

EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING AND BEYOND

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Educational success is often put forward as one of the most important factors on success in later life. Having an educational degree of (at least) upper secondary education – also called an ISCED 3 level qualification – exponentially increases one’s opportunities on the labour market and hence also on the housing market and in family life. Moreover, several studies have shown that there is also a positive correlation to be found between educational success and individual’s health status or psychological wellbeing (Gonzales, Dumka, Deardorff, Carter, & McCray, 2004; Kelly, 2009; Trautwein, Lüdtke, Marsh, Köller, & Baumert, 2006). In a so-called European *knowledge society* knowledge is constructed as one of the most valuable features to achieve. Consequently, it is no surprise that many policy makers have designed policies addressing educational inequalities. In recent years, and in particular on the level of EU policy making, the topic of early school leaving has become one of the most salient issues and is often perceived as the outcome of a long-term process of declining school engagement (European Commission, 2013; Eurydice & Cedefop, 2014; GHK Consulting, 2011).

Early school leaving (ESL), as a concept created by the European Union, refers to people aged 18 to 24 who leave education and training without attaining upper secondary qualification or equivalent – ISCED 3. The importance of this issue for EU policy makers is apparent when one takes a closer look at the EU 2020 strategy. The decrease of the EU wide ESL rates is part of the five headline targets of this strategy for a «smart, sustainable and inclusive economy» (European Commission, 2010). However, even though reducing early school leaving

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rates is presented as a main EU target this does not imply the different EU member states adopt a similar viewpoint and approach. In some countries, such as Poland, «early school leaving» is not a commonly used terminology and does not seem a policy issue, while in the case of the UK policy attention is focused more on the category of NEETs (young people not in education, employment or training). It is worth noticing that the concept of early school leaving is quite ill-defined, multi-meaning that depends on the context where it is produced and used (Dale, 2010; Álvarez & Calado, 2014).

Despite these differences, one recurring issue shared by all formal educational systems across Europe is how they deal with the processes of declining school engagement apparent among various socially vulnerable groups. While the composition variables of these groups might differ – although lower socio-economic status and/or immigration background often correlates with higher ESL rates –, the underlying processes of decreasing school engagement is assumed to be widespread. Policy makers across educational systems are therefore confronted with similar issues and design policies to tackle them.

It is this topic that this special issue wants to address: how have these policy makers – often taking office in quite diverse social, economic and educational contexts – engaged with the issues of educational inequalities and of early school leaving? More in particular we want to bring together the insights from experts studying the rationales underlying these policies and in what ways higher level EU policy initiatives contradict or support lower level national, regional or local policy initiatives. To answer this question in this special issue we rely primarily upon an ongoing seventh framework research project «Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe» (RESL.eu). Nine European countries participate in this five-year project and aim to generate as much as possible innovative cross-country and cross-case insights. The RESL.eu project combines a multi-method, multi-disciplinary and multi-sited approach: educational and school policy analysis (by way of document analysis, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions), survey analysis (a survey with youngsters in upper secondary education and after two years a repeat-survey, and a teacher and school management survey), and interviews and focus group discussions with youngsters (in school, in alternative learning arena's and in NEET-status) and their parents, teachers and other educational actors¹.

An important part of this research project, and this offers the framework for this special issue, is the comparative analysis of policies on early school leaving in nine European countries. As each educational system is structured in a particular way the respective policy discussions often reflect those context specific features. Therefore, rather than offering an analysis

¹ More information on this project can be found on the project website: www.resl-eu.org.

of EU educational policy, this special issue addresses the various ways higher level policy initiatives are implemented or resisted on lower policy levels within different EU member states.

The first five articles in this issue build and report on the RESL.eu project referred to above. The first, «Education in Flanders: Balancing social and economic rationales while tackling early school leaving», by Noel Clycq, Ward Nouwen, Rut Van Caudenberg and Christiane Timmerman, starts by placing early school leaving as one of the main targets in Flanders, under the drive of the EU 2020 Strategy. As they argue, the restructuring of secondary education occurs within a heavily politicised educational context where tensions may be identified within the ideological spectrum between two rationales: a social equity and an economy driven rationale as shown by the use of the position of Flanders in the PISA rankings with different arguments.

Under the responsibility of Louise Ryan and Magdolna Lórinç, the paper «Interrogating early school leaving, youth unemployment and NEETs: Understanding local contexts in two English regions» examines key issues in the changing policy landscape in what relates to education and youth unemployment in England, exploring the localised socio-economic factors facing young people. As they emphasise, the notion of early school leaving is not commonly applied in the official policy discourse in England where the focus is on youth unemployment and on young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). The authors argue for the need to relate the educational policies and outcomes with the national and regional economic opportunity structures as educational policies *per se* are unlikely to solve the general problem of large-scale youth unemployment. They question the use of the terms ESL and NEETs and youth unemployment to capture the vulnerability patterns in youth transitions in two English regions.

While analysing the contours of the problem of youth unemployment in Europe, Marie Gitschthaler and Erna Nairz-Wirth bring to the fore the most relevant early school leaving statistics and research studies which describe early school leaving in Austria. Their article «Education policies concerning early school leaving in Austria» discusses measures and initiatives implemented in Austria since the Lisbon 2000 Strategy in relation to ESL policy. The authors argue that even if other EU guidelines had been followed, Austria still would lack the implementation of preventive measures, such as tertiary level training for kindergarten teachers and the introduction of comprehensive schools. Moreover, they clarify that the introduction of «new middle schools» has not managed to reduce educational social inequalities whereas the supra-company apprenticeship has reached some of the country's early school leavers.

«Between school and work: Vocational education and the policy against early school leaving in Poland», by Hanna Tomaszewska-Pękała, Paulina Marchlik and Anna Wrona, is the article that follows. It addresses a selection of education and social policy measures to tackle early school leaving in Poland. The authors argue that even if the relationship between leaving the system of education early, youth unemployment and NEETs is vague, it is assumed in

the policy measures that have been undertaken. As they see it, this assumption is contrasted by the results of their qualitative research that shows that the opportunity to go to work or the difficulty to reconcile education and labour are at the roots of ESL in Poland; a situation that might be compensated by the provision of more flexible alternatives to school-based forms of vocational training and education.

«Early school leaving in Portugal: Policies and actors' interpretations» are analysed by António Magalhães, Helena C. Araújo, Eunice Macedo and Cristina Rocha who focus on the emergence and development of early school leaving (ESL) as a political question in Portugal, since 2000. To emphasise that the development and implementation of ESL policies and measures is influenced by the interpretations of the actors, the authors studied the narratives and voices of diverse educational stakeholders at the European, national and local levels. The article brings to light the existence of three periods in the Portuguese educational and political landscape in which «social inclusion», «educational quality and effectiveness» and «qualifications for work and the labour market» took on different characteristics and responsibilities.

Still with a focus on educational disengagement, the articles that follow are not part of the RESL.eu project and have diverse origins. Aina Tarabini, Marta Curran, Alejandro Montes and Lluís Parcerisa contribute with the article «El rol de los centros educativos en la prevención del abandono escolar: Una aproximación desde la perspectiva micropolítica». They analyse the way in which schools, as non-neutral micropolitical contexts with an active role in the political implementation, manage the risks of dropping out of schools and implement different strategies to combat ESL. The article builds on a multiple case study in five compulsory secondary schools in Barcelona where the main rationales, identified in dealing with ESL – heterogeneity, monitoring, omission and expulsion –, give room to diverse frameworks of opportunity for educational success of students and show the need for early preventive strategies at school. The high percentages of ESL in Spain and Catalonia, below the targets set by the European Strategy *Education and Training 2020* were the concerns underlying the study.

Chantal Tièche Christinat, Anne-Françoise de Chambrier and Valérie Angelucci are the co-authors of the article «La direction, relais indispensable entre le dispositif d'accrochage et l'établissement scolaire». They argue ESL to be a processual phenomenon and claim for the need to take into account related school factors, such as school management and the structures of participation that have an impact on students' engagement. They analyse one specific school managed by a socio-educationalist and an educator where they took on their empirical data collection by means of consultation to the school principal. As they see it, the partial inclusion of at risk students in their class, double school management and the development of a competency system among professionals that stands on the reflection about their practices are the most valuable features in keeping students in school.

The article that follows «Lutte contre le décrochage scolaire en France: Du phénomène au problème» is also in French and it is written by Joël Zaffran who focuses on the French situation. The European strategy, public policy and the relations between the European guidelines and the national policies addressing professional training are in the spotlight. The author starts by discussing the rise of school dropout in Europe, as a topic on the European agenda and in France while giving attention to the ways in which ESL became constructed as a problem. More than the lack of certification, the problem lays on young adults who have qualifications but are still doomed to face low skill jobs. Besides there are unsolved limits in the fight against school dropout as opportunities are not provided to unqualified young adults.

Focusing on drop out from higher (tertiary) education, Filomena Ferreira and Preciosa Fernandes present the article «Fatores que influenciam o abandono no ensino superior e iniciativas para a sua prevenção: O olhar de estudantes». The authors clarify that, in the more recent years (2010-2014), drop out in higher education has gained floor as political and social concern and has become object of reflection in the academia. Hence, the development of an exploratory qualitative study at university level involving students gave the opportunity to develop important findings in this area. They emphasise that, in most cases, students leave their study cycles at the university due to economic and academic factors. Moreover the lack of institutional awareness of the phenomenon comes together with the deficiency of resources in the promotion of the institutional failure in dealing with this matter.

In this special issue, we bring together a diversity of academic voices discussing the topic of early school leaving and drop out. Hereby we aim to broaden our understanding of the issue of ESL as a process emerging in specific contextual domains and within specific structural and institutional contexts. We argue that ESL is not solely a «problem» to be tackled on the individual level of the student, but can only be addressed genuinely by taking into account (f)actors from the meso and macro-level.

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