided in holiday time. Despite there being multiple ways that the UK government could address child poverty there has been no other policy initiative over the last 13 years and even more surprisingly none either since Covid-19 nor since the current UK cost of living crisis.

5.1 Whole School Approaches - Comprehensive Community Initiatives (CICs) and Children's Communities

There is an urgent need for the kind of whole school approach provided by CICs. CICs have a dual focus, firstly in supporting successful participation in, and outcomes from, schooling, and secondly, in providing 'wrap around' supports, namely pastoral and welfare services that can help to address barriers to school success arising from children's home and community contexts. CICs encouraged schools to work with partners to provide a more holistic set of services for their local communities that could begin to address. They build on a previous policy for England from 2000-2010, that of extended school and extended services. In such initiatives services such as adult learning and wrap-around childcare aimed to challenge poverty by supporting and enabling parents to find work and develop skills, while many schools employed family support workers who could work with other agencies to provide parenting support and specific interventions to address clusters of problems in families that had the potential to disrupt learning (Pearson et al., 2007; Carpenter et al., 2011).

A Children's Community is a specific kind of CIC. It is a place-based interagency collaboration that aims to achieve positive outcomes for disadvantaged children and families through bringing a range of organisations together in a co-ordinated way that is locally driven with community participation, has effective governance, and robust evaluation. It takes a generational approach to stimulating change from 'cradle to career' across all of the contexts in which children live and learn. By working in partnership to develop a vision for all children in the area, a robust long-term strategy for tackling disadvantage, and an effective set of actions and provide support and opportunities for children and families 'from cradle to career' and across all aspects of their lives (e.g. education, health, employment), a Children's Community aims to eventually create a 'tipping point' at which the effects of poverty can be challenged effectively and outcomes for children are improved.

Several Children's community CICs are in operation across England, including pilots initiated by Save the Children (Batty et al 2019), and those undertaken by individual schools wishing to adopt these approaches (e.g. Reach⁵, Newcastle West End Children's Community⁶) but these are not supported by central policy-making and largely reliant on precarious funding arrangements. A growing evidence base suggests that these approaches have the potential to address educational disadvantage.

The Newcastle team has been involved in the development of CCIs that also centre community involvement, working with the various communities as actors with their own agency. Diverse partners are brought together to develop and act on a shared vision of how to improve outcomes. The West End Children's Community (WECC) is a place-based community initiative aimed at tackling poverty that has been developed by local organisations and the community working in partnership. Other key NGOs in the UK such as the Child Poverty Action Group have called for the reinstatement of extended schools similar to children's communities.

6.0 Key takeaways

Most importantly the English example underlines the importance of dealing with major underlying root causes such as poverty. And it shows also the damage that can happen when austerity is applied to children's services and schools over a period of a decade leading to cuts in all services, services that are necessary for the prevention of early school leaving.

The main policies of the last 12 years have focused on a widespread change in the governance, funding and powers of schools (academisation moving schools from local authority control to enable them to have more control of finance curriculum etc); a focus on the importance of accessible childcare with the provision for parents of free hours; making services and information available to families; a set of measures around the funding, accessibility and quality of higher education; a set of measures to do with the skills and employment of the 16+ age groups (T levels qualifications, the expansion of apprenticeships and giving young people a range of experiences and skill development opportunities away from home with the national citizenship service); the development of a more inclusive and integrated approach to SEND in the creation of EHCPs; and funding for schools to help close the educational attainment gap between rich and poor (pupil premium, free school meals funded for all in first 2 years of school, holiday activity fund).

Several of these can be seen as intending tackling problems at root cause. For example, academisation would assume that giving schools control and power would be a major driver of change. Similarly English policies in early years, in FE, in SEND (aiming to make education

inclusive for all) can be seen as concerned with prevention. However, not wishing to repeat our previous detailed analysis - all been shown to be too little, not effective, underfunded, aiming for rollout without proper piloting and evaluation, replacing fully funded comprehensive services with a short-term substitute, not reaching those most in need and/or causing other problems.

Academisation is not effective in tackling the impact of disadvantage. HE policy has led to more young people from non-traditional backgrounds going to university, but access, participation and success problems are not being effectively tackled. Free childcare hours have been shown to be ineffective for low-income families and the impact of removing funding from SureStart has been very negative for families especially those that need support. FE T levels are too little, too quick to introduce, and not effective. A major issue, often the elephant in the room, is that these policies have not tackled what is the key root cause of educational issues for children and young people who leave school early and this is poverty.

There are many other key preventive policy areas that are not effectively funded such as teacher professional development, welcoming migrant children, involvement of children and parents in decision making, and having an engaging curriculum. Action from national government in these areas have been much reduced in the last 12 years in comparison to the previous decade, resulting in large areas of omission in the prevention of ESL. In some such as how we welcome migrant children there is rhetoric of support for children that is not seen in practice. Indeed, the treatment of refugee children has many atrocious stories in terms of practice with many unaccompanied children put in hotels and disappearing. The many innovative approaches to curriculum such as forest schooling (Tiplady and Mentor, 2021), enquiry based curriculum and community curriculum (Leat, 2017) all merit attention as part of an enriched school curriculum.

Main intervention policies over the last 12 years have been pupil premium, along with free school meals, holiday activity fund and covid catchup funds. Some prevention policies can also be understood as contributing to an interventionist approach such as the NCS. These have been well used and largely welcomed (covid fund less well used but nevertheless welcomed, NCS welcomed but with concern for cuts in youth services). Pupil premium is now essential for schools and is well used for many different approaches and activities. The EHCP as a process to provide educationally for children with SEND is a very good development in theory and although many children receive support this falls massively short of supporting teachers, parents or children. The main conclusion about interventionist policies in England is that most are not enough, have shortcomings in implementation and funding, and fall short of achieving their goals.

In terms of compensation, there has been very little good news in some of the key areas that are needed such as having a range of ways to have a second chance, a flexible school curriculum, alternative pathways to the labour market, and access to specialised support. This is underlined by the failure of the last decade of any major investment in further education and the fall in opportunities for mature students to attend higher education. Excellent practice by many educational institutions and educators notwithstanding little national policy has supported the plethora of compensation approaches needed to prevent ESL.

Whole school approaches in terms of extended schools had funding withdrawn a decade ago. These were a major approach to tackle the root problem at the same time as providing interventions and compensations ie acting at all levels. However as detailed earlier in this review there are many examples of schools and communities enacting their own whole school approaches on models such as the children's community. These are effective and very promising but have yet to be fully evaluated not to make it to policy. The family hubs that are in today's policy are not focused on school and have insufficient funding but are an excellent start in the right direction. They are focusing on families in need and early years and there is some evidence that they have been getting multiagency stakeholders together. There exist some impressive examples of CIC's such as children's communities that would serve well as the basis for a national policy in whole school approaches.

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Appendix 3

Co-creation of successful policies

Report on Dialogic Seminars



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6. Overall Report including Report on Transnational Seminar – MPHSS

Version 1.0
PORTUGAL

National Dialogic Seminar

Work Package 1

Lead Beneficiary Director-General for Education (DGE)/Ministry of Education

Authors DGE

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1.0 Introduction

The Portuguese National Dialogic Seminar took place on October 4th, 2023, at Santo António Schools Cluster, Barreiro (next to Lisbon) between 2:30 pm and 6:00 pm. The event was attended by around 30 participants including students, parents/guardians, technicians, teachers, non-teaching staff, “policymakers”/DGE, researchers from the University of Porto involved in the project and representatives of non-governmental organizations – ACM - PI (High Commission for Migration, Public Institution).

The DGE/ME team has decided to hold the Dialogic Seminar in this school since it comprises a wide variety of stakeholders, especially students from more vulnerable families. Being a TEIP school (Priority Intervention Educational Areas) this school gets additional support and resources from the Ministry of Education to address its context and the whole school community is really committed with the goal of tackling early school leaving and school underachievement, mainly within Roma community, students from Portuguese speaking African countries (PALOP) and migrant students.

This report presents the reflections and ideas of all the participants who decided to express them within the context of the Seminar.

The main goals of the Dialogic Seminar were to:

- **listen to different voices, especially those of students’ and families’ from more vulnerable contexts, valuing everyone's participation. There are no opinions more important than others;**
- **understand the impact of social policies on results and retention/early school leaving through the life experience of the individuals who are their target;**
- **understand the processes that underlie the implementation of these policies and make recommendations for a more successful policy development.**

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Structure of the seminar

The seminar took place in the multimedia room at the core school of Santo António Schools Cluster. It was structured according to the project guidelines and lasted 3h 30m, mediated by a coffee break and according to the following methodology:

- **Challenge/Icebreaker: Since there was a diverse range of participants, it was deemed appropriate to carry out an icebreak activity;**
- **Formal presentation:**
 - **Presentation of the SCIREARLY Project and its objectives;**
 - **Presentation of the objectives of the dialogical seminar;**
- **Plenary: response to two questions involving the different stakeholders;**
- **Formal presentation:**
 - **Presentation of prevention, intervention and compensation measures (taking as an example the preliminary reports concerning Spain, Poland and the United Kingdom);**
- **Working groups with 15/20 minute slots to discuss the measures implemented in the different partner countries and their parallels with the Portuguese reality;**
- **Plenary for recommendations and conclusions.**

2.2. Agenda

- 14h30 Opening session: School Deputy-Director, Paula Domingues
Director-General for Education, Pedro Cunha (DGE)
Head of Curriculum Development Unit, Helder Pais (DGE)
- 14h40 Introducing all the participants (sitting in circle) and the project
- 14h45 Challenge (ice-breaking activity)
- 15h00 Plenary for discussion: 2 questions on factors of increase and decrease of school dropout
- 15h45 Coffee-break
- 16h00 Presentation of different measures implemented in partner countries in the project
- 16h10 Groups discussion (prevention, intervention and compensation measures)
- 17h10 Plenary for recommendations and final conclusions
- 17h30 Closing session

2.3. Recording

The seminar was audio-recorded with the written consent of all participants.

2.4 Analysis

The seminar was recorded, transcribed and analyzed using the following steps:

- **Transcription**
- **Reading and note-taking**
- **Data analysis**
- **Searching for themes**
- **Defining themes**
- **Writing**

The seminar followed the structure proposed by the project team, focusing on:

- **Prevention Measures**
- **Intervention measures**
- **Compensation measures**

2.5. General keywords

From the Challenge - Ice-breaking activity - **What is School for you in a word?** Here are some key words around which the dialog began, and the themes developed.

- **Learning opportunities**
- **Window**
- **Future**
- **Inclusion**
- **Share**
- **Grow**
- **Freedom**
- **Knowledge**
- **Respect**

2.6. Participants

All participants signed the informed consent document. In the case of students, authorization was obtained from their respective guardians.

The information has been collected through audio recording, archived securely and only used for the purposes of the research, such as reports, publications or presentations.

Participants have been informed that their identity will be protected, ensuring the anonymity of their participation.

The following table summarizes the participants' variety.

Entity	Type of participant	N.º
DGE/ ME	Pedro Cunha - Director-General for Education Helder Pais – Head of Curriculum Development Unit Ana Carreira – PT SCIREARLY team Carla Mota – PT SCIREARLY team Filipe Teixeira - PT SCIREARLY team	5
ACM, I.P. (High Commission for Migration, Public Institution)	Teresa Vieira (ACM* member from Roma origin) Francisco Azul (ACM* member from Roma origin)	2
University of Porto	Sofia Castanheira Pais, Professor/ Researcher Carmo Cabral Gouveia, Professor / Researcher	2
School psychologists and social workers	School Psychologist Social Worker Social Worker	3
Teachers	School Cluster Deputy-Director Teacher, Head of School General Council Teacher, Vocational Courses Teacher, TEIP Coordinator (Priority Intervention Educational Areas) Teacher, Citizenship and Development Coordinator	5
Students	3 Roma students 2 PALOP students (Portuguese Speaking African Countries) 1 migrant student from Bangladesh	6
Parents	2 Roma parents 2 PALOP parents 1 migrant parent from Bangladesh	5
School Assistants (janitors)	2 school assistants/janitors (one of them the Roma mediator)	2
Others		
Total of participants		30

3.0 Social determinants of underachievement and dropout

3.1 DATA ANALYSIS OF QUESTION 1

What factors keep students engaged in schools?

Several themes emerged in response to this question:

- **Well-being and sense of belonging**

All the participants (parents, students and teachers) were unanimous in saying that students are more interested in being at school the better they feel welcomed, understood and integrated, as we can see in the testimony of one student:

"School is a second home for us. I feel comfortable and I have everything covered. We have teachers and staff who support us. What keeps me interested in school is academic training and preparation for working life so that I can have a stable life." (PALOP student).

- **Trust**

For parents and pupils from the Roma community, trust is a factor that keeps them at school. They need to feel confident in the teachers, the management and the staff. This factor drives their desire to learn.

According to one mother, what keeps them at school "is that the school is always calling home when the students are absent. The teachers don't leave them unattended," It's important that teachers maintain an interest in their students and play a leading role in their presence and integration, by means of a "more personalized attention:

"I make a point of talking to each student, getting to know their name. We care about each one. We make a difference by providing this personalized attention" (deputy director).

- **Projects**

The fact that the school integrates different projects that facilitate motivating teaching practices, triggering a close relationship with teachers and staff. Two projects were mentioned:

Project *UBUNTU* (a project run by the *Instituto Padre António Vieira* for a significant number of schools in Portugal). This project highlighted the development of empathy and learning with a deep impact. It highlights the ability to listen to others and their opinions developing socio-emotional competencies.

One of the students said that he "learned to empathize, to see the other person's side. Ubuntu changed a lot of things. It was a great incentive. It's always good to listen to everyone's opinion" (student1).

Roma Educa: A project outside the school promoted by the High Commission for Migration, which awards a scholarship (primary and secondary education), funding school development within the Roma community. "I joined Roma Educa. At the time I joined for the money, but then I realized that school is my home. I think school is important for everyone (student2).

- **TEIP Program**

The school where the seminar was held is part of the Priority Intervention Educational Areas Programme (TEIP). Since 1996, this program has been an educational policy measure aimed at schools located in areas of greater social vulnerability, with a view to ensuring the inclusion and school achievement of all students, improving the quality of learning and tackling school dropout.

A new phase is currently starting, the TEIP4 Program.

Schools integrated in these challenging contexts can define improvement plans, supported on their realities and on the knowledge of the local contexts, through the reinforcement of their autonomy and of positive discrimination measures to:

- **Human resources empowerment;**
- **Additional human resources (teachers, psychologists, social workers, mediators among others);**
- **Additional funds that allow schools to organise learning networks, as well as the monitoring and the assessment by the higher education institutions;**
- **Diversification of the educational offers, in order to respond to the fundamental needs of students and to assure their school inclusion.**

- **Family / School Relations**

It's a school that values learning and the relationship with families, keeping the community involved on a daily basis, where "families aren't numbers, they're names and they have faces" (technician2). On the other hand, a lot of work has been done to get families to value school, because only when they understand the true value of school and how a quality education can contribute to improving their life will parents commit to sending their children to school.

- **Support office**

The student and community support office works to welcome, refer, advise and support students, making the school environment welcoming and focusing on a close relationship with students, teachers, mediators, staff and management. "The office provides social support, mediates between the school and the neighborhood and a large part of the projects come through the office... some families arrive without documents, but with good expectations of our country. The office helps with contacts, helps fill out the paperwork because without documentation the students are not entitled to food" (psychologist).

- **Mental health**

School is very important for students' mental health. Friends are made and knowledge is valued. For the guardian (as a foreigner), school serves to get to know the culture and traditions of the host country. They value the creation of empathy through sharing and socializing. School creates human beings.

- **Motivation**

Roma students spoke about their experience of feeling motivated to learn and the importance of having goals, valuing school as an enabler of practical learning and creating tools for life.

3.2 Data analysis of question 2

What factors contribute to students' disengagement in schools?

Several themes emerged in response to this question:

- **Cultural Issues**

One of the constraints felt by a member of the Roma community and presented to the discussion is the mismatch between school culture and Roma culture. The fact that, for example, in Roma communities girls leave school early is cultural, there is the weight of tradition and the idea that school is of no use to them. For this community, the priority is the family. "I left school at 15 and I'm studying in the evening school. I left school for family reasons and came back because I think it's important to have at least the 9th grade" (student 3). It is essential to build trust with ethnic minority families in order to reduce the distance that has been created throughout history.

- **Material/financial issues**

The question of enrolling in higher education is something that worries upper secondary school students and many don't feel motivated because they can't afford to pay higher education fees. The fact that merit scholarships are awarded to students is relevant to their motivation to study in this cycle of education.

"My son won a merit scholarship" (EE2). "In the case of Roma students, it's difficult to think in the long term, because the family tradition doesn't have, for example, the habit of saving money for university" (ACM2).

- **Lack of trust**

When families believe in the school system things are easier. The mediators (operational assistants/janitors at this school) have this important role of linking the community and school fostering trust.

- **Segregation by students and teachers**

Roma students and parents pointed out some segregation among peers, which is not often, but since there is a heavy cultural background they still don't feel totally included.

2.0 Mapping successful policies to tackle underachievement

This section will present reflections and discussions on the results of research into measures in the various partner countries relating to prevention, intervention and compensation measures.

4.1. PREVENTION MEASURES

The following were presented and discussed as measures to prevent early school leaving and failure:

- Improving access to and the quality of pre-school education. Greater investment in pre-school education;
- Reducing retention rates;
- Increasing extracurricular activities;
- Investing in teacher training (initial and in-service training);
- Specific support for schools located in vulnerable areas;
- Involving students and parents in decisions;
- Involving children and young people in decision-making;
- Curriculum adaptations/adjustments;
- Curriculum adaptations (outdoor learning);
- Support for students with educational needs;
- Support for transitions between cycles;
- Systematic support in learning the host language;
- Strengthening vocational paths;
- Close links between education and work.

4.2 INTERVENTION MEASURES

The following intervention measures to tackle early school leaving and failure were presented during the discussion:

- Identifying and providing specific support for students who are failing at school and students who are not native speakers of the language of schooling
- Strengthening parental involvement
- Creating partnerships (e.g. with companies as part of their social responsibility)
- Motivating and empowering teachers
- Student-focused strategies (e.g. tutoring...)
- Reinforcement of out-of-school activities
- Student-centered support
- Premium scholarship
- Free meals for students
- Funding for schools
- Extracurricular activities
- Parent training

4.3. COMPENSATION MEASURES

The following were put forward as compensatory measures to combat early school leaving and failure:

- Improving second chance schools and alternative courses
- Facilitating places for further training and re-entry into the education system
- Recognition and validation of career paths
- Support for re-entry into the education system
- Second chance schemes
- Professional apprenticeships

5.0 Recommendations

5.1 Recommendation of prevention measures

- There should be greater investment and more places in quality pre-school education, particularly in order to build a relationship of trust and proximity with the Roma community;
- More support for transitions between cycles, with more coordination between teachers from different cycles;
- Learning the Portuguese language should have an initial phase of 1 to 3 months just for first words;
- Training on the history and culture of the Roma and other peoples to better understand students from these communities;
- More extracurricular activities that connect students to school;
- Greater involvement of parents in school, mediators, teachers, social workers;
- Emotion management office from the earliest years;
- Student participation in extracurricular projects, e.g. Ubuntu, friendly school;
- Reducing the number of students per class;
- Valuing multi-cultural classes

5.2 Recommendation of intervention measures

- Adult education to learn the language of schooling (it is important that parents also learn to make integration easier for everyone) with flexible timetables (night and day);
- More coordination between ministries to facilitate local support and measures in general;
- More support offices for students and families, as a school measure for guidance and support and proximity to students at risk, made up of a multidisciplinary team (teachers, psychologists, social workers, mediators) to solve various dropout issues;
- Leadership that is aware of the school and its community well and allocates the right people in the right places/positions;
- A very strong communication network with the school, with mediators who are very close to the school and communicate with families at the first sign of trouble;
- Smaller class sizes that reflect diversity and do not create "ghettos";
- Specific programs to develop emotion management;
- Dissemination of programs such as INCLUD-ED;
- Less curriculum overload and educational pathways that are more geared to the needs of each individual, while allowing space for all students to study the cultures that exist in schools, so that everyone can respect each other;
- Implementation of support networks for students with mediation by community members.

5.3 Recommendation of compensation measures

- Valuing vocational courses and second chance education;
- Financial support for schools so that they can support students in material matters.

6.0 Main conclusions

The Seminar was very interesting with participants representing different stakeholders: students, teachers, parents, school leaderships, school psychologists and social workers, mediators, school assistants and policy makers.

A very interesting discussion, first on a plenary approach, then in three groups and in the end a final plenary for sharing and taking conclusions/recommendations.

In a nutshell the main factors that contribute to keep students at school are trust and wellbeing, as well as motivating lessons and a motivated school community that fosters a proximity support and relationship with the students.

Education policies should invest even more in pre-school education, extracurricular activities for a better integration of all the students, curriculum adjustments and this school can be a good practice example fostering a growing sense of belonging as a result of the collaborative work of all the school staff and the families.

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Version 1.0

A REPORT ON THE DIALOGIC SEMINAR HELD IN DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY

Reduce early school leaving and underachievement





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Participants

There were 31 participants in total in the following categories:

Teachers

- Home school Liaison
- Guidance Counsellors x2
- DEIS Coordinators x 2
- Year Head in a DEIS School
- Transition Year Coordinators x 2

Students & Parents - 13 participants from 2 DEIS schools

Principals 4 (3 DEIS schools and one FE College)

Former Director Curriculum Development Unit

President of the Joint Managerial Board

Policy Makers:

- Director of Tusla Education Support Service
- Integrated Services Manager of Tusla
- Social Inclusion Principal Officer Department of Education and Skills
- Social Inclusion Principal Officer Department of Education and Skills with responsibility for Implementation of the DEIS plan - monitoring and evaluation

Methods

The seminar took place in Dublin City University over a three-hour period.

There were four phases to the seminar.

Phase 1: Ice-Breakers

As there was a diverse range of participants it was considered appropriate to have an icebreaking element.

For this meeting we adapted the

- Name
- Place
- Taste

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which proved very popular and effective.

Phase 2: Briefing

The research team delivered two briefing presentations

1. An introduction to the SCIREARLY Programme and Horizon Europe
2. An overview of the policy areas relating to the dialogic seminar

Phase 3 – Group discussion

The wider group was split into three mixed groups who then had an intensive one hour discussion around the themes identified. This was recorded electronically and on flipchart.

Phase 4 Plenary discussion

Each of the three groups made a presentation to the plenary which was followed by a wide ranging and detailed discussion.

Recording

All elements of the process were recorded and transcribed.

Analysis

The seminars were recorded, transcribed and analysed using approach to thematic analysis of data proposed by Braun and Clarke (2013: 202-203), who identified 7 stages in the coding and analysis process as follows.

1. Transcription.
2. Reading and familiarisation; taking note of items of potential interest.
3. Coding – complete; across entire dataset
4. Searching for themes.
5. Reviewing themes (producing a map of the provisional themes and subthemes, and relationships between them – aka the thematic map)
6. Defining and naming themes
7. Writing – finalising analysis.

The broad analytic frame followed the model agreed by the project team over the course of a number of meetings and required a focus on:

Engagement
Disengagement
Prevention
Intervention
Compensation



There is a widespread recognition (Lamote et al, 2013) that Early School Leaving (ESL) exists on a continuum that sees students move from a stance of engagement to one of disengagement. Rather than viewing it as a one-time event, this narrative of gradual alienation allows policy makers, practitioners and participants to consider how to target interventions in a manner that reverses the trend of disengagement, or where possible, creates a policy and practice context where the habit of engagement is embedded at a systemic and school level. To understand how this context might be created, it is important to consider the different policy lenses that might be used to identify successful interventions. Here the European Commission policy framework of 2011 that posits a framework focusing on policies designed to prevent ESL, approaches that can intervene in order to shift the dynamic back towards participation and compensation measures that can be used to address the lived reality of young people who have experienced ESL.

Engagement and Disengagement

There is a widespread recognition that engagement, and the corollary concept of disengagement, is a complex yet important reality in context of Early School Leaving. Al Rashidi, Phan and Ngu (2016) speak of seven decades of development in the area citing Appleton et al., 2008; Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006; Finn, 1989 etc. as key researchers who have linked engagement with ESL. For the purpose of this analysis, we have chosen to use the 2004 model suggested by Fredericks et al. who have distinguished between three dimensions of engagement: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive. Behavioural engagement pertains to involvement in academic and social activities, emotional engagement refers to the relationships with teachers, classmates, and/or the school, and cognitive engagement refers to the willingness to exert effort into complex problems and tasks. This three-dimensional structure of school engagement is widely accepted and has been validated in research on student engagement (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, & Pagani, 2009; Wang, Willett, & Eccles, 2011).

Towards an analytic framework

Accepting that there is a broad conceptual hinterland to ESL involving engagement and disengagement, we were left with the challenge of how to examine the actual policy interventions designed to address the challenges of school leaving. Here it was decided that the 2011 European commission policy analytic framework would be the most appropriate with its 3-fold division of policy initiatives, which are outlined below.

Prevention measures, which aim to tackle the root problems that may eventually result in early leaving. Prevention measures can include: Access to good quality early childhood education and care (ECEC); Relevant and engaging curriculum; Flexible educational pathways; Better integration of newly arrived migrant children; Smooth transition between different levels of education; High quality, attractive and engaging vocational education and training (VET); Involvement of pupils and parents in school decision-making; Initial and continuous education for education staff; Whole school approaches (positive relationships among all stakeholders); Strong and well-developed guidance system; and Cooperation with the world of work.

Intervention measures, which aim to combat any emerging difficulties experienced by students, by improving the quality of education and training and providing targeted support. Many intervention measures apply to all pupils but are especially beneficial and relevant to those at risk of ESL. Other intervention measures are more student-focused and build on the early detection of support needed for learning and motivation. They should take a multi-



professional and holistic approach and provide individual guidance in addition to practical and emotional support.

The intervention measures can include: Awareness of early warning signs, Focus on the needs of the individual pupil, Extra-curricular and out-of-school activities to enrich the learning offered to strengthen students' sense of belongingness with school; Developing the capacity of school staff to create and maintain learning environments that support at-risk pupils especially support teacher to use strategies and methodologies to meet the students' needs; Strengthen Guidance and counselling; Empower families and parents to support their children's education; Raise parental awareness of ESL and involve them as partners in their child' education.

Compensation measures, which create new opportunities for those who have left education and training prematurely to gain qualifications. Such measures include: Accessible and relevant second chance schemes; Quality and recognition of the alternative pathways on the labour market; strong governance of these institutions to ensure multi-service collaboration in second chance education; Personalised and holistic approach to second chance education (focused on developing life skills and employability skills; ensuring access to specialised supports e.g. guidance and counselling, psychological and emotional support, financial support etc.); Flexibility in the curricula; Links between second chance education and mainstream education; high quality teaching

As a final note, it is important to recognise that in common with many analytic models there will be some overlap between the different thematic categories and while we have endeavoured to reduce these, it has been impossible to entirely prevent.

Themes relating to engagement and disengagement

We used, in a broad sense, the three engagement dimensions of:

- Behavioural
- Emotional
- Cognitive

When exploring the stakeholder inputs relating engagement and disengagement. What is striking from our analysis, but on reflection perhaps not surprising, is the centrality of the Covid-19 pandemic experience to many of the points brought up by stakeholders where thinking about the process of disengagement.

Theme 1: The impact of COVID 19

When reflecting on experiences of recent years relating to rates of ESL in Irish schools, there was as strong identification of the COVID-19 pandemic as an inflection point. There are a number of sub-themes associated with this.

THEME 1.1: COVID 19 AND ALIENATION / DISENGAGEMENT

One staff participant summarised the impact of COVID-19 on school attendance in the following manner:

because post-COVID, we were finding a huge difference between our attendance then and now. We were actually on top of it after a lot of work. But since COVID it has gone from 10% to last year's 25%. So on an average every day out of 640 students we had nearly 200 absences, either full days, half days, on holiday. And it's something we've tried very hard to work out.

This idea was picked up in the later plenary discussion by a parental representative, who reacting to the broad theme of attendance said:

And not just that but also the culture around school attendance changing. Whereas school attendance was seen as being hugely important and a lot of support and a lot of time and effort was put into making sure that it was presented in that way, the intervention of COVID and the translation and the broader way that we as a society look at what it means to be in places has also impacted the way in which being in school is talked about and thought about for some people. And that's been a challenge.

Here the issue of supports is mentioned, and this will be addressed again later in this section, but it is notable that this stakeholder also identified the way the conversation around school has changed and how this is challenging.

just not even coming in the door and you know linking with parents just trying to get them in just can't get them in the door

This latter point was picked up by a teacher stakeholder who suggested that the key issue related to a transition in parental attitudes which we might view as a subtheme.

THEME 1.2: THE IMPACT OF PARENTAL ATTITUDES TO SCHOOL – INCREASED ANXIETY

There was a strong suggestion from some participants that a key factor in disengagement is *anxiety among the parents* suggesting that schools now *need to have that conversation with the parents and with the students*. Clearly this is an example of Frederick's emotional engagement / disengagement.

One of the home school liaison teachers who worked with students who were disengaging put it quite starkly:

Parents are ringing me saying, will you come up here and get him in, because he's not going to leave the house for me. What am I meant to do? Do you know, I go up and I talk and, you know. I can't get him out of bed, you come up and get him out of bed. He won't come on and get out of bed for me. I said, well, he won't get out of bed for you, he's not getting out of bed for me. But, you know, and you go up and you try and do what you can, and I can't go up into the child's bedroom and that type of stuff. And this has gone on and on and on and everyone just blames each other.

This particular participant, reflecting on the impact that this had on the key behavioural stage of disengagement namely reduced school attendance suggested that

I know that sounds all very negative but that's what I'm saying you know, we're back what now, nearly 4 weeks? but I haven't looked at attendance, I'm out trying to talk kids out of the bedroom do you know?



Interestingly, one of the policy makers reacting to this suggested that

I don't think they're that anxious, I think they just don't want to come to school again.

While another teacher participant felt that parenting needs support

parents are afraid of their kids.

Covid also facilitated a shift in priorities among parents as they also enjoy their children being at home with them

So it's become a part of what to do, you know, it's no big deal missing time, spending time alone. And the parents, single parents like having them alone, collect the younger siblings ...a huge education for the parents, I think. They're really struggling.

It is important to note that student participants addressed this issue in a different manner suggesting that

the impact COVID had on attendance rates was that they really improved.

This linked to a broader discussion around the *type and mode* of engagement and an emerging theme of a cultural change in the nature of school engagement.

THEME 1.3: COVID AND THE EMERGENCE OF HYBRID CULTURES OF ENGAGEMENT

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the broader societal adoption and adaptation of hybrid approaches to work also impacted on the manner in which certain student cohorts chose to approach school. Reflecting on a change in school engagement in recent years, one teacher suggested that a senior cohort who had gone through COVID developed a strategic focus to engagement

They tried, I suppose, they looked at subjects they thought they would do best in. So they still had a view to the leaving cert, they still carried that as something they wanted to achieve. They didn't disengage completely.

This latter point is particularly important as it appears to demonstrate a transition in approach at student level, perhaps supported by a wider cultural transition to 'working from home'.

Another stakeholder summarised this process of prioritising 'hybrid working' as follows

Yeah, the students themselves though wanted their ideal situation to be to come to school for some time and to work. That's how they communicated that, so they still placed a value on learning. But it was in context.

This hybridity was not necessarily welcomed by all participants, with one policy maker outlining a return to a set of policy provisions that prioritised sanction as well as engagement. They suggested that there was no reasonable, legislative or realistic possibility of

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getting prosecuted through COVID and (they) were instructed not to because there just wasn't, no one could attend school at the school that was closed. So the legislation didn't stand and I think, I don't know

if we can get back to where it was, I don't, but we'll see. So prosecution has, you know, the enforcement end of the work is back up and is ramping up. We'll see where that goes and we need to keep an eye on that.

Interestingly, and in response to this comment in a wider plenary another policy stakeholder suggested that at a systems level there will be an attempt to refocus activities to facilitate engagement at a behavioural as well as an emotional level focusing on attendance identifying an approach that will see

... a series of seminars targeting yourselves around what is, an international expert is trying to guide us through, what should you be looking at, and then what might you do when you see that. And I think we have to be honest and say, this is new territory, because it's not really what was driving it 20 years ago but maybe some of it is. But we need new strategies ... as quick as we can so this year a big focus on an attendance awareness campaign.

A further, connected, point was picked up by a teacher who suggested that the socio-economic impact of COVID and the capacity to integrate studying with working also had a serious effect on patterns of engagement. They said

I was sixth year at Yearhead last year and what I would have noticed in terms of attendance was homes at home, they were complicit with allowing students to work. So the student wanted to work because they needed, the family needed the money and it was actually, you know, there were great qualities that they showed.

They had a very nuanced analysis for what we might see as the behavioural, emotional and cognitive impact of this acknowledging the negative impact that this had in terms of their attendance, and maybe attainment, but also recognising that new skills and attitudes developed

Definitely impacted on their learning, but I think it showed that they had a sense of resilience, you know, that wasn't, they didn't need before, and society has changed, you know. So I felt, speaking to some sixth years, they were carrying responsibility way beyond their years. Did their attendance fall off? Yeah, they did and they were in fairness some of these students worked really hard in both cases, you know, they showed up for work but they were wrecked.

The issue of students living in poverty seeking low skilled, low paid jobs has been an issue for DEIS schools for decades however, the benefits of remaining in education have been well documented. The challenge of hybridity to engagement is perhaps perfectly summed up in the following statement

if they're getting already to the place where they want to be, they've got money, they can contribute at home, making life better and yet at the same time it's devaluing their own kind of education or their own opportunity.

Making schools places where such students choose to stay and are not lured out by short term gains continues to challenge all involved in DEIS education.



THEME 2: THE EMERGENCE OF NEW CULTURES OF EXPERTISE

A second theme that, was the recognition of the manner in which recent years has seen an acceleration of the democratisation of knowledge. In the plenary session one participant said

There is also a recognition that a lot of our students now can access all of the information we can access. They can access in terms of requirements, what needs to be done in terms of mandatory attendance, school leaving and options during, before and after school, which changes the dynamic and changes the structures as well.

One of the student participants, when discussing their peers said

They've knowledge. You know we're underestimating them, I think.

A practical implication of examining that can be seen in the following anecdote from a teacher explaining how access to information lessens the coercive power of school attendance structures and perhaps accelerates the disengagement process

He went to research on the computer. What am I meant to do with that? And then he sits down and he says, you know, there was a time he's not going into school. Do you know, that's what's out there. These lads are not afraid of telling you what they know.

There is a view that students are becoming more fearless of consequences having direct access to the information and they can see patterns of threats not becoming a reality as the system moves so slowly. The teachers recognised that the knowledge has given the students more power and the coercive power of the school system is diminished as a result

....education is not going on the agenda at the moment in very impoverished areas like Finglas with 63% of all 18 to 20 year olds are unemployed. These lads are not afraid of telling you what they know. You can't do anything to me. I'm gone out here when I'm 16, I'm 14 and a half now. You can send me all the letters you want.

The power has switched to the students.

The challenge here, of course, is to think through the implications of this democratisation of knowledge and to clarify the policy narrative around this.

It is to the policy framework that may or may not facilitate a re-thinking of the manner in which we approach ESL.

Theme 3: Prevention measures

As we have seen, prevention measures are broadly defined by the European Commission as measures which aim to tackle the root problems that may eventually result in early leaving. To a certain extent, some of the policy initiatives



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in this area overlap with compensation measures established to deal with the lived reality of those who have experienced ESL. While we will endeavour to differentiate between these two categories, at times it will be necessary to acknowledge a conceptual and practical overlap.

THEME 3.1: THE ROLE AND POTENTIAL OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

When discussing the impact of ECEC, one of the policy participants succinctly summarised the perceived benefits of the sector

good quality, early childhood education is of great value in the longer run in terms of people staying in school and benefiting from school.

This was picked up by one of the parent representatives who said

I just I was like, two little small children at home and now the second one has just started and I was just actually blown away by the curriculum and what they are covering. So my elder one has just started primary school and he just completed his two years and the younger has just started but I was really blown away by you know, the depth of the curriculum and what he got from us, ... I can't believe what they have covered I think you know, it just I'm far from what I suppose my memory of what of what it was.

There was a general acknowledgment of the importance of ECEC across all groups, perhaps apart from the students, but there were issues with regards to the type of provision and the challenges posed by the indigenous model in Ireland which was perceived by some participants as having taken a wrong turning when it prioritised private over public provision.

As one participant stated

To thing for me would be that it is a publicly funded or publicly subsidized serves. But it is privately provided. There is no public provision. Yeah, virtually no public provision. ...

This is perceived as a problem because

You're trying to influence public policy, over private institutions. Yeah, ... very limited power over them.

Another challenge was perceived as being the challenge of getting staff given the relative paucity of pay and the knock on impact this has on a sector that was acknowledged as being vital to creating a continuum of high quality educational provision.

Here one policy stakeholder highlights the conundrum posed by the enhanced qualifications profiled in ECE yet the remaining low pay and the drift from the sector into compulsory education sectors

the issue seems to be the staff there. It's expensive, but it's not the staff who were getting it in terms of retaining quality people, more than a bit will be here to primary and post primary it must be all the more difficult to retain people in early childhood because if I was one of them, the obvious thing would be to try and progress into primary or secondary, rather than stay and have an engaged career in Early childhood education.



Interestingly, from the perspective of this study, the presentation on policy interventions in this area in other EU countries resonated with reference being made to provision in Poland and Greece and the perceived benefits of these initiatives in the context of a push to combat ESL.

THEME 3.2: TRANSITION BETWEEN DIFFERENT STAGES OF SCHOOLING

There was a general acknowledgement of the importance of transition points to prevent ESL. All stakeholder groups, and in particular staff and policy makers, identified the necessity not only to recognise the centrality of transition but also to plan actively to make sure that these points were properly supported. It is acknowledged that the latest recommendations around DEIS planning asks schools to examine every transition with the home school a key player in these transitions.

One school leader spoke of the general school policy in the area stating that they

have a transition programme from primary to post primary. We'll do that in a general way for all students, all 150 students coming in.

In addition to this they also do transition in

a targeted way for the students who have particular learning needs for particular social needs or disadvantages, whatever else. When they come in, they'll have to initial meeting one to one guidance counsellor all with the year head. But they students as you said, there are students who might need more support. And it's not just the quality of equity, they will get more meetings more time but to make sure that they're they have the extra supports they need.

Interestingly this support

but that then follows through into second year, third year.

This type of long-term support was also emphasised by another school leader who suggested that rather than relying on whole school approaches that there needed to be and *individual transition plan* that ensures that

every student that you meet has a transition and a working document that changes over time with the ideas of what can I do next and constantly training like oh, that's for the same person.

In the wider plenary session, while there was a recognition of the benefits of this there was also an awareness of the costs and how difficult it is to fund individually targeted supports in a system that struggles for resources. This was summed up by one school leader when he said

With all of these plans, comes in administrative overhead and the paperwork is just piled higher and higher and higher. ... 22 years on, I'd say 80% of my job was papers when I was very good. Just like the allocation of administrative resources was based on a capitation which is just seriously so there'll be no there was no budget for that. ... but it is a biggie you know like individual Transition Plans, guidance plans. Somebody



has to put this together. You have the professional to come up with the content, you know, but you need people to produce the plan. You know...

THEME 3.3: HIGH QUALITY VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

There was strong interest in the area of VET and in particular, in the necessity to explore how differential provision for students in danger of experiencing EAL might be embedded in the system in a non-tokenistic manner. Key to this was the re-energising of the apprenticeship model. As a first stage, one teacher mentioned that there needed to be a change in mindset at a values level stating that

And I think we do have a societal issue about the value of education, about what it actually is and what is valued or not. The electrician or the plumber that goes and does their two years, Are they any less educated than someone ...do we talk about trades and vocations and professions in the same level. Mindsets need to shift.

Others disagreed saying that

The view of the place of apprenticeships has improved from being a very male orientated working class option. Increasingly it is being appreciated as a legitimate pathway but there is a lot of work to be done in this area.

For some, the process of changing perceptions of apprenticeships required a new vocabulary

instead of calling them vocational schools, you can call them apprentice training colleges and link them straight into the construction companies you know and from a construction background.

Others suggested that the system was already beginning to change

they're putting apprenticeships onto the CAO, that's helped. You know that approach, that's the only small way.

In the plenary session, there was a broad discussion on this topic that drew in a range of international contexts and tried to position the Irish experience within this

And one of the things we identified very strongly here was the idea of apprenticeships, which need to be expanded, need to be changed in terms of the gender balance and what's valued in terms of that. There was comment about the systems, particularly say Switzerland, which has a very, very strong apprenticeship tradition and shows you the way in which a society and a culture can actually develop and value these types of pathways and not just in terms of lip service. So that was considered very important as well.

The implications of ignoring the VET pathway were succinctly summarised by one student participant who said

but we kind of focus on main courses, and not really like plumbing. There's many big courses, like you want to be a doctor, lawyer, we know the way we want to study, we have it all planned out. Whereas if somebody wants to be a plumber, wants to do something tiny, there's no courses for that and they leave out early.



Theme 4 : Intervention measures

Intervention measures, which aim to combat any emerging difficulties experienced by students, by improving the quality of education and training and providing targeted support. Many intervention measures apply to all pupils but are especially beneficial and relevant to those at risk of ESL. Other intervention measures are more student-focused and build on the early detection of support needed for learning and motivation. They should take a multi-professional and holistic approach and provide individual guidance in addition to practical and emotional support.

THEME 4.1: GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING PROVISION

The issue of guidance and counselling was also seen as linking with transition and support of agency. Throughout the seminar there were references to the positive impact on career guidance as well as guidance counselling with a call for more availability:

there is nowhere near enough guidance in our schools at any level.

DEIS schools should have proper access to psychologists and more guidance time according to the principals and teachers - with time to fully focus on the future planning as well as dealing with the constant need for therapeutic support and trauma therapy. These should not be in a constant state of vying for time - one taking time off the other - DEIS schools need better resourcing in this department rather than the tokenism of a little extra allocation as it is now

we have psychotherapist in our school funded by a charity - they are flat out - but why do people need to stand in the rain to collect money to have these in our school - our kids see things that no child should see. They live in a violent world of drugs and poverty and are often out all night on a bike just wild - so many mothers got hooked on drugs over covid - so they are wild - and in trauma as a result - we have to pick up the pieces so we have a queue for the therapy- course we do and the guidance are to the pin of their collar.

A teacher also linked this work of the counselor to accessing resources for the students.

We get four assessments a year for clinical and educational. That's ridiculous.

Among the strongest voices in this part of the discussion were the student participants. They recognised the importance of trained specialist provision arguing

So it would help if we had psychologists that was actually trained rather than just throwing teachers in the deep end and having them do what they think is best.

They also suggested that relevance and relatability were important when designing support systems



Some of the lads over there, they said they had a guidance counsellor that lives near them so they can actually relate to them. So they're easier to talk to, they know the issues that are around the area, and so it's just better.

There was a strikingly innovative suggestion from the student group who proposed

have guidance counsellors that are actually your age. So have trained students, have them have training, and have them picked out by the teachers, and have them have training so that students can come to them because it's easier to go to someone your age that knows your problems and knows what you're going through rather than an older person because it's obviously different generations and it's a different time now.

Even without this particular innovation, all participants recognised the need for high quality guidance and counselling provision.

There was, however, a particular interest in and focus on the way in which guidance and counselling resources are allocated in the school with an argument that rather than focusing on senior school and exam focused guidance this support should be present throughout the education continuum. One school leader commented with reference to recently published research

But you had an ESRI study which said the disengagement of students begins in second year. So but if you have an absence of guidance, and because of the absence of bodies, and the pressure in the senior cycle, but the bulk of guidance tends to be in the senior cycle, but the actual danger point is in second year.

It was also highlighted by another principal that the counselling side of the role is often more urgently in demand as students are in crisis

More of, but again, the guidance, the whole area of guidance, counselling is huge. We're under pressure, we don't have personnel, first of all, to take in, and then they're under the pressure all the time. It's having people in all those different projects, starting in primary school, to have more psychotherapists and so on

The positive impact that the career guidance has on students' future was also highlighted with a particular link to the positive impact of their links with university access programmes as they were identified as being particularly effective in changing mindsets and developing a vision for a positive future.

the access programmes for universities, a huge impact in our school, for creating that culture capital, like it completely changed our school and from first year now our guidance start working with students about thinking about choice, what are they going to do, what can they do for hobbies to a career.

It was a game changer for the school and for the community.

THEME 4.2: DEIS PLANNING - ONE SIZE FITS ALL MODEL DOES NOT WORK

The positive impact of a well developed DEIS plan was articulated by a school DEIS co-ordinator. Schools need to be further supported in developing a bespoke response to their context through the construction of their DEIS



Plan and a set of interventions that are tailored to meet the needs of their specific cohort of students and their needs. Every school's plan should be unique to them as they respond to their identified needs and issues.

the main work would be support schools with their DEIS plans and what their targets are and what their actions are. And you see some of them. Some of them are great, some of them are amazing. Some of them are just grabbed from a neighbor, thrown in because, look, that works. And all the actions were not about linking in with the reality of the students in front of them.

It was noted by a principal that the DEIS plan can be very effective if the staff take the time and are supported to make the targets and measures focused on their identified needs

And I think the whole point of the DEIS plan was that you contextualize your targets, you contextualize your actions for who's in front of you.

THEME 4.3: EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION OF SERVICES FOR STUDENTS

The various stakeholder groups argued that services need to develop effective coherence for the impact to be more effective.

Participants identified that there are a number of services supporting students in the system including NEPS/ SASSY/ CAMHS/ Crosscare and SCP among others. It was noted that although the services are there for students there was a call to have the services become more coherent and collaborative. One teacher noted that

I have a number of kids that have gone through all the services now from CAMHS to SASSY (drugs programme) to Crosscare, all of them and they're still at home.

The services are disjointed so the child goes through each service according to a principal of a DEIS school and gets signed off in each only to join a waiting list for the following service according to a teacher, but, because there is a gap in transferal between services, the student starts again with the new service

the kids start in a square one every time he goes to a referral.

It was proposed by another principal that because the services are disjointed and slow - all of a sudden the students are too old to be provided with support and they are finished with school

they're out into the world with all these problems that no one even attempted to fix them... it's just shocking. Why can't we all just join up at the very outset? ...there's no joined up thinking with it...everybody's just an island and everybody's just left to pick up the pieces and then society are left to pick up the pieces when they leave early.

During the discussion about the crisis with attendance it was noted by one home school liaison coordinator that the removal of the attendance officers from SCP in schools had an impact as they were available to keep a close track of whose attendance patterns were becoming worrying.

We lost the attendance officers a couple of years ago. For me, that was a killer. For me, really we can't keep on top of 600 kids every day. Everything is very reactive. Everything is very reactive. I find myself reacting



the whole time. And that's not even, that's not even touching the top of the list....we are still dealing with the fallout from summer still.

THEME 4.4: INVOLVEMENT OF PARENTS AND STUDENTS IN DECISION MAKING

The issue of voice, inclusion, involvement and agency for parents and students was seen as being crucial for a number of seminar participants. Initially it was framed in the discussions relating to transitions, both teachers and parents identified the importance of bringing all those who might be in danger of ESL into a deliberative, respectful and relationship building dialogue as soon as was practicable. As one school staff member put it

To have those meetings before the student even enrolls in the school. And it is a key aspect of something that keeps not just the students by the way, but also the parents because an awful lot of school completion early school leaving is the expectation is the perception of school or schooling of the parents, but to keep those affable conversations or supportive conversations with students, with the parents that build the relationship. It's just really what we need.

Interestingly not all of the barriers to this type of meaningful relationship building were obvious. One parent emphasised that quite often it is the previous experience of education brought by parents themselves that leads to issues

I think as well it also comes from the experience that some of us parents had the experience in school. You know, if it was a negative experience that they have guessed automatic shutdown of I'm not going to look there.

This was acknowledged by all other stakeholders with one stating

What we find is sometimes parents or guardians are afraid that the school might get them in trouble or whatever else and when we meet them.

Often then, the first point of engagement is a reassuring one which seeks to convince parents that

In terms of the student. We want the best we'd like you once you're in school, that breaks and that kind of perception, that barrier all of a sudden, it's a team effort. They know that we're supporting them, and they see us as as a support for them. And all around that provision.

THEME 4.5: TARGETED SUPPORT FOR GRT COMMUNITIES

An interesting, and connected subset of intervention measures were those specifically targeted communities who were traditionally perceived as marginalised as a result of their ethnic or cultural backgrounds. Specifically in an Irish context, the experience of the Traveller community, who had traditionally been poorly served by the compulsory education system, was highlighted. Different stakeholders had different experiences of providing targeted supports for these communities.

One policy maker identified a specific, multi-agency support structure put in place that built on existing provision but focused it on the needs of the identified community

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They have an education worker who is usually Traveller, normally they have an Education Welfare Officer at three or four pilot sites. They have Home School Community Liaison person linked in with the Traveller Enrolment structures and outreach to parents as well.

Another welcomed the current national consultative process that is in place by the Department of Education regarding the support structures for minority groupings including Traveller and Roma students.

there's been a lack of say support or help for the lads from the travelling community, there used to be visiting teachers and ya know the teachers that linked in but our school has no support in that way- there's a pilot going on but I haven't heard how it's going while all the while we are very worried about how we can go about managing some of the lads especially after covid - they locked down the sites over covid and it's been very hard to get them back into routines- they're in and out the whole time.....

Another highlighted another programme that is designed to bring members of the Traveller community into the teaching profession, a key policy direction in many systems. It is designed

for students who are from the traveling community to catch them at a very young age to bring them into primary and right into secondary school teaching. And it links with a couple of different colleges. I'm not sure if I can find the name of the college (Marino) the traveller community facilitating their transition into teaching.

Theme 5: Compensation Measures

Compensation measures are initiatives that provide new opportunities for those who have left education and training prematurely to gain qualifications. The stakeholders taking part in this dialogic seminar explored these in a broad sense as well as a specific programmatic sense. A number of thematic areas explored earlier are also relevant here and will not be repeated.

THEME 5.1: UNDERSTANDING THE REASONS FOR ESL – FINANCIAL PRESSURES

Among the most trenchant analyses provided in this area came from the student participants who highlighted what they saw as the lack of acknowledgement of the costs of education and the impact that this had on participation. One student put it bluntly

I remember when I was coming up to exams in third year, I did like, pay 100 Euro in the for, and then you say that's all of it. But then there's add-ons like exam papers, books, like trips that are in the middle of your course, and they should learn to pay for it.

This was echoed by a school leader from a further education background who described their experience of the student cohort who return to education through this pathway but who ultimately face challenges here as well

If you like, if you know what, I mean, in further ed, the by far the biggest issue that causes people to not complete a course or to just discontinue attending is finance kind of origin, by far the biggest. But we would have people in homeless services we would have people who are ex offenders. I mean people I put you, you name it, it comes in the door.

In practice, what happens here is a process of hybridisation and the emergence of the student cohort who both studies and works at the same time (see Theme 1.3 above) because



if they're getting already to the place where they want to be, they've got money, they can contribute at home, making life better and yet at the same time it's devaluing their own kind of education or their own opportunity.

THEME 5.2: ALTERNATIVE CURRICULAR AND CERTIFICATION PATHWAYS

In addition to the issue of apprenticeships and VET (Theme 3:3 above) there was a recognition among stakeholders of the need to examine how we facilitate certification for those who are in danger of ESL, who are experiencing ESL and who wish to transition back into education.

One identified approach is to provide different certification pathways. Here participants mentioned the potential of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) as bridging structures for those considering and experiencing ESL. One of the major flexibilities this brings is in subject choice and, perhaps, relevance. As one school leader put it

I think one of the welcome developments recently was taken, that's for everybody now, as opposed to those who met the narrow range subject groupings and again, I think xxx said, the expansion I just jotted down in my own school in the last 10 years we follow leaving cert subjects LCVP, ag science, politics and society, PE and computer science. So, a youngster now can do a radically different leaving cert today than even less than a decade ago.

There is perhaps a wider philosophical change here as well in relation to curricular provision that echoes some of the earlier thematic areas. Some stakeholders saw the emergence of curricular relevance for, perhaps, the first time

The curriculum provision needs to be meaningful and relevant as students are increasingly exercising their right to choice with some choosing not to come to school. It was noted that other countries have more meaningful options open to their student body.

I mean that's a deeper argument, ...It's not just plodding through some curriculum that's a terrible way... It has to have meaning to the students. And if it's not meaningful, it's not effective ... we have a society where we effectively coerce students into school... but now that coercion element is nearly gone. They are making choices and what choices do they have access to.

Linked to relevance is also the manner in which we value attainment and while traditional, end of school assessment is important there were other calls to examine how we might, at a systemic level, begin to value other pathways to recognition.

Theme 6: Policy Interventions

Throughout the various discussion events, there were policy suggestions from the different stakeholding groups. These suggestions were both reactive insofar as they sought to address issues that had or were emerging and proactive in that they sought to put in place interventions that would prevent ESL at a local, regional and national scale. Necessarily some of the themes raised here will also be addressed in the next section of the report.

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THEME 6.1: RECONCEPTUALISING THE DEIS PROGRAMME – NEW POLICY INITIATIVES TO ADDRESS DISADVANTAGE

The Delivering Equality of Opportunities in Schools (DEIS) programme is the primary intervention seeking to combat systemic disadvantage in Irish education. Organised in 'Bands' the DEIS programme channels additional resources to schools designated as disadvantage and seeks to facilitate innovative curricular, staffing and organisational practices to ameliorate the impact of disadvantage on student achievement.

While there was widespread acknowledgment of the commitment of those working in the DEIS programmes, and a recognition of recent enhancements both in terms of identification and resourcing, there was some disquiet about what might be perceived as the monolithic nature of the programme.

One teacher participant asked a question related to this

Could there be the degrees of DEIS. Kind of all or nothing. At the moment, could there be a tiered access to it?

The idea of tiered access was picked up by a policy stakeholder who suggested that this might be useful when addressing those in school communities who were not identified as disadvantage at an organisational level but who were experiencing disadvantage at an individual level

what we constantly see in the department is schools that are seeking DEIS status, but they don't meet those criteria. Yeah, but that doesn't mean that they don't have severely disadvantaged children in their school.

This idea of targeting support, even within DEIS schools was seen as being important. Some very specific programmes seeking to address EAL were identified as those that might be targeted at a policy level, which would then filter down into a practice level

Targeting of students and I suppose, you know, with school completion or with the home school and all of that you have the ability to target and I suppose maybe that it is a more focused, focused on those kids that will maybe remain left behind.

This policy targeting was seen as having the benefit of addressing a perhaps unintended consequence of reconceptualising DEIS, the potential double advantaging of certain student groups in supported schools who were not experiencing disadvantage

the more advantaged kids in the DEIS school will reap more benefits from being in the DEIS school. So you still have the inequality between within the DEIS school itself. So I suppose those who can will achieve more out of it and there still will be these kids that are left behind.

The underpinning reality for all of this was that even successful programmes such as the Home-school Liaison service were clearly working but were under-resourced

Home school Liaison was seen to be very effective but under resourced with the level of need that is now being encountered in schools particularly with regard to attendance patterns.



Home school teachers need to build a rapport with parents to yield positive results but because their target numbers have become overwhelming they find it difficult to meet all of the parents who are desperately in need of support.

THEME 6.2 : DEVELOPING A COMPREHENSIVE EMPLOYMENT STRATEGY AND LINKING TO GUIDANCE SUPPORTS

In a previously mentioned discussion, examining the nature and opportunities offered by VET and a reinvigorated apprenticeship structure, there was a recognition that this should not happen in a piecemeal manner and rather, there was an argument of the need for a policy supported *Comprehensive Employment Strategy*.

The operation of and supports for this approach were outlined by a participating teacher

we've been granted an extra teacher for 12 hours on it's called the Comprehensive Employment strategy. Okay, CES, and it's grown across the top 20 schools. It's between Dublin and Galway. And basically, you're targeting the most vulnerable students. They have to they have to their students with additional needs, or wherever they could be LCA, they could have anxiety, they could have loads of different factors. That will just fall high on the continuum of support. And for many different reasons, it could be like socio-economic, and so on. And you've each school picks a certain number of students, they're, they're your small cohort your levels one, your 12 hours are just kind of based around them. But you can also extend it out to the rest of the school.

It was described by a school leader from the FE sector as policy that was multi-faceted and focused on enhancing the life opportunities of individual students by developing multi- agency and multi-sectoral supports. Under this approach

each student's is then supported with a transition plan from the school to further education or the world of work. It gives them life skills, teaching them life skills, teaching them social skills, kind of adapting the curriculum, for those who make it accessible to them so that they can build on their skills so that you can go into the workforce and it links in with business in the community as well as all the comparable companies around in the local area.

Interestingly this speaker linked the provision of an employment transitions strategy to the development of a wider, support strategy focusing on guidance and transitions and linking it to data generation

it's a research project actually, it is over five years and you will track the students for two years after they finish leaving cert to see Do they actually go down the different pathways do they actually go into further education or down the environments when they go somewhere or do or what happens? And if it is successful? I'm hoping that it's going to come in because they actually is really, really beneficial. And that's the kind of guidance based then closer to the guidance remit so the 12 hours extra on top of your 22 hours. Okay, yeah. For whatever many guidance counsellors you have. So we have now two guidance counsellors and Transitions coordinator which follows up to the guidance.

THEME 6.3: RECONFIGURING ASSESSMENT AND CERTIFICATION POLICIES

Earlier sections presented reports on discussions relating to assessment pathways, and in particular the need to explore alternative provision.

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Leaving Certificate Applied Programme

Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme

Apprenticeships

were considered important additional pathways towards accreditation for those who were in danger of or who had experienced ESL.

As part of a wider discussion about certification pathways there was a broader engagement with policies around assessment. Here again the COVID experience was seen as a key inflection point which resulted in innovative, school based and less 'high stakes' assessment regimes emerge. This was considered important as, in the words of one school leader,

The state certification state exams commission system is too inflexible

and another arguing that the problem was that

everyone's assessed the same.

Which was seen as being a *disincentive* for students to continue in mainstream education.

At the plenary session there was extensive discussion about the manner in which COVID actually changed assessment and certification. One participant asked

Should assessment be tailored a little bit more?

Another pointing out that

When COVID came, we did the calculation of grades and all of that.

However

very, very quickly, the decision was made not to explore that more or pursue it more, but to go back to the rigors of the Leaving Certificate and the exam and the points race all over again.

There was a sense of a lost opportunity here

So we had a big experiment, in a way, with teacher-based or school-based assessment, but it didn't last.

There was some hope that the insight and learning from this experimental period might be channeled into the broader reform of curricular policy, however the general tone was not one of optimism.

Having said that, it was claimed, or perhaps recognised, that a reconfiguration in this area has to potentially lead to long term social and personal development with the emergence of lifelong learning pathways leading to opportunities that simply would not have existed prior to this.

Don't forget this progression from an apprenticeship on. I mean, it could be an electrician and go on to be an engineer. And so, students need to know that there's this progression. You're not stuck to one.



Policy Reflections/Discussion

The policy analysis conducted as a precursor to the dialogic seminar played a pivotal role in setting the stage for the seminar. To carry out this analysis, we utilised the Framework of EU 2011 recommendations, encompassing prevention, intervention, compensation measures, and the whole school approach, to review policies. The themes derived from the policy discourse analysis were instrumental in initiating discussions among stakeholders during the seminar. Through this dialogic seminar, we aimed to bridge the gap between policy in theory and policy in practice.

The majority of stakeholders present were individuals directly experiencing or being affected by the implementation of systemic strategies aimed at addressing underachievement. The dialogic seminar served as a platform for bringing together policymakers, implementers, and end-users to engage in egalitarian dialogue. This transformative approach facilitated the exploration of diverse perspectives and allowed for the identification of genuine gaps and potential solutions.

The interactive relationship between the seminar facilitator and participants ensured that every voice was heard (Stufflebeam & Coryn, 2014). Exposure to a wide range of perspectives during the seminar revealed previously unnoticed aspects of the policy. For example, students emphasised the importance of having guidance counsellors who were not burdened with multiple teaching responsibilities but rather young professionals trained specifically for guidance and counselling, capable of understanding and relating to students' experiences. While the policy analysis had highlighted issues related to teacher retention in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings, it was during the seminar that the absence of career progression opportunities for professionals in the ECEC field came to the forefront. The need for reimagining the DEIS programme and strengthening the Home School Community Liaison service was repeatedly raised during discussions. While the DEIS programme offers differentiated support and resources to schools based on identified levels of disadvantage, it was brought to light that within DEIS schools, there is a need for individualised student-level support.

Moreover, Alternative assessment methods, such as those used during the Covid-19 pandemic, received overwhelming support as a departure from traditional exam-based assessments that limit student achievement to a mere 'two hours of examination.' The comprehensive employment strategy, coupled with comprehensive guidance and counselling, was praised and proposed as a significant intervention measure. These discussions, which encompassed alternative aspects experienced, observed, or suggested by participants, provided valuable additional insights into the policy topics under consideration (Patton & Sawicki, 2016). Through plenary session, a collective consensus was achieved on all the areas under discussion, potentially heralding a transformative social process.

The research team contributed evidence gathered from policy reviews, while participants shared their personal experiences, perspectives, and local realities related to the implemented measures. This collaborative approach aimed to bridge the gap between expert knowledge and the real-world needs of participants, ultimately fostering the co-creation of a new, practical policy discourse that is responsive to the needs of end-users. This collaborative and inclusive approach to policy discourse not only enriched the dialogue but also promoted a sense of ownership among stakeholders. As the seminar progressed, participants developed a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of policy challenges and the nuanced solutions required. This collective effort served as a



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catalyst for fostering meaningful policy changes that were not only informed by expert analysis but also rooted in the real-life experiences and needs of those directly affected by these policies.

Key take-aways

- In Ireland, there is no policy deficit with regard to underachievement and ESL; instead, there is a need to extend and fine-tune the existing policies and make their implementation more robust in response to the ground realities.
- The various stakeholder groups have a general consensus on the issues brought to the discussion and have realised the need to allocate additional resources and to reach out to all those facing disadvantage and at risk of ESL.
- The impact of COVID-19 on society's acceptance of hybrid work approaches has also influenced students' attitudes toward school, resulting in the emergence of a hybrid culture of engagement, akin to the 'working from home' culture. This evolving approach should be taken into consideration when developing policies related to school attendance.
- The democratisation of knowledge has granted students greater access to information regarding the consequences of policy non-compliance. Due to the often slow response of educational systems, students may no longer fear the consequences. Policy narratives should be mindful of this shift.
- Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) serves as the foundation of schooling and demands a qualified staff. Strategies for staff retention and the potential influence of public policy on this private service should be thoroughly examined.
- Comprehensive guidance and counselling services are essential for managing transitions between various levels of education and also between education and employment. The service is also essential for the most marginalized who need more trauma informed therapy.
- There is a need for improved apprenticeship programmes that effectively bridge the gap between learning and industry requirements.
- Strengthening interagency collaboration is imperative to enhance the effectiveness of support services available to students.
- Establishing better communication and collaboration between schools, students, and parents is crucial to fostering a respectful and relationship-building dialogue that supports at-risk students.
- Measures should be taken to provide support and role models from the Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller (GRT) communities, such as by offering training to teachers from these communities. The outcome of the collaborative process examining the provision of supports for GRT is anticipated in the hope that it will provide practical help to schools to support GRT students in successfully completing their schooling.



- While the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme is a comprehensive package aimed at supporting disadvantaged students and addressing underachievement, it should be further enhanced to support those who may fall through the cracks in existing policies.
- Given the changing educational landscape, there is a pressing need to revisit traditional assessment and certification practices, drawing lessons from the experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

On the whole, the dialogic seminar emerged as a highly successful and insightful endeavor in our pursuit of a comprehensive understanding of policy matters. By bringing together a diverse array of stakeholders and fostering a collaborative atmosphere, we were able to access a multitude of perspectives, ranging from expert analysis to firsthand experiences.

The seminar not only facilitated robust discussions but also served as a platform for stakeholders to collectively reach a consensus on key policy issues. It underscored the importance of engaging stakeholders in the policymaking process, bridging the gap between theory and practice, and prioritizing solutions that are responsive to the real-world needs of those directly affected.

As evidenced by the rich insights and practical recommendations generated during our dialogic seminar, it has become abundantly clear that collaborative and inclusive approaches to policy discourse can yield transformative outcomes. These insights will undoubtedly inform the development of policies that are not only well informed by expert analysis but also deeply rooted in the experiences and perspectives of the individuals they aim to serve.

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DIALOGIC SEMINAR REPORT: ENGLAND

**By Karen Laing, Lucy Tiplady and Liz Todd, Newcastle University
October 2023**



1.0 PARTICIPANTS

The dialogic seminar took place on 28th September 2023 in Newcastle upon Tyne, in the North of England. Participants were recruited to the dialogic seminar through

- A direct invitation from the Director of Education at Newcastle City Council
- An invitation to consortia members of the Newcastle West End Children's Community
- Other existing networks and contacts
- Word of mouth

23 adults and 10 children (aged 10 or 11) took part. The adults were made up of:

- Educators
- Local VCSE representatives
- Those with lived experience of exclusion/ drop-out of themselves or their children/grandchildren
- Policy Leads in 3 different Local Authorities and the North East devolved authority

The children were all from a local urban primary school and were aged 10/11 (year 6). The school population is characterised as economically disadvantaged. 40% children are in receipt of free school meals.

2.0 METHODS

The seminar lasted 3 hours. Participants were seated on 5 tables. The dialogic seminar consisted of a range of presentation, focused discussion and a Lego activity.

Each table discussion was audio recorded to enable the retrieval of verbatim quotations, and detailed researcher notes taken on pre-developed note sheets. Participants were invited to use the Lego during their discussions and post-it notes were used to record key messages for policy. Photographs were taken throughout.

3.0 ANALYSIS

Data analysis included a combination of deductive methods, in following the model agreed by the SCIREARLY project team and requiring a focus on engagement, disengagement, prevention, intervention and compensation, and thematic analysis methods in generating codes and themes as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

4.0 RESULTS

4.1 FACTORS SHAPING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Theme 4.1.1 Relationships with supportive others

Children told us that what kept them engaged in learning was their parent's encouragement, their teachers helping them and their friendships:

My parents encourage me, my dad

For me, parents keep me going, I don't want to disappoint them

My teachers, when I don't get something, they explain it really well

For me, I would say my friends

Adults also talked about the importance of parents:

The thing that kept me [going] was my family, my dad was really keen on education, and he wanted us, all his daughters to go to university which we all achieved.

Feeling known and valued by others was also seen to encourage learning:

If you're in an environment where you feel valued and, in that space, you're much more likely to want to be there and want to learn.

If you're not known you can't be valued, making sure that things that you see you see yourself in ... people as individuals being known and understood.

It was also important to children to be treated equally and not be subject to discrimination:

I really like school because I know I'm equal to everyone. No-one treats you different. Everyone can like what they want and don't have to argue.

Theme 4.1.2 Positive learning experiences

Children and adults talked about being encouraged by learning successes. One child was motivated by a sense of competition:

You look at what others are doing and do it even better than them

Theme 4.1.3 The future

The thought of the future, what I'm going to do

Theme 4.1.4 Feeling safe and secure

Adult participants noted the importance of feeling safe and secure to engagement with education:

You only learn when you feel safe and happy and then you can be pushed a little bit further.

A stable, secure, home life is the be all, and end all.

Children also spoke at length about needing to feel safe in their communities:

I've lived here for quite a while. I don't always feel safe, people are smoking and fighting, and it's not good for the children.

I would feel safer if there was more police.

I don't think Benwell is a good place, it's really busy which is good, but there's always ambulances.

4.2 FACTORS SHAPING STUDENT DISENGAGEMENT

Theme 4.2.1 The perceived attitudes and expectations of others

Children talked about how the opinions of others about them, had a big effect on them and their ability to learn:

If people are negative, then I don't want to

Bad criticism makes you not want to do it

If no-one's there to tell you to keep going

When you feel that everyone is better than you

If someone makes you feel bad

People saying negative things making you want to give up

Adults in the seminar also talked about their own experiences of disengagement, including recounting distressing experiences where they had been humiliated by teachers. They also talked about the lack of understanding of disengagement they sometimes came across and the perceived attitudes of parents:

Sometimes the attitude of educators, where instead of understanding what leads to [disengagement], it's the denigration 'oh, they [parents] don't care about education', you see it so many times, you see that.

Further discussion happened about the attitudes of some parents and grandparents living in traditionally socio-economically deprived places who do not necessarily see educational attainment as relevant for their children, particularly in the light of the lack of opportunities for social mobility close to home:

It all depends where you live... the narratives around education... I had a grandparent... and her response was 'why does he need GCSEs? His dad never got any and he's done fine'... their life experiences, it's irrelevant.

There is whole communities that have been disengaged from this for so long, they find money in alternative ways, they get by. They see they have not had to have that education so why impose it on our child?

Theme 4.2.2 Finding education difficult and feeling under pressure

Children told us about the pressure of being tested, particularly SATs. They talked about the pressure coming from within themselves, and not just from others.

Pressure, you always want to do well

Both children and adults spoke about a fear of learning that could hold them back. One adult explained:

Probably the thing that stopped me learning was fear of learning. Sometimes I get really overwhelmed by it all, wanting to do a good job and not feeling like I'm going to do a good job and then it becomes too overwhelming, and I say, 'right, I'm not doing it'.

Theme 4.2.3 A lack of opportunities where you live

Children talked about there being a lack of things to do in their area, which they believed led to bad behaviour like fighting and violence. They talked about the local park, which was not well cared for, being old and dirty and with lots of graffiti. One child built a Lego model of the entrance to the local park being guarded by police and superheroes to stop it being vandalized:



Figure 1 The entrance to local park being guarded by police and superheroes

Children also talked about leaving their area in the future to go to where there were more opportunities for them:

I don't think I'll want to live here when I'm older, maybe London, or LA, they are better environments. In London they might provide different trips.

Maybe when I'm older I might want to live in London for my children to have a better education.

One child didn't want to leave Newcastle as:

I don't want to leave. I think Newcastle is one of the safer countries [sic] and if all of the children leave there'll be no-one to solve the problems.

Theme 4.2.4 Being in the right frame of mind to learn

Children told us they did not want to learn when they were tired or upset:

When you feel sad and emotionally upset

When you feel lazy, and want to stay in bed all day

Some of the adult participants talked about the challenges that neurodiverse children experienced engaging in education. One grandparent made a Lego model of 'the wall of awful' that their grandchild

had to navigate to leave the house in the morning to go to school, referring to the challenges of organizing and managing anxiety:

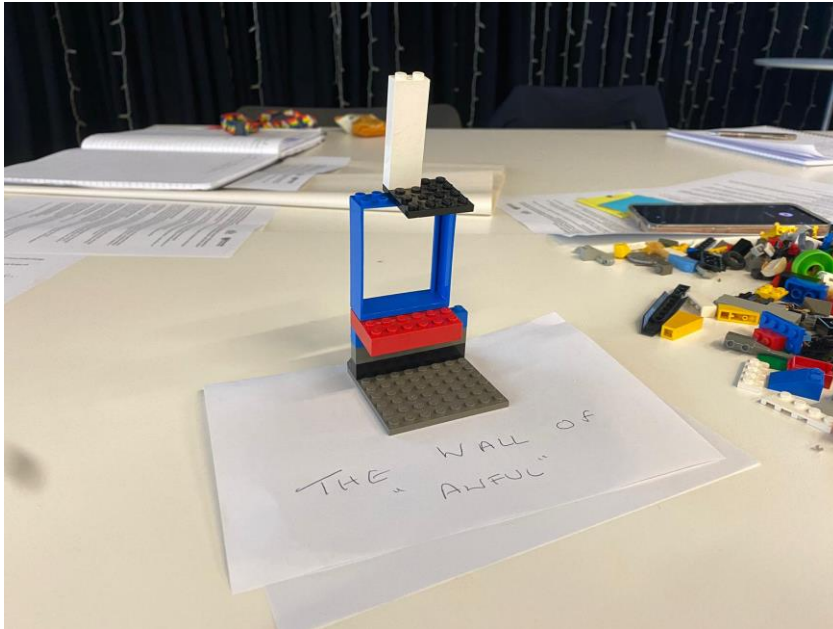


Figure 2 The 'wall of awful'

4.3 PREVENTION MEASURES

Preventive measures aim to tackle the root problems that may eventually result in ESL. These measures can include aspects such as access to good quality early education, support for transitions, an engaging curriculum, good support for vulnerable populations, parental and family involvement in schools, and effective PPD, for example. During the dialogic seminar, participants spoke at length about the optimum conditions for children to succeed, and presented examples of good practice that they had seen or knew about.

Theme 4.3.1 Relationships

A key theme emerging throughout the seminar was that of relationships. Relationships were seen by many as being key to creating a safe and supportive environment for children to learn:

Certainly Newcastle has tried really hard around relational practice and has tried to really understand the evidence and trying to understand what a journey of relational practice really looks like, how you include every single person in the school and community ... there is definitely something understood around good relationships and children having someone they really trust, feeling safe and really understanding each other ... there seems to be some evidence that that works across adults as well as children, really makes people in schools feel more involved and having a bigger ownership of what's going on and children seem to be beginning to say to us 'I feel as if I've got a say', 'I feel as if I'm listened to' and 'I feel as if I'm understood'.

Adult participants told us that relationships between children, families, schools and communities have been changed as a result of the pandemic. They recounted that children were told they did not have to be at school in order to learn, and attendance since the pandemic has been poor. These relationships with parents and children need to be re-built so that schools are seen as an important partner in education.

Children also prioritized relationships in their perceptions of what was needed to prevent children disengaging from school:

They need someone there for them to encourage them and to explain in a nice way that they need school

Everyone needs someone there for them

If you don't have friends

You could encourage them, maybe invite them to your house after school

Theme 4.3.2 Listening to children

Listening to children and understanding their needs can lead to greater engagement with school. Community organisations can help schools to listen to their children. This can help a more individualized approach. One participant with a health background talked about the push for personalised medical care and wondered how this could be applied in an educational context.

Theme 4.3.3 Parental engagement

Participants discussed the need to listen and understand communities to engage parents and families as well as some of the barriers that can hinder effective practice, including the stereotyping and judgement of communities and punitive measures such as fining parents. This theme related closely to that of relationships as one attendee commented:

It all goes back to relationships, do schools have the relationships with families to engage in that work?

Theme 4.3.4 Ensuring a relevant curriculum

There was much discussion about the narrow focus of the national curriculum in England, which is largely academic and has led to a focus on basic skills and a move away from the learning of the arts and languages, for example. The curriculum was sometimes seen as irrelevant to what children need to succeed in life, and in particular, was not perceived to prepare them with the skills they will need in the changing face of technological advances and the changing workplace. It was noted by some as focused purely on enabling children to pass exams, rather than acting to equip them with the knowledge they will need in the future. This is further re-enforced by the performance indicators for schools that are linked to mastery of the curricula.

Perverse targets that we operate in this country around what we believe is the right thing to do and that's probably ultimately why we still struggle to talk about the difference between academic and vocational and we're still years down the line of really understanding that and saying 'if you're not academic then maybe you can do something vocational' ... sadly the curriculum is designed around an academic, knowledge-based curriculum.

Theme 4.3.5 Addressing poverty

A major theme for the seminar participants was that of poverty. The North East region and the places that many of the attendees were living and working are among some of the most socio-economically deprived places in England, and this was reflected in their discussions. It was recounted that educational engagement and achievement was difficult to prioritise in the face of poverty:

It's poverty, you cannot talk about what we are doing in our communities to give children the best chance, when so many of our communities in Newcastle, and in the Northeast, are simply deprived, impoverished communities. So yes, you do have those families where education, it's just not on their agenda because they don't need it, but you've also got all those families who would love to get their children into education but, you know, when you've got no money, when you can't afford food for the family, when you can't afford uniform... when all you can think about is 'how am I going to feed my child?', you can't do your child's homework with them. So, we can't separate this out from the deprivation going on in our communities. You can be as clever as you like in school but... the reality is, life is tough for some.

The effects of poverty were talked about in respect of every stage of education, and it was seen as a major factor for students dropping out of education prematurely, particularly recently as a cost of living crisis has affected England:

But poverty, even if families want them [children] to learn, we've seen that, this summer, in post-16, families are saying, 'we can't afford for them to do it', despite the RPA legislation which says they are supposed to be in learning until 18, we're getting increasingly families going 'we cannot afford it, he can't do a college course, he can't do a training scheme with no money', probably hasn't got the grades to get an apprenticeship, they just have to work. And that is very noticeable this year.

A parent or grandparent saying, no that child can't do an apprenticeship because they're going to lose their benefits.

For families in poverty, while education is free in England, the cost of being able to participate in education and other wider learning opportunities, for example, the cost of equipment, uniforms, food and travel is substantial. This was being recognized by participants and one noted:

If you want an intervention that would change things, then every young person under 18 would have a free travel pass.

4.4 INTERVENTION MEASURES

Intervention measures are those which aim to combat emerging difficulties experienced by students, by improving the quality of education and training and providing targeted support. Many intervention measures apply to all pupils but are especially beneficial and relevant to those at risk of ESL. Other intervention measures are more student focussed and build on the early detection of support needed for learning and motivation. Such measures include out-of-school activities, the use of strategies in the classroom to meet individual student needs, guidance and counselling, and parental involvement initiatives.

Theme 4.4.1 Good quality alternative provision

Participants talked about the need to understand that education and learning are not just about schools, but that learning happens in a variety of contexts and beyond the school day. It is equally important to ensure children have access to good quality alternative education when schools prove an unsuitable environment for them, as it is to ensure good quality in schools. This is particularly the case for children with SEND.

Theme 4.4.2 Learning beyond the classroom

Following on from theme 4.4.1, participants noted the importance of learning beyond the classroom and the effect of having opportunities to go to new places, and do new things:

It goes back to the curriculum as well because you see young people being taken out of the classroom and really thriving doing cooking and gardening, well wouldn't it be better if everyone was doing that earlier on, before it gets to the point of crisis.

Theme 4.4.3 Need for non-academic support – careers, pastoral, health

Participants talked about the need to support children more widely than with their academic studies, so that they were able to engage with learning, particularly if children had SEND. However, adults felt that many services that could help children were not available. England has suffered many cuts to public services and there are currently long waiting lists for support (e.g. mental health services), and some services that have been removed, or have become the responsibility of schools to deliver (e.g. careers advice).

The systems aren't working for children and young people, all the mental health support doesn't work because by the time you get to see somebody, you're in crisis.

We were told about one scheme that was being operated locally that encouraged collaboration between schools and other local services which was felt to work really well, in instances where schools engaged with it:

'Team Around the School' is the idea that you get the voluntary sector and public sector organisations, that work in the community, around the school, and they meet regularly, then they

can work together to solve issues, So, it might be, you have the police there, you have housing there, you have health, voluntary sector organisations, psychology is always there, other local authority reps, and the school can bring an issue of concern. So, it could be knife crime... or poor attendance... how do we all work around that? They are such a good thing... the principle is good, but the downside is how much the school buys into it... it's buy in for the school, because schools are silos, that's what's got to break down.

4.5 COMPENSATION MEASURES

Compensation measures create new opportunities for those who have left education and training early to gain new qualifications. The kinds of measures taken include accessible second chance schemes, ensuring access to support (e.g. employability skills, guidance and counselling, financial), high quality teaching and a flexible curriculum. What we find in England is little evidence of effective compensatory policies.

Theme 4.5.1 Perverse barriers to education

A careers advisor talked about how a policy designed to provide more educational opportunities to those post-16 or past compulsory school age (the Apprenticeship Levy) was actually working to reduce opportunities to those with few qualifications:

There are negative policies working, particularly for the post-16 sector... The apprenticeship levy is possibly the worst thing that ever happened as far as I'm concerned as a career's advisor, because it meant that the NHS, who used to have entry level jobs where you didn't need qualifications, turned them all into apprenticeships and you had to have a level 2 qualification, or be working towards a level 2 qualification to get an apprenticeship. So, youngsters who could have gone in, in an entry level job... now have to have an apprenticeship. Now that rules out anybody who's not going to get Maths and English [GCSE's].

Theme 4.5.2 Poverty

Adults talked about the inflexibility of the English welfare system that currently acts as a disincentive to those post compulsory schooling age to engage in education:

The benefits system works against us a lot of the time. It isn't worth going to work or re-engaging in education because you will lose your benefits.

4.6 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Theme 4.6.1 Joined up and evidence-based policymaking

Although some policies were critiqued and some suggested by attendees, particularly in respect of tackling poverty, the key concern was one about the process of policy making itself in England. There was

a feeling that educational policies were not always evidence-based, but based on opposing political ideas which meant much churn and change, meaning policies were unable to mature and have real impact:

An observation about these policies and where we sit in this country, we seem to lack any ability to stick with something that works... the typicality of it is that we start something in this country, and we get caught up in the politics changing it very rapidly... what we tend to do in this country is we start and then give up.

There's something about evidence-based practice. Because there's so many government policies that you think 'ok, where's your evidence for that? Is that just someone's bright idea?'.... There is a lot of research in education, but not a lot of government policies reflect it.

Cross-party collaboration was seen to be vital for long-term sustainable educational policy that could make a real difference to achievement. Because of this churn in policymaking, and a lack of investment in robust evaluation, learning about effectiveness is not being applied consistently:

We're doing loads of brilliant things, both at creating the foundations and the environment but more so at the intervention point I would say, but what we're not doing is learning the lessons and working strategically so that every child or young person has the same.

In a policy vacuum around a holistic approach to children's wellbeing and success, organisations are providing different kinds of services and are trying out new things, but this is leading to a 'postcode lottery' where there is no consistency in the level or type of services, support or resources children will have depending on where they live.

There's loads of really good practice but it's not in policy and so you have a real mix across an area in terms of what deal a child or young person gets.

From a career's perspective, the best work we do is the pilot stuff but its unsustainable on a big scale... identifying youngsters who we think are going to disengage from education, but I don't have a big enough team.

We've got a project going into 4 schools in the [local] area looking into financial capability, and that's a good thing. The downside of that is its only 4 schools in Newcastle, there should be more of that.

Zone West... The fact that it is a research project as well, the fact that it is evidence based and it is linking education, social care and health, but only on a small scale but we are making those connections.

Some educational policies are perceived to have been developed reactively, rather than proactively:

Government is investing in schools, in hubs that seem to be doing well and how we can share that, now investing in individuals that will be able to come round and offer you advice ... it's another example of the system having a problem that has risen out of all proportion and then we do something about it ... it hasn't happened in the right way.

Many attendees of the seminar were despondent at the current ability of policy to support educational success:

Are we meant to be trying to think of good things?! [Attendee chuckles] What's happening that we think is good? We're all silent, that's a bit sad, isn't it?

Key messages from attendees for this theme included:

Remove education from the political spectrum.

Consistency and accountability in educational budget from gov.

Ensure a consistent cross-party vision for our communities.

For different parts of DfE to actually work together on policies so they are consistent, with wellbeing as key

Theme 4.6.2 Wellbeing first

Participants stressed the need to think about children and young people in a holistic way. Education is finely balanced with other aspects of their wellbeing, from home-lives, to where they live, and the resources they have access to. There was a view that educational policy would be ineffective without wider policy support for children and families' wellbeing. Key messages from participants included:

For DfE to have wellbeing of children and young people as the aim of all its policies

Children's wellbeing at the heart of education

Some suggestions for policy support included specific actions for schools such as training or specific staff to support wellbeing:

All staff working in education settings trained in trauma-informed practice

Anti-racism in education, in the curriculum and in teacher training

Mental health lead in all schools – a non-teaching post

Anti-misogyny work in schools

Theme 4.6.3 Addressing financial barriers to education

Poverty came up frequently as a challenge for children, families and schools. It was felt that although schools and local services worked hard to alleviate the effects of poverty, addressing poverty effectively could only be achieved by policy intervention. Key messages in respect of tackling poverty included:

More funding for post-16 options

Free bus pass for all 12-18 year olds

END CHILD POVERTY NOW. End benefit sanctions for lone parents. End 2 child limit on UC [Universal Credit]

Reform post-16 funding to make it more flexible and responsive to young people's needs. Possibly pay young people to continue in education.

Expand free school meal entitlement.

Asylum seekers able to work. Real Living Wage for all.

The policy recommendations from children centred largely around addressing the cost of living and the effects of poverty:

Housing for my mum with a baby

I saw in the news that students in university are struggling with heating and they might stop!

Electric cars are good but really expensive. If you could cut the cost somehow that would help people to look after the environment

Things have got really expensive so if he [the prime minister] could help with that

Theme 4.6.4 Listening to children and families

Listening to children to understand their experiences and involving them in policy-making processes was a further recommendation by attendees. The presence of children at the dialogic seminar, who confidently moved around the tables, engaged with the adults and shared their views and experiences was noted by many attending to be powerful and invigorating and a vital addition to the dialogue. Key recommendations for policy supplied by attendees included:

Listen to children

Involve children in educational policymaking

Listen to children and young people and communities to really understand what's important to them in ensuring a positive and enabling learning environment

Theme 4.6.5 Specific educational and curriculum reforms

Several specific reforms to education and schools were made, and often reflected the knowledge and roles that people had in respect of children's education. Many comments concerned broadening out of the curriculum:

Contemporary and relevant curriculum with time for choice

For secondary school curriculum to explicitly include inter-personal and intra-personal and life skills (at least as much as curriculum knowledge)

Oracy and art education for all

Other suggestions concerned introducing wider educational approaches:

Get rid of SATs¹

Personalised education – child as individual

Build relational practice into all aspects of school life

Strengths-based education

Playful schools which respond to individual needs

Continue to nurture year 7 and 8 during transition slowly to secondary teaching and learning

Reform the delivery of careers guidance – too disconnected

Final comments included improving pay and conditions for educational staff, including those in the Early Years workforce and Teaching Assistants; many schools are struggling to appoint suitable staff in these positions as the pay is very low and compares less favourably to jobs in supermarkets and other places.

¹ SATs (Standard Assessment Tests) are high stakes examinations set by government at the end of primary school

5.0 POLICY REFLECTIONS/DISCUSSION

Our policy review of England revealed that there was little educational policymaking that was targeted specifically at reducing early school leaving and raising attainment. Wider policies concentrated on trying to change the structure of schools and their responsibilities. The other major policy of the last 10 years has been to reduce the gap in attainment due to poverty (Pupil Premium). This money has largely been spent on supporting classroom practices. What the results from the dialogic seminar uncover, however, is the need for policy to tackle poverty at source and support children and young people's wider wellbeing, in order for them to thrive. It also uncovers a frustration with the political nature of educational policymaking and the inconsistent implementation and resourcing that is leading to differential educational experiences for children and families. Lots of good things going on locally, but it is a bit of a postcode lottery whether things are available for individual children. Funding is not spread equitably across areas and is spent in different ways. Leadership is important, both from government and locally to ensure every child gets access to the opportunities and resources they need to succeed.

6.0 CONCLUSION

Through this dialogic seminar we have heard from children and adult participants of the importance of safe and supportive environments that inspire and motivate children and young people to learn. The key theme of relationships has been seen throughout discussions, including the positive and negative impacts that different practices have. Listening to children, young people and families was seen as key in improving provision for communities. However, it was also recognised that there are issues that need to be addressed on a national level, such as poverty, a relevant curriculum (including learning beyond the classroom and good quality alternative provision) and holistic support for all (particularly pastoral, health and careers). There was frustration that instead of a comprehensive range of compensation measures to support young people back into education, there are perverse barriers such as the apprenticeship levy and punitive benefits system that can make re-engagement very difficult. Participants called for joined up and evidence-based education policy making that sits outside of party politics and has wellbeing at its centre.

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Version 1

SPAIN

National Dialogic Seminar

Work Package	1
Lead Beneficiary	UDEUSTO
Authors	UDEUSTO
Submission Date	19 October 2023



History of changes

Version	Date	Created or modified by	Comments
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V1	19/10/2023	UDEUSTO	Final version

Disclaimer

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1. Participants

A total of 13 participants attended the dialogic seminar. They were selected through purposive sampling using the researchers' own local networks. At least one representative from each of the target groups participated in the event.

- policy makers (2)
- families (2)
- students (1)
- civil society organizations (3)
- school administration (1)
- teaching staff (4)

2. Methods

Personalized invitations were sent by the SCIREARLY researchers from the University of Deusto, providing information on what is expected of them as well as the format of the dialogic seminar. At the same time, findings from the integrated systematic literature review and the policy analysis in WP1 were finalized and transformed into a two-page and easy-to-understand Executive Summary in Spanish.

The dialogic seminar used an adapted Interactive Groups format (Flecha, 2015; Valls & Kyriakides, 2013), where three heterogeneous discussion groups were formed. The participants were provided color-coded name tags that match their assigned table for easy identification. They were also provided with the Executive Summary and the informed consent forms were distributed for their perusal.

The seminar lasted for 1.5 hours, following this general structure:

- Introduction (20 minutes). Welcome remarks, instructions, brief presentation of results
- Discussion Round 1: Factors affecting school engagement/disengagement (20 minutes)
- Discussion Round 2: Prevention, intervention, and compensation measures (20 minutes)
- Short break (5 minutes)
- Discussion Round 3: Recommendations (20 minutes)
- Conclusion and Closing Remarks (5 minutes)

A facilitator from the University of Deusto research team was assigned in each of the three discussion groups. Guide questions were provided and they were briefed prior to the discussion. After the end of each round, the facilitators moved to the next table to continue with the second round, and so on.

The participants' consent was first sought to audio record the discussion, and they were also asked to read and sign the informed consent forms. A voice recorder was stationed in each of the tables. At the end of the event, the audio files were uploaded to a password-protected account accessible only to the researchers at the University of Deusto. They were then transcribed using an automatic AI-assisted tool, and were checked and anonymised for analysis. The informed consent forms are kept separate from the anonymised transcript to avoid identification.

3. Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was followed (Clarke & Braun, 2017), and consequently, the transcripts were read thoroughly by three researchers to collectively identify key messages and ideas from the discussions.

4. Results

This section presents the results of the thematic analysis of the stakeholder discussions during the dialogic seminar. The following recurring themes have been identified:

4.1. Factors shaping student engagement

4.1.1. FAMILY PARTICIPATION

When asked about their personal observations on key aspects that help learners to continue in the education system, many participants identified family educational involvement as a key factor of reducing early school leaving and underachievement and boosting students' motivation. Educating families and inviting them to participate in school activities along with their children is thought to be an effective strategy to improve both academic and social outcomes, thereby transforming communities. Education systems should attempt to be attractive not only for students but also for their families in general:

The involvement of the family is also important for motivation because I experience it in school, too. The more support you have from your family, I believe the more you have accomplished. Then, the other points that you all have mentioned, I also agree with them. But I believe that the family's role in motivating and engaging the kid - and also being a reference, as you mentioned - well, there are many times when if the family itself is a reference, I think it also helps. (S, School administrator)

Including families in this training because, to the extent that we not only work on raising the level with the students but also involve families in learning that benefits them - what they want to improve in their lives - and that helps them improve academically and in everything that society increasingly requires, having higher levels, it transforms and then these would be, from what I see, the key factors. (M, Association representative)

So, it's true that family engagement is super important, it's a key factor. I see it in my work every day, and when we manage to get families to commit and get involved, the bond improves a lot. (J, Family member)

... it's not just that one student who is failing, all the others are failing too, and other families are not getting involved either. It's not an individual case. What's failing is in general. And then, if we manage to get families involved, it doesn't matter because that family will already be with the others: in the park or somewhere else. There will be a change at a general level... (M, Association representative)

4.1.2. HIGH EXPECTATIONS OF ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT FOR ALL AND ROLE MODELS

When asked about the underlying causes why some students decide to abandon school, the recurring answer among the stakeholders was that low personal and societal expectations of academic success, combined with the lack of role models can often determine achievement levels. High teacher and family expectations of young people to continue in the education system until early twenties is one of the main factors to successfully continue studies. As an association representative shares:

Sometimes there aren't even repetitions, not because they have the levels they should have, but due to low expectations. (M, Association representative)

Because to the extent that you can be shown that a school with vulnerable groups also works and improves, no one is going to think, "they can't be there." It's like... having a role model. (M, Association representative)

4.1.3. DIVERSITY AND CULTURALLY SENSITIVE, ENGAGING CURRICULUM

Another commonly shared belief in the participant discussion was that related to the value of diversity as a key element of academic success. Some participants believed valuing and promoting cultural and ethnic diversity not only can reduce ESL rates among vulnerable and minority population, but it can also increase their sense of belonging in the community as well as enrich general learning experience for all students:

It's about valuing diversity, you know. Because I think it's crucial for them to continue. I mean, for them to feel that it's a space for them. So they don't feel like it has nothing to do with how I dress, what I like, or how I talk. So sometimes there are young people or teenagers, or well, even kids who go to places or environments where they think it's not for them, that they're not expected to be there. So that really creates a lot of distance. (K, Teaching staff)

The example can be seen in interactive groups... The greater the diversity in a group, and the more diverse it is in terms of different levels, the better it is for the group to achieve academic success. (J, Family member)

Well, and also to promote, I mean, for policies to be more focused on spreading the message to the population that diversity is richness, but not just in theory, but in reality. I mean, if your child is in a Jesuit school and you want them to excel, the more Roma and immigrant students there are, the more excellent it will be. Because they are with all the diversity. (M, Association representative)

That it's a curriculum that's ethnocentric, always from the same perspective. Working on that also requires a lot of time, and textbooks are not prepared for it, nor do they accommodate the realities of migrant students who come from South and Central America, Africa, or Asia, or even from Roma students who are unaware of their own history. (S, Teaching staff)

There's also an issue that generates, I believe... that vulnerability. I mean, it's the people who arrive - this 'rolling admission' as they say - who arrive at any time of the year, without knowing the language, in the best case, they know Spanish, they arrive from South America, and of course, they put them in a D model [language support model]. That in itself - I often think, it's as if I suddenly go to Russia and they put me in a school, "there you go," and there are no more resources. (S, School administrator)

Yes, in the case of the Romani people, I can say there's invisibility in the curriculum due to this ideological difficulty. We experience school as something very "non-Romani," something foreign to us. (J, Family member)

In addition to cultural sensitivity, the participants also believe that an engaging curriculum is an important factor to keep the students and teachers motivated. They suggested that the materials taught at schools should reflect present day understanding of learning-teaching practices and be aligned with the needs of the youth:

The students are diverse, the teaching profession is complex, and you have to approach that diversity in different ways. Furthermore, education nowadays is not something that implies that a teacher is just pouring content into the children's heads. (P, Teaching staff)

So that there is suitable culture and, I don't know, sports and cultural offerings that also cater to the interests of young people. (K, Teaching staff)

That we try to make the curriculum more than just academic content and to highlight the importance of integrating certain themes. I do believe that can help to convey, I mean, I'm not just studying, yes, math is crucial, but I'm not just studying math; I'm studying math with a gender perspective that also addresses cultural diversity and why I'm here. I mean, are we going to go there? And then I can feel, I believe, more engaged. (A, Association representative)

Also, the contradiction in the society the kids move in, outside on the streets. Everything is very fast, everything is very information-heavy, everything is very visual, everything is very entertaining, everything is... And then in class, it's a complete drop, you listen to me, I talk to you, and "calm down." I mean, asking a kid who's used to constant interaction to stay calm. (J, Family member)

4.1.4. TEACHER DEVELOPMENT AND SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

When trying to identify the level of action to reduce ESL, many participants stated that teacher development programs and school leadership are at the core of the change at micro level. They also stated that teacher development programs need to be experiential, contextual and aimed at exercising teacher agency in decision-making processes:

And then, on the micro level, I focus on the teacher, I focus on the teacher and the people who support the teacher. I emphasize good training and a good selection of teachers, I emphasize school leadership. (P, Teacher)

We always have two approaches: macro or micro. I believe that many things come from a micro perspective, a center-focused approach, a group-focused approach, a local-focused approach. The idea revolves around being with the people who are working and enabling them to make decisions and get involved in the processes... For training to be truly effective, it has to be centered, it has to be in the environment, in the context. The macro perspective is to provide an opportunity for schools to make decisions about their training, and that this training is of high quality. It should also be quality training, whether it's early reflection or whatever you prefer. (E, Policymaker)

In addition, some participants emphasized the poor quality of current online teacher qualifications that do not prepare student teachers to real experiences:

There are master's programs, and nowadays, most of them are online... So, we need to be aware that this training is very poor or inadequate. There was actually an article in [the local paper] about this training, and it emphasizes that the basis of training should be in experience, in practical work within the schools, and this practical experience is not at all guaranteed or supported. (S, School administrator)

You mentioned teacher training, and that's a significant gap. It's very complicated because initial teacher training is focused more on content and less on the practical aspects of working with students. (E, Policymaker)

4.1.5. GUIDANCE

Many stakeholders believed that supporting at -risk and returning students by providing continuous guidance as an important element to improve academic outcomes and reduce ESL as well as to make students and families to be cared for individually and prevent risky activities outside of school:

Well, to provide more support to the young people who really have more difficulty in being supported, because in the end, the data is telling us. I mean, which young people are the ones who are falling behind? Those who really have less chance of being accompanied, of being helped. (E, Policymaker)

A lot of follow-up and reaching out to them again, we call them back, because if they are outside the school, they are worse off. (A, Policymaker)

4.1.6. ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS When asked about the solutions to underachievement and poor motivation, the discussions of the participants revealed that alternatives need to be offered to the traditional schooling paths. Besides, one participant's observation highlighted the importance of having multiple alternative tools at different stages to support underachieving students:

We need to offer alternatives, have alternatives. If one path doesn't interest us or for some reason hasn't worked, consider the alternative. (M, Student)

I know, I believe there's an element of the system that's a bit different. We have many elements for collecting students. And this comes with a lot, but when you really start looking, in secondary education, there are different systems in place to respond. We have the curricular education, we have the support programs (PRESS), we have supplementary education, and we keep advancing. In other words, as students start dropping out, dropping out in the sense of leaving the system, there are many collection systems. (E, Policy maker)

4.1.7. EARLY DETECTION AND PREVENTION

The discussions of the stakeholders revealed that early detection and prevention and high-quality evidence-based support at preschool level is critical to prevent underachievement from early ages. One participant pointed out the cumulative nature of poor academic outcomes which implies interventions must be implemented early on in children's learning process:

From a macro perspective, there are things that can be done. Improving access and attendance in high-quality early childhood education programs. In other words, there's a macro effort, but that macro commitment, if there isn't a quality intervention that contributes quality, well, that's just a good step. And from a macro perspective, it's very complicated. (E, Policy maker)

Early intervention seems fundamental to me, such as detecting possible issues from a very young age that can be addressed because you already know what elements are emerging there. (B, Association representative)

And we often say that they ... come with a very heavy baggage, and that baggage is filled with all these economic needs, families with a low cultural level, poverty, little involvement, economic neediness, a lot of linguistic issues as well. And then, there's a lot of emotional, psychological, and

even psychiatric issues now. We see it increasingly not resolved in earlier stages. So they arrive with a baggage ... and we have to start trying to unpack things. (P, Teaching staff)

4.1.8. QUALITY INTERPERSONAL INTERACTIONS

The participants who had experience working in second chance schools believed having positive student-teacher relationships was an important factor for students to maintain interest towards learning and feel safe. According to the opinions heard from their students, the participants of the seminar believe that in traditional school systems students feel irrelevant and undervalued, while in schools for returning students, teachers focus on maintaining quality relationships with each individual student. The following are the student statements cited by the participating teachers:

Here you treat us well. (S, Headteacher)

Well, I needed someone to pay attention to me, to notice me. And for me, it's very clear, I need someone to pay a bit of attention to me, to make me feel like they know what's happening to me and what you all do. (P, Teacher)

They used to say: "Here I feel like someone. (S, Teacher)

4.2. Factors shaping student disengagement

4.2.1. NEGATIVE IMAGE OF EDUCATIONAL CENTERS AMONG LEARNERS

According to personal experiences of the participants, students' perception of a school mission or the lack of awareness of its mission created a sense of disconnect. One participant associated her school with passing exams. Another participant questioned the concept of long-term schooling due to lack of understanding its purpose:

If you see that taking exams isn't your thing, as it happened to me, then look for what you like. (B, Student)

And also, maybe, an idea of a lack of education among all groups, including families and teachers, regarding the need to pursue the highest level of education. There's a social notion that why does everyone have to go to university? Why does everyone have to complete post-compulsory secondary education? So, there's this lack of awareness that it's so necessary for the modern world because if not, you quickly end up in precariousness. (A, Association representative)

4.2.2. PRACTICES FOCUSED ON REPRODUCTION

The issue of an education system based on reproductive practices was thought to be detrimental to student and teacher agency and motivation, according to the conversations of the participants. Some admitted that the imposed academic contents cause boredom both among students and teachers, which made them question the utility of the education systems. In addition, pressure on teachers to evaluate and on students to sit exams and constant changes in assessment practices make professionals lose interest and initiative. One of the participants stated:

Me, being in class after 15 years - sometimes we see huge anachronisms in class - I don't understand many of the contents. Why? Why give these to those who don't...? Of course, I'm not a teacher, I can't evaluate it like a teacher, but I can evaluate it as a parent, as a person, and as in, "Do you really want

to know this in life, kid?" I mean, memorize it, then dump it in an exam, and then forget it? Really? All of this is an issue. For me, it's a huge anachronism in the education system. (J, Family member)

For me, the issue of evaluation is a big one. Like... in some way, how do you justify "this student is competent"? And the new law emphasizes this a lot. It lays it all out. The learning situation and so on. And then it tells you that you have to assess differently, you have to assess in terms of competencies. And to this day, none of us really know how to assess competencies well. And many times, you end up doing the same exam you did 20 years ago, even though the law is telling you that you have to assess differently. And maybe you're even using different content and activities, but when it comes down to it, you still assess the way you used to. (S, School Administrator)

4.2.3. POOR PSYCHO- EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

The stakeholders noted that psycho-emotional issues among young learners are on a raise. Poor psychological and emotional well-being can disrupt the learning process due to unresolved conflicts, marginalization and unmet emotional needs. Underachievement causes students to feel a deep sense of failure and hopelessness. Some examples of this are:

They really come with the feeling of having failed. And many times, we believe it's because in the previous stages, they couldn't, didn't know how, or there was no way to progress. They come with very low self-esteem and a sense that they've been sent here as a last chance, not the last one. We don't tell them no, it's not the second, there will be a third. And the fourth is that they are very young. (P, Teacher)

There are also people who have experienced marginalization. They have been treated poorly in class, and that has harmed them greatly. (G, Teacher)

4.2.4. POOR LINGUISTIC SUPPORT

The participants' conversations highlighted the importance of linguistic competence for immigrant students and their families to be able to participate fully in schools and communities. According to the participants' observations, inadequate linguistic support of immigrant populations leads to marginalization in the majority of social processes and poor academic outcomes:

It's just that if you don't master the language, you're excluded from almost everything (S, School principal)

The issue of language reinforcement should be approached differently. I mean, I don't understand how it can be like figures of Occupational Risk Prevention (PRL). The role of language reinforcement should be more distributed. And certainly, the idea of two years... (M, Family member)

4.2.5. DEPLETED HUMAN RESOURCES

The participants admit that often teachers and schools serving vulnerable populations in particular are overwhelmed with the workload they have and the lack of time to dedicate to professional development. Some educational centers intend to have multiple agendas and they find hard to prioritize real needs of the learners and teachers:

And when they want to do it, they should prioritize it. Because in schools with a large vulnerable population, they feel like they're dealing with so many urgent matters that they're constantly putting out fires and not focusing on the essentials. (E, Policymaker)

How can you expect mainstream co-education in all schools if the teachers don't even have time? I'm not even talking about time for training but for preparing activities. (S, Teacher)

In other words, policies should be more evidence-based, and there shouldn't be so many initiatives bombarding teachers with all sorts of things, making them do a thousand things and driving them crazy. Things that contradict each other and have no evidence behind them. That confuses a lot and, well, it also encourages everyone to do what they like or what they feel like or what requires the least effort, and that works better. (B, Association representative)

4.2.6. SEGREGATION-PROVOKING PRACTICES

The stakeholder discussions confirmed the ineffectiveness and inutility of intervention measures that track and group students into different abilities or obligate them to repeat grades to obtain secondary school certificates. These measures were believed to produce limited learning outcomes and low self-esteem that leads to counter-productive consequences among students:

So, if the groups - the ones doing better - are helping the others, those who are doing worse, who are surely better at other things and can also help, they will improve. Because what's clear is that when you create Groups A and B, you're already condemning those in B or C, and everything drops, expectations drop, the level drops, everything drops. So, the idea of "No, repeating is not necessary," but most importantly, it should be about how to organize, right? (B, Association representative)

What I'm very sure about is that the academic system doesn't cater to the diversity in the classrooms. Not in the slightest. (J, Family member)

There are many decisions at the macro level, theoretically not to talk about repetition. Every time I have a conference, we always talk about how useless repetition is because it's clear, I mean, we have evidence from all over that it doesn't lead us anywhere. It might work for us, but for the students who repeat, it really doesn't work. And this happens in schools, it happens in the immediate context. And with everything else, we can say the same thing, that there are macro decisions that can make things happen, but the right response comes from those involved in the work. I mean, surely in your school, with the same macro as others, the responses you provide are much more suitable for the students than those provided in another way. I'm sure of it. (P, Teacher)

Repeating is the first step for students to start dropping out. Everyone who leaves the system has repeated at some point. I mean, if we had zero repetition, would we have zero dropouts? That would be fantastic. (E, Policymaker)

4.3. Prevention measures

4.3.1. PARTICIPATION OF FAMILIES IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

The stakeholders admitted that participation of families is of a great importance to the learning outcomes of their children, particularly in decision making processes. Establishing effective communication between a school and families is necessary for families and teachers to reach understanding in the issues causing conflict and tensions, and in particular, to resolve misconceptions that arise from both parties:

So, when you involve families, engage in dialogue with them, take their fears into account, and respond to alleviate those fears effectively... for example, in schools where families are afraid to participate, you propose how to do it, how to do it well, how to participate, such as in an interactive group where the mother of that troublesome student comes... and you see how the relationship of that mother improves as she starts to view the school differently, because she sees that the teacher

is concerned about her child, who is not the enemy, and the school realizes that the mother is not the enemy either. (M, Association representative)

According to the personal experiences of educators, certain negative experiences of dialogue between a school and families cause defensiveness and fear in teachers and in school leadership that impedes further communication. However, some stakeholders think that these obstacles occur because of a lack of dialogue between schools and families that creates misunderstanding of real needs and challenges in this process. Often families believe that they are not heard by school leadership and teachers and that their voices are not valid, which in turn leads to low motivation to participate and causes schools think that families are not interested, thus converting into a vicious cycle:

I have a problem, and it's that family participation depends on allowing them to participate and creating an environment for participation. When this is done, families respond, get enthusiastic, and everything improves. And then, on top of that, families are blamed for not participating. (B, Association representative)

For families to participate, you have to allow them to participate. So, the family may want to participate, and the school closes the door. We know many students who have succeeded because they were pushed from home. (G, Teacher)

So, I believe that the problem with family and student participation is that in most cases, they are not given the opportunity to participate because it's not just about going to a meeting to listen and say yes to everything – that's not participation. (M, Association representative)

Another issues that came up in the stakeholder discussions is the need to support and guide vulnerable groups and minorities to be able to participate in decision-making processes at school:

In the case of vulnerable individuals, when you want to involve them in decision-making, what position do you already place them in before coming to the meeting? If you think what they have to say is interesting or not interesting because you already believe they have nothing to contribute. So, this expectation eventually becomes a reality where you end up talking for the entire hour, they don't say anything, and in the end, it's because you thought they had nothing to say, and it's as if it has been fulfilled—they didn't say anything. It should be an equal dialogue. (G, Teacher)

Cultural elements play an important role. Not because these families lack culture, but because the perception they have of being able to help their children is much lower than that of other families. Consequently, they provide less support mainly due to a belief. The reality is that they can provide the same amount of support, or even more than other families, as support involves accompanying the child through many processes. In this case, the school has a much greater role. I believe that their participation with or through the school and decision-making is much more critical at this level. (J, Family member)

Families didn't have the ability or ease to participate, but they wanted to participate. When I mentioned earlier that the teaching profession is complex, it's very complex because it involves trying to build confidence in these individuals, who often lack it. To achieve this, you may need additional support, such as socio-health entities, mainly because many of these families aren't prepared to support their children effectively. (M, Association representative)

One participant mentioned that during the COVID- 2019 pandemic some established relations between families and schools have been weakened:

Unfortunately, due to COVID, all the involvement, I mean, the families and so on, disappeared, and this year they are trying to recover it again. But yes, it was a shame because all the work that had been done, because it was done in the school, I mean, the counselor mentioned that there were about 27 interactive groups throughout the week. (S, Teacher)

4.3.2. DIALOGIC AND EVIDENCE- BASED TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

According to the stakeholder discussions, dialogic teacher development is believed to be an effective measure, however, it was mentioned that this practice is often infeasible in many educational centers and only a small number of professionals are able to dedicate time to implement it due to other priorities dictated by the educational policy:

Going for dialogic training is a step further for our teachers. Once they are capable of aligning themselves with the law, we can perhaps see what tools allow us to advance in other areas. I believe that dialogic training has a much greater impact on the coexistence itself, even within the school. So, not only in terms of the possibility of learning differently but also, I think, in terms of the relationships between students and between teachers and students. (S, Headteacher)

Nevertheless, teacher professional development is believed to be critical in formation of evidence-based policies such as dialogic professional development:

We are talking about how to ensure that evidence-based policies are adopted by creating groups that generate a process, identify needs, and from those teachers who are in the practice, be able to take it to political levels and demand, "Look, if we don't do it this way, it doesn't make sense, and it won't change." (M, Association representative)

And to say, let's not just stay here saying that it doesn't work like this, but let's take action, ask for signatures, gather support, and push for it. Because with the current system, policies are often made from the opposite perspective, and if they are made that way, they can fail. (E, Policymaker)

4.3.3. POLITICAL COMMITMENT

When exploring the reasons behind the gap between ESL in Basque Country and other Spanish regions, one participant believed the success of education system in Basque region depends on the degree of commitment of the political agenda to developing inclusive education:

The interest of the Basque educational system for many years has been to develop an inclusive school. Therefore, all the resources, programs, and plans around inclusive education, I also believe, are a macro element that can contribute to reducing failure. (P, Teacher)

4.4. Intervention measures

4.4.1. EXTENSION OF LEARNING TIME (THROUGH EXTRA CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES)

The idea of intervention for students through extra-curricular activities raised mixed opinions among the stakeholders, some stating this practice creates inequality and segregation and therefore should not be encouraged, while others believe extracurricular activities should focus on sports and interpersonal relations:

As I mentioned in something I said earlier, when I talk about extending learning time, I always understand it as more "athletic," like an English class or something similar. Activities where you can still have group interactions without having to study. It could be sports, dance, or something like that. We're fortunate to have many extracurricular sports activities. I believe that does extend learning time because when they leave school, they have the soccer team or the basketball team, and they have practice three days a week. I think that helps. At least, I see it in my children; they go with enthusiasm. (S, Headteacher)

4.4.2. COMMUNITY EDUCATION PROGRAMS

When asked to identify key missing elements from intervention measures, the participants highlighted the importance of community involvement in reducing ESL. Teachers and families do not always get the chance to provide targeted at-risk students due to lack of time and resources and other priorities. Sometimes, school leadership is afraid of taking up the responsibility to lead a dialogue between families and teachers. Therefore, the communities and neighborhoods surrounding a school should provide facilities to engage the youth in learning opportunities:

It's not just the professionals; it's the community that needs to intervene. Professionals, well, there's no money and no time for professionals to reach those families. (M, Association representative)

The community needs to be activated. (S, Family member)

So, the school alone cannot do all of this; I'm absolutely certain of that. Not even the educational community within the school; it requires a broader community and services located in the neighborhood or the area where the educational center is, in order to collaborate and address these types of situations with families, fathers, and mothers who don't really engage with the school. (G, Teacher)

4.5. Compensation measures

4.5.1. COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT

When asked how compensation measures could be improved for students who abandoned the education system, the discussions revealed the important role of comprehensive support systems and alternative pedagogical practice. Some students need basic care needs, while others need more psychological support and communication in a safe environment. In addition, the use of alternative evidence-based learning strategies helps students improve self-esteem and motivation. According to the participants:

It's true that we are a team, we are highly involved educators, very much focused on asking, "What do you need?" Because sometimes, you have to start with figuring out where you'll sleep, what you'll eat, what's preventing you from learning. If you have a seemingly wonderful family with plenty of money and resources, why have you failed? Well, perhaps there has been drug use that they haven't informed anyone about, I don't know. So, it involves a lot of talking with them, a lot. (S, Teacher)

Because they can do it, the proposals, the activities they're presented with, they actually do them - they are successful. And we all need success. The way we treat them is different as well. Well, yes, because maybe we're more relaxed, and perhaps we even overindulge the teachers a bit. (G, Teacher)

Within second-chance schools, we have a representative for the students, and when they come together from various schools, they prepare written documents. We give them a bit of a voice,

sometimes with some guidance, because as you mentioned, it's a bit like that, but we let them have a say, ask for what you believe you need, what you can request, and so on. Last year, the center also had an interesting collective writing experience about their learning process. (P, Teacher)

We believe more in talking with them than expecting them to speak as if they have to know significant things. In terms of values education, we emphasize it a lot, very systematically, what's important in your life. What's important, what you need for success. (S, Headteacher)

4.5.2. SECOND CHANCE SCHOOLS

Regarding second chance schools, one participant expressed the importance of having educational centers for adults among vulnerable groups, however, she thought the title "Second Chance Schools" may stigmatize those who will attend these institutions:

But yes, it's true that we're fighting to create a small group specifically for university education for people over 25 years old from the Roma community. We're working hard to establish a group of this kind, which works very well in Catalonia. There's a group that's doing wonders. More and more people over 25 are enrolling in universities, overcoming obstacles, and it's a great life trend, both for boys and girls, which is fantastic. (M, Association representative)

Okay. I don't like the name. Second chance, it doesn't appeal to me. With that name, you don't encourage me to sign up for anything. (M, Student)

5. Policy reflections

Several themes that emerged from the policy reviews were also reflected in the discussions during the national dialogic seminar. One of the most prominent issues that participants highlighted from different perspectives (from their experiences as teachers, parents, caregivers or policymakers), was the key role of the educational participation of families (particularly those from vulnerable groups). When Roma parents explained how relevant it is for them to be involved in the educational activities and decision-making processes of their children's school, the rest of the participants agreed on that. However, they highlighted the challenges of this in practice, sharing some examples of how COVID-19 has weakened families' involvement in higher education. According to the participants, the ideal situation for overcoming underachievement and ESL includes families and other community members within the schools, and understanding the massive value of their cultural knowledge to the educational success and the positive coexistence in the educational institutions and beyond.

In a similar vein, another theme that emerged both in the policy review and the dialogic seminar is the importance of valuing the cultural and ethnic diversity in the school. According to the participants, not only does this reduce ESL rates among vulnerable and minority populations but it can also increase their sense of belonging in the community as well as enrich general learning experience for all students.

These reflections were mostly connected to prevention and intervention measures, highlighting the greater potential of local measures and regional efforts to support and counteract ESL compared to national policies. Compensation measures were only slightly addressed during the discussions, as the conversation focused more on holistic actions rather than targeted interventions that are viewed as a last resort.

Interestingly, while the national policy review pointed at the limitations in early detection measures, the participants of the dialogic seminar highlighted this as an important factor, especially around providing high quality evidence-based support at pre-school level to prevent underachievement from early ages, given the cumulative nature of poor academic outcomes in young people's lives later on.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE SEMINAR

Factors that <i>contribute</i> to ESL as identified by the stakeholders	Factors that <i>reduce</i> ESL as identified by the stakeholders
- Negative image of the education system among students and families - Measures focused on reproducing knowledge - Segregation practices - Poor psycho-emotional well-being of students - Poor linguistic support for immigrant students - Depleted human resources (teachers)	- High expectations and role models - Continuous guidance - Family educational participation - Diversity and culturally sensitive curriculum - Relevance of curriculum - Teacher development and school leadership - Alternative pathways - Early detection and prevention - Quality interpersonal interaction

<i>Challenges</i> identified by stakeholders	<i>Recommendations</i> given by the stakeholders
- Counterproductive institutional practices and insufficient funding cause teacher burnouts and lower the quality of teaching - Community is not sufficiently involved in family-child education - There is a negative perception of schools among students and their families - VET and Second Chance Schools tend to be stigmatized - A gap between prescribed evidence-based policies and their implementation (CdA) - A gap between evidence-based pedagogical practices and education system realities (focus on evaluation, tests) - A lack of understanding of importance of long-term schooling and school's mission by students and their families - A lack of detection on early stages and accumulative effect of underachievement	- Creating a safe space for parents to participate in decision-making practices - Activating community for intervention measures with families and children - Identifying real needs of learners and prioritizing targeted interventions - Promote dialogic teacher education - Offering high quality ECEC - Promoting diversity in schools and communities - Providing guidance for vulnerable populations - Providing non-stigmatizing alternatives and return pathways - Offering strong linguistic support - Following up through accurate implementation of evidence-based policies - Providing psychological support to the youth - Promoting the value of schooling

Conclusions

This report outlines the key results of the national dialogic seminar (Spain) held on 3 October 2023 attended by 13 participants representing policymakers, families, students, associations, school administration, and teaching staff. In general, the seminar discussions aligned with the themes covered in the policy review, such as the educational participation of vulnerable families, their involvement in decision making, the importance of valuing cultural diversity and curriculum sensitivity in schools to foster an enhanced sense of belonging, the positive impact of holistic actions especially at the regional and local level, and the importance of high-quality and evidence-based support especially in early years to prevent underachievement. Several recommendations have also been identified, especially with regard to providing safe spaces for parents to participate in decision making, offering guidance especially for vulnerable populations, offering high-quality ECEC, and the accurate implementation of evidence-based policies.

Overall, the results of this seminar are a product of a co-creation process with the wider community. This is in keeping with SCIREARLY's broader objective of leveraging scientific evidence to maximize social impact towards systemic change, giving young people the best opportunity to succeed and thrive in school and beyond.

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SCIEARLY WP1: Task 1.3 – Dialogic Seminars

Proposed Structure of Partner Report Template

TITLE – Greece	
PARTICIPANTS	The seminar was held on Wednesday, October 4th, between 5.30-8pm. Five individuals participated in the dialogic seminar (of the 25 contacted overall, 13 of whom had confirmed their attendance but were unable to make it). Most participants were reached via email and telephone calls, while two were also recruited through acquaintances and other networks. Three were women and two of them were men. Their ages varied from around 40 to 75 years old. The participants' expertise covered a range of roles and challenges. It is important to also mention that most participants already knew of or had collaborated with one another. One participant is the director of a multicultural school in central Athens, while another participant is the director of a high-school in an area of Western Attica with high numbers of Roma students. Another participant is director of a second chance school in the broader region of Attica (for students of ages 18 and above). One participant is a special education teacher, who has acted as director of different primary schools in Athens (now retired) and had also been appointed vice-mayor in charge of education in the municipality of Athens. The last participant is a social worker, and the founder of an NGO offering support to Children and Families, which has focused actively and extensively on the education of Roman children since the 1990s.

METHODS	The dialogic seminar was preceded by a short presentation of the content, objectives and activities of SCIREARLY, including of the partners involved. Then, all participants, including the three members from KMOP, presented themselves, while some of our guests gave details and answered questions related to the institutions that they represent and their role within them. The structure of the dialogic seminar consisted of the following activities: - Ice-breaking activities (which included some statements drawing on the policy research on which we wanted our participants to reflect and elaborate) - A separate section dedicated to the factors that may shape student engagement and student disengagement. - A set of questions were presented with the objective of discussing policy recommendations (this activity was meant to take place while the participants were divided in two separate groups, each coordinated by either of the two organisers – eventually, because of the small number of participants but also because of the constructive discussion held between them, no separate groups were formed). - The concluding part of the seminar included some open questions aimed to give participants the opportunity to express any further issues or concern. As all participants gave their consent, the seminar was recorded using a recording device. It is interesting to note that, in spite of the planning of the seminar that we had agreed upon, the actual discussion deviated from the structure above. Once the first statements/questions were presented, the discussants initiated a dialogue (both in answering the questions and exchanging views with one another) which however did address all the crucial points that were the objective of the dialogic seminar. Whenever the organisers felt that the discussion might have been deviating significantly from the objective, we sought to intervene and set the topic and the direction of the dialogue anew. In doing so, we made sure that we covered all the points of the dialogic seminar that we had planned, while also managing to gather important insight into new issues. An important observation is that the largest part of the discussion centered around engagement and early school leaving particularly for students with a minority background (with a special focus on the Roma communities). This is largely due to the fact, first, that our participants drew on their own experiences that have to do to a significant degree with students from those parts of the population, but also because ultimately the issues explored in the dialogic seminar seem to primarily concern these groups.
ANALYSIS	The data analysis consisted of: content and discourse analysis, based on the notes taken and on close hearing of the recording.
RESULTS (please put under sub-sections with representative	Themes 1.1-2.2 related to factors shaping student engagement and disengagement: Given the expertise and experience of the participants involved, the dialogic seminar focused on the following factors that may shape student engagement and disengagement:

quotes from participants wherever possible and include images if visual/creative methods were used)	- Societal factors: these have to do with the social/economic status of the student and their families and with the extent to which the parents are themselves educated or interested in promoting their own children’s education. Some participants commented how helpful it is for students’ education if the parents have themselves completed compulsory education (and have even attended university). - Gender: some participants repeatedly emphasized the differences between the opportunities given to boys and girls in their schools, particularly within the Roma community. According to the director of the school with a high number of Roma students, “girls are instinctively ready to grab a broom and start cleaning the floor!”. That same participant shared her concern about a particular, very bright student – a girl from the Roma community – who was very interested in school, but the director was certain that her family wouldn’t allow her to continue her studies in compulsory education. Similarly, different stories of young girls from the Roma community were shared, where the girls were already pregnant before starting high-school and they took it for granted that the priority in their lives was not school, but rather get married and have children. - School books: the two school directors believe that the current school books and curricula do not correspond to the interests and needs of most minority communities attending Greek schools. Most participants agreed and observed that these books are much more relevant to Greek students (<i>it is interesting to note that they described the latter on the basis of their religion, i.e. “Greek Orthodox students”, suggesting the strong links between nationality and religion in the country, also reflected in education</i>). - The director of the second-chance school added two factors that seem to have affected student engagement (to the extent that they had eventually dropped out): learning or developmental difficulties (especially those that were undiagnosed or where the diagnosis came in much later) as well as bullying in school and bad experiences/relationships with school teachers. - Two further interesting factors were raised: • One factor concerned the lack of acceptance that some students of minority background may face by some schools. Though the participant claimed that they did not wish to use the term “discrimination”, they described a situation in which a migrant student was openly excluded from a school in the centre of Athens by the school director, who refused to have the student enrolled (even though he had no right not to accept the student). • The second concerned the disruptive behavior and even violence by some students, especially in high schools, which precludes them from integrating into the school system, while also creating important challenges for school authorities. The director of the school in the underprivileged area shared some deeply concerning stories where she felt like her own safety was at stake: for example, when she tried to physically intervene to put a stop to a fight between Roma and

Pontiac students (who are apparently adverse enemies) or when the imprisoned father of a Roma student in her school called her on her mobile (“he called me from prison?”) to directly threaten her in case she did not promote his son to the next class. The director was so deeply concerned that she was asking the other participants for advice on what they think she should do. Interestingly, all participants commented that the police would be very unlikely to intervene, as they wish to keep themselves out of such in-group conflicts.

Theme 3.1 related to prevention and intervention measures discussion

The participants seemed to all agree that the prevention and intervention measures implemented in the country – especially as these emerged from the policy review – only seemed to be minimally successful in helping student engagement and performance in school or in the continuation of their studies throughout compulsory education.

Specifically:

- Measures such as **ZEPs** (special education zones) or **integration classes**, though relevant, have helped address the challenges that some students, particularly of minority background, face only as temporary solutions. As discussed further below, students whose first language is not Greek or who may have special needs (of different types, also including because of their background), may require constant support (in the form of integration classes) and not just ad-hoc interventions. Our participants seemed to all agree that more ZEP and integration classes should be formed and that they should be more permanent (see also below).
- The same seems to apply to another measure, namely **all-day schools**. Though the objective was for the latter to reinforce student presence and engagement in school (while also giving an incentive to their parents who may be working or unable to look after them during the day), one participant noticed that such schools have in many cases turned into a type of “day-centre” where students do not really engage in learning, but are just kept at school because they have nowhere else to be.

Themes 5.1 and 5.2 related to compensation measures discussion

One of the most significant aspects that emerged from the very start of the seminar was the existence (and consequences) of **special allowances** that are offered to the families of children attending primary and secondary education, as well as to large families (that have 3+ children) and to single-parent households. There also exist additional types of allowances, including a “return to school” allowance (determined on the basis of the child’s age) and an allowance meant to help students and their families purchase all necessary material they may need for school purposes.

A prerequisite in all cases is that the children attend (and complete) compulsory education.

This measure may have indeed acted as an incentive for parents to send their kids to school but, as the participants noted, for the wrong reasons and not exactly in the most desirable way. For instance, a number of incidents were shared with us of students skipping school and showing up solely to make sure they receive the allowance; of parents pretending to be

single so that they are also eligible to the allowance; of parents requesting that their child continue to high school in spite of the fact that the latter lacks the knowledge or basic skills to do so, etc.

Though such a measure may first appear as a “blessing in disguise”, as it may clearly act as a motivation to encourage school attendance (and it may also partly explain the statistics that emerged out of the policy review), all participants were adamant that the ultimately consequence of the allowances was not helpful in terms of students’ engagement, their performance or everything that they may actually gain out of compulsory education.

Themes 6.1 and 6.2 related to policy recommendations to improve student engagement

The following recommendations were made that also touch upon primarily pedagogical approaches (see also following section for a more thorough analysis):

- **Class size:** typical school classes in Greece may hold up to 28-30 students. All participants seemed to agree that smaller classes is a necessary prerequisite in seeking to reinforce student engagement.
- **Teaching approach:** alongside the reform of the curricula and material given to students (mentioned above), participants emphasized that a teaching/pedagogical approach that would adopt a more experiential learning method would be highly beneficial for improving student engagement.
- **Integration classes** should be established in every two-three schools in a given area/neighborhood.
- **Emphasis on the improvement of primary education and support with the transition from primary to secondary levels of education:** all participants agreed that students should not be able to graduate from primary school and enter high school so easily if they do not meet certain criteria. They all also shared the view that in various more vulnerable cases of students, the transition from one level to the other may come as a shock and may hinder them from continuing their studies in compulsory education. In general, smoother cooperation between primary and secondary education must be promoted (at the moment, it seems that very often one school puts the blame on the other).
- **Leniency in absences:** a very common issue that, according to some participants, must surely be addressed is the tendency by school authorities to be lenient when it comes to excusing (or even erasing) school absences of students. In most cases this is a result of the genuine concern teachers or directors show, and an effort to be more understanding and help support students that may come from difficult living situations. Ultimately, however, this may mean that these students may be promoted to the next class, and subsequently to high-school, without having acquired basic knowledge and skills. This has consequences in terms of their engagement, performance, and the continuation of their school attendance.
- **Over-grading:** related to the above, another issue that needs to be addressed is the tendency of school teachers and professors to over-grade some students – again in an effort to help them and support them in the continuation of their studies. As mentioned above, this may have the exact opposite consequences.

POLICY REFLECTION/ DISCUSSION	Some take-aways, on the basis of which we wish to reflect further for the deliverables and the next stages of the project: - Though the participants were aware of the fact that Greece seems to be doing quite well in terms of early school leaving (as indicated through the 1.2 policy reviews), they were all certain that such statistics fail to consider a high number of unregistered students (refugees and migrants, Roma, students changing schools, students who never actually register to attend school, or even students who are denied registration, etc.). - The successful outcomes of the country over the last decade in terms of early school leaving do not however seem to go hand-in-hand with an overall good quality and level of school performance (an outcome which, to a certain extent, had also emerged from the 1.2 policy review). To the contrary, most participants observed that students do indeed stay in school and continue their studies for longer, but by the time they graduate a significant number of them may have not even managed to meet some of the most basic criteria and standards of compulsory education (i.e. in language, writing, etc).
CONCLUSION	The insights gained from the dialogic seminar were highly constructive in the sense that they helped, first, highlight some gaps or potential questions that emerged out of the policy review (particularly in relation to the statistics and samples used and gathered). They moreover helped bring to the surface some crucial aspects that we had not considered or had not noticed in the policy review, namely the role, the limits and challenges created by a series of measures that were implemented to help address the question of student engagement and early leaving, such integration classes, ZEPs, but also the specific allowances. In doing so, the findings help enrich the material that we have gathered for the policy review and also lead us to some specific topics that need to be explored further.

Version 1.0

THE MHPSS COLLABORATIVE

Transnational Dialogic Seminar

Work Package 1

Submission Date 23 October 2023



1.0 Introduction

The final part of the dialogic seminar process, following the completion of seminars at the country level, saw the holding of a transnational seminar to gather insights, experiences, and recommendations related to student early school leaving and underachievement.

The organisation of dialogic seminars is based around a number of key guiding principles including:

1. **Participants:** Four groups were targeted for recruitment in each country-level dialogic seminar: students, teachers, parents, and policymakers. This diverse group of participants is intended to generate a well-rounded perspective on the issue.
2. **Primary Goal:** The primary goal of the dialogic seminars is to generate consensus through egalitarian dialogue between the participants and the researcher. This is different from traditional focus groups, which aim to collect diverse perspectives only. In dialogic seminars, the aim is to solicit joint interpretations that can guide social transformation.
3. **Researcher's Role:** The researcher acts as the facilitator of the dialogic seminar. They not only moderate the discussion but also actively participate in the dialogue. This approach aims to create knowledge that is responsive to the local realities of participants and can contribute to social change.
4. **Guiding Points:** The facilitation of the dialogic seminar is guided by general discussion points agreed upon and shared across the sites, as well as learnings from a policy mapping process specific to the country setting. This helps structure the discussions and ensure they are relevant to the research goals.
5. **Language and Methods:** Dialogic seminars are conducted in the local language to ensure effective communication. To facilitate exchange, some teams use a mix of visual and creative methods. The choice of method is determined by the country-level teams based on their familiarity with the methods and their appropriateness for the specific sample.

The dialogic seminar process in this project was completed with a capstone transnational seminar which was underpinned by the following concepts and ideas:

- a. The nature of the seminar: After the conclusion of the national dialogic seminars, a transnational seminar is held with representatives from each country. During this seminar, each representative shared key points, takeaways, opportunities, challenges, and recommendations from their country-level seminar.
- b. Facilitation: The MHPSS Collaborative facilitated the transnational seminar, aiming to identify common facilitators and barriers that are shared across countries and those that are unique to specific contexts.
- c. Goals of Transnational Seminar: The transnational seminar's goal was to foster cross-cultural collaboration, exchange of knowledge, and the development of transnational recommendations for improving educational outcomes.
- d. Format: The specific format of the transnational seminar is outlined in Table 1 below, and provides details on the structure of the seminar.

In summary, this approach combines local dialogic seminars to gather insights and perspectives at the country level with a transnational seminar to identify commonalities and unique aspects across countries, ultimately working towards improving educational outcomes and addressing early school leaving and underachievement.

The structure of the transnational dialogic seminar was as follows:

Activity	Time allocation
Welcome and Introduction Welcome address by the host organization, acknowledging the multicultural audience. Introduction of participants, highlighting their country of origin and respective organization	5 minutes
Panel Discussion: Cross-Country Perspectives and Success Stories Panelists from different countries present their country-level experiences, highlighting the major takeaways from the dialogic seminars. Of particular interest will be the major factors identified in the discussion on the multi-level factors impacting students' engagement with schools and recommendations for policy change. Each country representative will have approximately 5-7 minutes to discuss highlights from their country seminar. Order of presentation: - Newcastle - UK - DCU - Ireland - DEG – Portugal - Deusto - Spain - KMOP – Greece - CESIE – Italy	30-40 minutes
Moderated conversation: Synthesis and Comparative Analysis Facilitated group conversation will focus on specific themes or topics derived from the country-level findings to identify commonalities, differences, shared challenges, and potential opportunities for collaboration. Orienting questions: - Of what other country partners had shared, what was the most surprising or different from the conversation unfolding in your own national dialogic seminar? - What was the most similar? - What are some of the lasting impacts of COVID on prevention, intervention, and compensation measures in your country?	20-30 minutes
Transnational Recommendations and Action Planning Interactive session to collectively develop transnational recommendations and action plans based on the cross-country insights and findings. Orienting questions: During the dialogic seminar, what were identified as priority policy areas for intervention? Conversely, what was considered of lower priority by the groups?	10 minutes
Closing Remarks and Commitment to Collaboration Closing remarks by the host organization, emphasizing the value of cross-cultural collaboration and expressing gratitude to participants for their contributions.	5 minutes
TOTAL TIME	1.5 hours

2.0 Participants

The MHPSS Collaborative conducted the transnational seminar in a virtual format, leveraging an aggregation and synthesis of findings derived from the country-level dialogic seminars. This transnational seminar, with a duration of approximately 1.5 hours, involved the participation of two to four representatives from each country-level seminar. These representatives were nominated by each country lead, resulting in a total of 23 individuals. Among the representatives, there was a diverse mix of SCIREARLY team members, family representatives, civil society organizations, school stakeholders, and teaching professionals. These individuals were selected based on their ability to effectively summarise and convey the key discussion points and takeaways from the respective country-level dialogic seminars.

During the transnational seminar, each representative had the opportunity to present the major highlights and key takeaways from their country-level seminar. This encompassed insights into opportunities, challenges, and recommendations for addressing issues related to early school leaving and underachievement. The facilitation by the MHPSS Collaborative aimed to identify unique facilitators and barriers, which could be shared on a transnational scale. The primary objective of this seminar was to foster cross-cultural collaboration, promote the exchange of knowledge, and develop transnational recommendations to enhance educational outcomes.

Recognising that not all participants in the dialogic seminars may be equally proficient in English, the transnational seminar was hosted on the Zoom platform, with the utilization of the "Live language interpretation" feature to provide multiple audio channels. The MHPSS Collaborative proactively requested each country lead to share this information at least two weeks prior to the seminar, ensuring the necessary arrangements for interpretation could be made.

The following are the participants of the transnational dialogic seminar:

The

3.0

Person	Position	Role in transnational seminar	Country
Karlo Dukic	The MHPSS Collaborative team member	Support to facilitator	Denmark
Kathy Trang	The MHPSS Collaborative team member	Facilitator	Denmark
Marie Dahl	The MHPSS Collaborative team member	Attendee	Denmark
Louise Juul Hansen	The MHPSS Collaborative team member	Attendee	Denmark
Deepali Pavgadhi	The MHPSS Collaborative team member	Attendee	Denmark
Aideen Casidy	DCU team member	Presenter	Ireland
John Barry	School Principal	Presenter	Ireland
Ger Dempsey	Teacher and home school liaison teacher	Presenter	Ireland
Jackie Boldon	Director of local organization Sussed and Able. Play campaigner, advocate for neuro-inclusivity and grandparent.	Presenter	UK
Liz Todd	UNEW team member	Presenter	UK
Carla Mota	DGE team member	Presenter	Portugal
Filipe Teixeira	DGE team member	Attendee	Portugal
Paula Domingues	Deputy Principal of the School Cluster	Presenter	Portugal
Sofia Costa	Head of Pedagogic Council at the School Cluster	Presenter	Portugal
Icy Fresno Anabo	Deusto team member	Attendee	Spain
Andrea Khalfaoui Larrañaga	Deusto team member	Translator	Spain
María Luisa Jaussi	Member of Berritzegune, a network of learning centres in the Basque Country providing support for innovation and training in education; Member of Adarra	Presenter	Spain
Irati Higuera	Psychologist; Education Research Assistant, University of Deusto	Presenter	Spain
Eirianna Dragona	KMOP team member	Presenter	Greece
Margarita Markoviti	KMOP team member	Presenter	Greece
Alessia Valenti	CESIE team member	Presenter	Italy
Fabrizio Di Spezio	CESIE team member	Attendee	Italy
Emna Miled	CESIE team member	Presenter	Italy

3.0 Analysis

Every country's participants shared the overarching themes that emerged during their national seminar. Following are the themes shared country wise.

1.0 ENGLAND: UNIVERSITY OF NEW CASTLE

THEME 1.1: FACTORS CAUSING ENGAGEMENT VS. DISENGAGEMENT

Factors, shaping disengagement, different attitudes and expectations of others was a was a key thing. So negative expectations we asked children to, and actually adults as well to use Lego and to create their preferred education, you know, what they wanted from education. And we had some very interesting models that were created, but both by adults and children. disengagement was also an issue of children, in terms of children find the education difficult and under pressure. And a big theme was a lack of opportunities where they live, this is something that children spoke off quite a bit. And not being in the right frame of mind to learn.

THEME 1.2 SCHOOLS ARE SLOW IN DIAGNOSING CHILDREN'S PROBLEMS

attitudes, professional attitudes, attitudes to parents has been a really tricky one actually really difficult one are kind of looking for quick reasons why things aren't going well blaming parents blaming children. So that whole thing is a big one. For us coming on the receiving end of children not being in school in schools, not fitting the needs of the children. As I mentioned, the transition, early diagnosis comes into that. So particularly getting an early diagnosis, our system is very slow. And parents often have to actually ask for the diagnosis, they have to make a referral.

THEME 1.3 IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING, AND POSITIVE PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT; LISTENING TO CHILDREN AND FAMILIES...

THEME 1.4 ENSURING THE RELEVANT CURRICULUM; ... SPECIAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM AND REFORM

THEME 1.5 ... ADDRESSING POVERTY CAME UP SEVERAL TIMES,... CHILD POVERTY HAS RISEN MASSIVELY IN THE UK;... THE IMPORTANCE OF ADDRESSING THE FINANCIAL BARRIERS TO EDUCATION

THEME 1.6 INTERVENTION [MEASURES]

... about learning beyond school, we will also have mentioned before in terms of out of school activities, and the need for non-academic support being so important...

THEME 1.7 ...FOCUS ON WELL-BEING, NOT JUST ATTAINMENT

THEME 1.8 THERE'S ALMOST NOTHING IN TERMS OF COMPENSATION

THEME 1.9 INTERVENTION AND PREVENTION MEASURES

[What has been done] in terms of intervention and prevention has been really piecemeal, we have more or less just one thing, which is Pupil Premium, that is the intervention. And very, so all good things in terms of what's promised in special needs, but a lot of it doesn't deliver.

2.0 IRELAND: DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY

THEME 2.1 POST – COVID RESPONSE

post COVID and the aspect of the impact of poor attendance in school and the work that's going on in schools to try and reengage both schools. and some families back into school and get them into a pattern of attendance is a very, very significant one.

it's quite diff difficult, therefore, to engage many students in coming back to school after COVID, because part went from anything, they recognized through the process of COVID, that they could kind of get away without being in school, actually. And there's actually very little the system can actually do when the chips are down.

Also, as a result of COVID, there's a heightened level of anxiety expressed now whether, whether partly it's an excuse, or partly, it's real... But it certainly is the reason why a lot would say that the students aren't in school, partly because the parents are the mother, rather, parents is the vast majority of single parent families. So in terms of the mothers not being able to themselves full of anxiety, and also the expression that their children are too anxious to get to school for one reason or another, would try and ask the school to come up to the home to try and get the child into school.

Also, as a result of COVID, we felt that there was almost a, what we call an emergence of a new culture of expertise. In other words, the students have got very savvy about the reality of what a system can actually do or not do. And also how slow system is really genuinely respond. So if a child decides not to go to school or not to engage in school, they recognize that actually, there's not an awful lot you can actually do about us in the short term, so they can get away with it for such length. And by the time the system fits in and actually does something about it, they've reached the leaving school age any anyway.

whole thing of while COVID was there, the number of part time jobs increased for our kind of students. And that meant that in poverty-stricken homes, a lot of the students would go to work, and that that was hard to break after COVID as well. And some participants in the seminar talked about our need as schools to recognize the maybe the maybe need for more hybrid type scenarios in other systems.

THEME 2.2 EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

The early the Early Childhood aspect was obviously recognized, and it's a crucial phase of engagement with both parents and children. And obviously, more publicly funded childcare was called for there.

THEME 2.3 GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING – MANAGING TRANSITIONS

The need also for help with transitions at various stages of the students' lives in Ireland, we transit transition from primary to secondary, at the age of about 12. And those are key stages in the lives of a child when things can fall apart of it. So, more support and more funding for those kinds of transitions seemed to be very important.

THEME 2.4 GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING – PROMOTING AND SUPPORTING ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS

Also, in Ireland, there's a huge call for people to sign up to go to college to third level University. And it's recognized in many of our disadvantaged schools that actually apprenticeships are more appropriate some for some students. However, the system doesn't necessarily support or recognize to the extent that it showed the value of apprenticeships and the I suppose that it's also almost a snobbery that it's not, you know, it's not as good as a third level education. So there's that inequity, therefore, that everybody's striving towards a third level education that may not suit them at all. And therefore students will drop out when it's just not for them. And there was a big call for more guidance.

THEME 2.5 GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING – EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

In Ireland, we have what we call guidance counselors. So their role is both to help with guidance in terms of career guidance, but also in terms of therapy. And because, again, we're working in very traumatized communities, our need for therapeutic trauma, trauma-based care and therapy is very huge.

THEME 2.6 DELIVERING EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY IN SCHOOLS (DEIS)

It's the program that supports and forms all of the different initiatives. And again, it was called that that become more further honed. And now it's a very well thought out program and has been reviewed and evaluated. But always the need for the more support actually on the ground and schools was called for, obviously, involving parents, we have a wonderful scheme called the homeschool liaison coordinator, where in all of our disadvantaged schools, there's a designated teacher, no timetable time, but their time is simply to engage with parents and to engage with them in the community... And it's a fabulous scheme. But again, we're recognizing that in very heavily disadvantaged schools, one is just not enough to get around, although it is in itself a fantastic resource, and very, very effective. But in some instances, the only tip of the iceberg of the need.

THEME 2.7 FLEXIBLE CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT

...part of what we discussed as well was the need for a more flexible curriculum, and a review of assessment policies to be more considerate of the students that are that have different needs.

3.0 Portugal: Directorate General for education**THEME 3.1 FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO ENGAGEMENT OR DISENGAGEMENT**

...as for the findings, mainly trust and sense of belonging, were actually the main things, the main factors that students pointed out as engaging them to school. Of course, if they feel included, they can be at school. Of course, what they didn't get disengages them is exactly the opposite lack of trust, not in the mindset for learning, not feeling included, and even sometimes segregated by my peers.

THEME 3.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION*Prevention measures*

to invest more in preschool education, in extra curricular activities, because more than one student mentioned, that it's quite important to have extracurricular activities to make the sense of belonging and to make students to want to go to school.

...greater involvement of parents and family;

the creation of emotion management offices... giving guidance, mainly psychological guidance to well to homeless students;

reducing the number of students per class; and

valuing multi-cultural classes.

Intervention measures

...adjustments in the curriculum, to address curriculum overload is always welcome. Although it has been done, it must be often reviewed;

more coordination between ministries to facilitate local support and measures in general;

school leadership's that are aware of their human resources to allocate the right people in the right functions; and

implementing support networks for students with mediation by community members.

Compensation measures

...valuing vocational courses, [offering] second chance education, and providing more financial support for schools, so that no student drops out of school because of financial reasons.

4.0 Spain: University of Deusto

THEME 4.1 IMPROVED IMAGE OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM AMONG THE STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

teachers were saying that students were only going to school to pass the exams. Another one is that measures focuses on producing knowledge, for example, doing the same exam for 22 years. Another one, I've seen repeated practice. For example, roping students... And the last one, there is a negative perception of schools among students and their families.

THEME 4.2 LIMITED SUPPORTS FOR IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Another one is poorly posted support for immigrant students. They don't have enough resources to success in school. Then factors that reviews earlier school leaving as the empty field widespread holders were thought to have the right expectations and role models.

THEME 4.3 FAMILY AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Family Educational participation in order to run motivation in the students... Also, community is not sufficiently involved in family kids education... And that's one recommendation given by the stakeholders. We have to stimulate dialogue between the school and parents to involve them in decision making practice will have to have a activating community for intervention measures and it will have to identify the real needs of liveness and period prioritize the targeted interventions.

THEME 4.4 CULTURALLY SENSITIVE CURRICULUM IS IMPORTANT BECAUSE IT CREATES A SENSE OF PERMANENCE IN THE STUDENTS.

THEME 4.5 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS AND SCHOOL LEADERSHIP.

THEME 4.6 INTRODUCTION OF ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS AS TRADITIONAL EDUCATIONAL PATHWAY DOES NOT WORK, WE'LL HAVE TO HAVE ANOTHER RESOURCE ANOTHER WAY.

THEME 4.7 REVIEW OF COUNTERPRODUCTIVE INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICE AND INSUFFICIENT FUNDING.

5.0 Italy : CESIE

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THEME 5.1 MAIN CONTRIBUTOR TO EDUCATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Primary factors contributing to students this engagement actually necessary is the social capital, social capital or background of the parents and their families. students from disadvantaged families often face additional barriers... inadequate family support can undermine a student's motivation to attend school because actually.

THEME 5.2 LANGUAGE BARRIERS

it's really significant barriers to learning here. For students who don't speak the primary language fluently, the engagement in the curriculum is a really difficult place to really compromise to because actually, the, the, the only language that we can teach in is Italian.

The spokesperson gave example of immigrant and Roma students as well as Italian students (Sicily) who speak different regional dialects at home.

THEME 5.3 SCARCITY OF EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

A second major problem which took the most time into discussion is that structural lack of educational resources in school in Italy and Sicily, especially, because the availability and the quality of the educational resources press a crucial role in student's engagement.

The spokesperson referred to the schools with no proper infrastructure e.g. no printer.

THEME 5.4 SENSE OF BELONGINGNESS – RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

relationship, actually building a strong relationship with the teachers and peers, it's a really important factor a really significant factor in maintaining the student interest. And when students feel seen and acknowledged by the teachers and supported by the peers, this really motivates them.

THEME 5.5 MORE SCOPE FOR CLASSROOM-BASED ASSESSMENTS

we talk also about evaluation, because actually, teachers say that they understand that the knowledge acquired in classroom should not be related to just with grades, but actually the teacher are obliged they must give grades, because that's how our system works.

6.0 Greece: KMOP

THEME 6.1 GAP BETWEEN STATISTICS AND REALITY

we're all certain that these statistics fail to consider students who are in the shadows, so to speak or unregistered. So refugees, migrants, Roma students, students who keep on changing schools, or moving from one city or from one neighborhood to another, and so on and so forth.

THEME 6.2 LITTLE CONTRIBUTION OF COMPULSORY EDUCATION TO STUDENTS' INTELLECTUAL GROWTH

Many of our participants, in fact, all of them noticed that students Yes, do stay in education longer. But that does not mean that they gain or acquire the necessary knowledge as this has been set out, either in primary or secondary education. So in compulsory education overall.

THEME 6.3 FACTORS LEADING TO ENGAGEMENT OR DISENGAGEMENT IN SCHOOLS

societal factors having to do with the social economic status of students and their families, whether or not the students parents have graduated, have finished compulsory education themselves, or have moved even forward toward third, university education. Gender, absolutely a very crucial factor. Some participants repeatedly emphasize the differences between the opportunities given to boys and girls in their schools, particularly within the Roma community, where girls are unlikely to continue their journey to already be pregnant and many different stories by our participants.

THEME 6.4 SPECIAL ALLOWANCE FOR ELIGIBLE STUDENTS

Greek government in the form of a specific allowance given to families whose children attend compulsory education, this has to do with primarily concerned primarily families of that have three kids or more, single household so single parents also had a variety this and also families with a minority background again, they also have a right to be granted this allowance... this is certainly acted as a factor that has triggered if you like, or that has ensured the continuation of studies for a certain number of students.

THEME 6.5 RECOMMENDATIONS – IMPROVING PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES

The first half of it has to do with class size, all the disciplines agreed that smaller classes.

...the teaching approach needs to be changed alongside curriculum that a teaching or a pedagogical approach that would adopt a more experiential learning method would be highly beneficial for improving student engagement.

...The integration classes that have already been established as an intervention measure for students who tended to drop out these need to be established in every two or three other schools in a given area or in a given neighborhood.

...emphasis should be placed on improving primary education as well as the smooth transitioning from primary to secondary education.

[Strict monitoring of student attendance] ...very often principals or teachers is very lenient when it comes to erasing the absences of students, just because they wish to help them continue their studies.

And finally, another tendency that has been noticed, which needs to be reformed is a tendency to over grade, again, as an effort to help compensate for some of the difficulties that certain students might be facing.

4.0 Focus of queries and comments in the plenary:

Post-pandemic worries for parents and students' mental health and anxiety (Ireland).

[What is the] Threshold for the number of school days missed (Ireland).

Extended role of guidance counsellors

What we would love to have more of in our schools is the counseling someone mentioned about the guidance counselors, and that they are actually now upskilling to become psychotherapist and a lot of their time is spent on in that area... I think it would greatly improve our schools and there is a pilot scheme going on in our primary schools at the moment in this area. But again, I think it's essential in at second level (Ireland).

Parents engagement

one of the strategies that we found in our school to avoid or to help students to come to school was to bring their parents to school to, especially when we talk about the Roma community, we manage to bring some of them ... Parents come to night school to adult school, and so they start to understand how important school is. So they managed to convince their children to come to school during the day (Portugal).

Delayed diagnosis

the late diagnosis of children with autism, dyslexia, and all the special educational needs. So this is something that really, in Italy is a big issue, especially for migrant children, as they teachers tend to put them like in the next level of education (Italy).

Allocation of funding a political move

sometimes decisions and as previous speaker said, political decisions are made, which, again, are not what we need in the schools. without really talking to us about it and how it's going to be hold will help the system. The money could have been used better in other areas we thought and the systems we had were working well. And sometimes there's not, as XX said that some joined up thinking. (Ireland)

5.0 Recommendations

Better interagency collaboration

Yeah, big priority for us was the external agencies working together, we have a massive problem here in Ireland ...And what happens is, there's no joint thinking here, they may know from one service to the next. And they don't all speak to each other, which is a massive issue for us, because they can go right through the whole spectrum of interventions, but they don't talk to one another (Ireland).

School segregation

23 October 2023

...segregation policies, at least in the, in Spain, although we've seen a good progress already in terms of ease, reduction of ESL grades, there are still, you know, segregation policies that are being implemented at the national level, and, you know, embedded in the education laws that are still there. And we know from evidence that it doesn't work (Spain).

Proper Allocation of funding

they actually want to the policies take care, or they take into consideration the regional differences, but not from the point of view of giving money to the region where the results are the worst...10 years of policies. Everything seems to like a big electoral move every time. The government's change (Italy).

Evaluation of social impact of policy measures

10 years of policies. Everything seems to like a big electoral move every time. The government's change. And there is in Italy, we have not impact evaluation at all of any policies in years. And yes, we have never done an evaluation of the impact of the policies (Italy).