EUROPEAN
POLICYBRIEF

RESL.EU EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

This policy brief aims to set out the main findings of the RESL.eu Project and to disseminate recommendations to combat early school leaving at school, national and EU level.

R E S L .eu
Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe

N O V E M B E R 2 0 1 7

INTRODUCTION

Early School Leaving (ESL), as it is defined by the EU, refers to young people between the ages of 18 and 24, who have not acquired an upper secondary education diploma and who are not currently receiving education or training. Reducing ESL is high on the EU's political agenda as low levels of education have severe consequences for the young people involved and are associated with high societal and economic costs.

The Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe (RESL.eu) project aims to address this issue by providing insight into the mechanisms and processes that cause young people to leave school or training early. The RESL.eu Project identified and analysed prevention, intervention and compensation measures that are successful in keeping or re-engaging pupils who are at a high risk of ESL in education or training. The project now aims to disseminate these insights and good practices to various audiences.

The RESL.eu project operates in nine countries: Belgium (Flanders), UK, Sweden, Portugal, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Hungary and Austria. These countries were chosen because they represented a broad range of national ESL rates: Portugal and Spain are currently experiencing the highest rates within the EU, while Poland and Austria were already below the Europe 2020 target of 10% in 2009.

Answers to the main policy questions regarding ESL:

IS ESL A GOOD INDICATOR FOR IDENTIFYING PUPILS AT RISK OF SCHOOL DISENGAGEMENT?

Although headline ESL rates provide a consistent and comparable quantification of educational un-der-achievement among young people, they are by no means a flawless and reliable measure of the scale and extent of the problems facing these youngsters as they approach the transition from school to work. Our quantitative and qualitative findings show that many pupils who attain an upper secondary school qualification, nevertheless display risk behaviours or school disengagement (e.g. high truancy rates or non-compliant/disruptive behaviour). The focus on headline ESL rates should not cause us to lose sight of these pupils.

HAS ESL BECOME A MOVING TARGET?

A further shortcoming of the continued use of ESL for identifying at-risk pupils is the extent to which this measure only captures a snapshot of the youth population. Our findings show that there is a high degree of 'churn' among this group, with young people frequently leaving and returning to education, training or short-term employment. This is particularly true of early school leavers who go back to school. This group requires special attention. The lack of a longitudinal measure of ESL obscures the impact of compensatory educational interventions for previous early school leavers.

HOW DOES EARLY OR LATE TRACKING INFLUENCE ESL?

The RESL.eu project included both countries with early tracking systems and more comprehensive systems in its research design. However, we did not observe any straightforward relationship between tracking and ESL. Although education systems with late tracking have a lower concentration of pupils with learning and behavioural problems in (lower) secondary vocational tracks, the lack of good internship places or apprenticeship possibilities in these systems is problematic. In education systems with early tracking, these pupils are more concentrated in the (lower) secondary vocational tracks, but internship or apprenticeship systems are often better developed. To tackle ESL, it is therefore necessary to develop and improve vocational education and training in all systems.

HOW DOES THE COMPULSORY SCHOOL LEAVING AGE RELATE TO ESL?

In our RESL.eu study, we observed that ESL rates were falling in systems in which the compulsory school-leaving age is (or has recently been raised to) 18. In systems where compulsory education ends before the age of 18, young people tend to leave school before reaching the threshold of the upper secondary school diploma, as this is legally permitted.

Findings of the Project: protective factors in high-risk educational contexts and other important findings for tackling school disengagement and ESL

In all of the countries studied, teacher support and involvement was a significant protective factor that guards against school disengagement. Both quantitative analysis and qualitative and field studies of schools confirmed this finding, even considering that most schools in our sample are characterised by school populations with a high risk of ESL based on socio-demographic and educational background variables.

Our quantitative and qualitative data show that parents are also an important protective factor in combatting school disengagement.

Certain educational transition moments, when pupils had to make choices that would affect their future education careers, emerged as crucial points in their educational trajectories. Examples of this include the transition to upper secondary education in the Netherlands, Poland and Belgium, or the post-16 transition in the UK and in Spain.

The alternative learning pathways (ALPs) we studied in the RESL.eu project proved successful in accommodating institutional flexibility and providing individual solutions and a caring environment in the majority of the cases (although this was not the case in Spain). ALPs can be effective in reintegrating young people into education and work. ALPs can also make it more feasible to combine work and study, which is a necessity for youngsters experiencing financial hardship.

Ethnic and social school segregation, whereby pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are concentrated in certain urban areas and schools, emerged as a critical issue in all seven countries in the RESL.eu study. Segregation particularly affected pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (hence, those most at risk) in urban areas.

Policy recommendations based on findings and protective factors:

THE ROLE OF TEACHERS

Make teachers more aware and knowledgeable of their role in tackling ESL by fostering professionalism through initial and continuous training.

Invest in improving teacher-student relations in order to provide a safe and cohesive school environment.

THE ROLE OF PARENTS

Promote incentives to increase parental involvement. Develop more inclusive measures to welcome parents from disadvantaged backgrounds.

EDUCATIONAL TRANSITION MOMENTS

Ensure that more relevant and individualised educational and career guidance support is provided, particularly before, during and after key points of transition.

ALTERNATIVE LEARNING PATHWAYS

Reinforce alternative learning pathways by increasing their availability and facilitating access to them. Boost their prestige by ensuring access to high-quality second-chance opportunities.

Foster cooperation between mainstream education and alternative learning pathways by providing compensatory measures in terms of improved and informed guidance.

COMPULSORY SCHOOL-LEAVING AGE

Develop and implement a sustainable national strategy to reduce school disengagement that goes beyond raising the compulsory school-leaving age or attaining a minimum diploma level.

Closely monitor young people beyond the compulsory school-leaving age and after the attainment of minimum qualifications, to ascertain whether they have maximised their educational potential and transitioned successfully to the labour market.

VOCATIONAL TRACK

Ensure access to high-quality vocational education and training (VET) to combat stigmatisation of this system and raise VET's prestige.

Improve cooperation between employers and schools in order to provide better internship opportunities for pupils, as this type of experience has proven to be crucial to the successful completion of VET training.

SCHOOL SEGREGATION

Promote complementary social policies designed to tackle segregation and socio-economic disadvantage in urban areas.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Objectives of the RESL.eu Project

Collect data on youngsters, families, schools and particular research areas across partner countries in Europe in order to understand the main causes of ESL.

Identify characteristics of youth at risk of ESL as well as protective factors (such as social support mechanisms, resiliency and agency of pupils, etc.).

Examine ESL prevention and intervention in regular secondary schools and ESL compensatory measures by studying alternative learning arenas in seven EU member states so that the EU policy on Early School Leaving can be informed by good practices.

Develop an Early Warning System for identifying and monitoring schools and pupils at risk of ESL.

Methodology of the RESL.eu Project

In each of the seven countries participating in the project, two research areas were selected on the basis of their being an urban area characterised by a high risk of ESL. Hence, the data collected in each country should be considered representative of areas that have a high risk of ESL rather than being representative of the countries/regions as a whole.

1. QUANTITATIVE DATA COLLECTION IN THE RESL.EU PROJECT

a. Student Survey
1st wave (spring 2014): 19,586 pupils in two different cohorts in mainstream secondary schools.
2nd wave (spring 2016): Pupils from the first wave were invited to participate in the second wave – a retention rate of 36% was achieved, comprising 7,072 pupils.

b. Staff Survey
A survey of school staff was conducted in the same research areas and schools (spring 2015), with a total of 1,977 participants.

2. QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION

a. Longitudinal study of individual pupils with 'at-risk trajectories'
1st wave (autumn 2014): Bio-interviews are conducted with around 24 to 32 selected youngsters per country (N=252). Respondents are sampled from the RESL.eu survey and via alternative learning pathways and other gate-keepers.

2nd wave (autumn 2016): Follow-up interviews with most respondents.

b. Additional focus group discussions with NEETs

c. Comparative case studies of measures taken within and outside of regular school through collection of school policy documents, interviews and FGDs with school staff and learners
School-based prevention and intervention measures: 56 measures were studied across 28 secondary schools in 7 countries.
Compensatory/alternative pathway: 61 measures were studied across 28 alternative learning arenas.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME
Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe (RESL.eu)

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(Large scale integrated research projects)

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February 2013 – February 2018 (60 months)

BUDGET
EU contribution: € 6,482,757

WEBSITE
www.resl-eu.org

FURTHER READING

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Publication 3: Nouwen, W., Van Praag, L., Van Caudenberg, R., Clycq, N., & Timmerman, C. (2016). *School-based Prevention and Intervention Measures and Alternative Learning Approaches to Reduce Early School Leaving.* CeMIS, University of Antwerp, https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/RESL_Publicatie_A4_v5.pdf

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Publication 5: Van Caudenberg, R., Van Praag, L., Nouwen W., Clycq, N., & Timmerman, C. (2017). *A Longitudinal Study of Educational Trajectories of Youth at Risk of Early School Leaving.* CeMIS, University of Antwerp, https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/RESL%20eu%20Publication%205%20FINAL%202.pdf

Publication 6: Tomaszewska-Pękała, H., Marchlik, P. & Wrona, A. (2017). *Finding the way: how to prevent ESL and school disengagement. Lessons from the analysis of educational trajectories of at-risk youth from nine EU countries.* Faculty of Education, University of Warsaw, https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/Deliverable%205_1_Publication%206_final_final_27_10_2017.pdf

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Publication 8: Lenaerts, K., Kilhoffer, Z. & Silva A. (2018 - forthcoming). *Exploring Possibilities of Performing a Cost-Benefit Analysis of Preventive, Intervention and Compensatory Measures Addressing Early School Leaving.* Brussels, CEPS.