



## CAUSES OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING AND PREVENTION MEASURES: SCHOOL DIRECTORS' INSIGHTS

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### **Abstract:**

The following study explores the phenomenon of early school leaving and related prevention strategies, focusing on the region of Crete, an island in Greece which has high early school leaving rates. This is a qualitative research focused on the opinions and attitudes of the elementary and secondary school units' directors. Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted, showing the interviewees' opinions about the reasons students leave school in this specific district, the applied prevention measures, and their evaluation. It is noted that the frequency of early school leaving in the local high schools and lyceums is high, while in the elementary schools it is low, which is mainly caused by the students' decision to enter the job market, help their family agricultural business, and create a family of their own or get married -especially the female students. Furthermore, participants state that they apply certain prevention measures, which include regular communication with the close family circle and with students at risk. Finally, they state that the effectiveness of the measures implemented depends - to a large extent - on the funding provided to schools, mainly as recruitment of specialized staff.

**Keywords:** early school leaving; prevention policies; school directors' insights

### **1. Introduction**

The phenomenon of Early School Leaving (ESL) is a multidimensional problem and an ongoing process. According to the definition of Eurostat (2016), ESL refers to those who have dropped out of school early and belong to the 18-24 age group, they did not complete the lower cycle of compulsory secondary education and have not participated in any educational or training activities at least four weeks before the day of the data collection. We notice a difference in the definition of CEDEFOP (2014), where ESL is the withdrawal from any educational or training program prior to its completion, with no reference to compulsory education. This definition characterizes both the school withdrawal process and those who have dropped out, failing to complete a course.

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According to the relevant literature, ESL remains a multifactorial issue, which takes on the dimensions of a modern and major social problem. Prevention policies involve any attempt to address the dropouts, and start from diagnosing the problem, treating each student as a unique case with special characteristics, which means that an applied and appropriate-for-all-students program cannot be implemented. Confronting ESL creates the foundation of upgrading the entire educational level of young people, in order to achieve better career and educational guidance, as well as effective integration in the job market and in society in general.

## **2. Causes of Early School Leaving**

ESL occurs because of several factors, which usually interact with each other, and can be grouped into the following categories: 1) *social*, 2) *financial* and 3) *educational*.

### **2.1. Social factors**

According to Jordan, Lara and McParland (1994), the effect of the inner circle contributes to students' dropout decision and acts as a factor that either increases student alienation (e.g. failing to create positive relationships across the school community) or pushes students out of school (e.g. creating friendly relationships outside the school context) (Ferguson *et al.*, 2005). As for the family-school interaction, the different family-school culture, the interventions of parents and the existence of another member who has dropped-out play a vital role (Dekkers & Driessen, 1997; Nevala *et al.*, 2011; NESSE, 2010). Parents who provide healthy living conditions, have effective parent-teacher communication and are interested in the child's behavior, help reduce the likelihood of ESL and often enhance school performance (Keppens & Spruyt, 2018; McNeal, 1999).

In Malta, S. Gatt and K. Gatt (2006) identify as the major cause of ESL in female students the decision to work and earn money with the prospect of marriage or drop out of school due to pregnancy (Coley, 1995). Cultural customs and traditions, as well as unwritten rules, are barriers to the education of female students, particularly for girls of the Roma and Muslim minority in Northern Greece (Androussou, Askouni, Dragonas, Frangoudaki & Plexousaki, 2011).

### **2.3. Financial Factors**

Economic factors are the leading causes of early school leaving in the region of Crete, according to similar researches (Bitsakos, 2021). Lavrijsen and Nicaise (2013) conclude that the risk of early school leaving is higher among the students whose parents have a lower educational level, when they have financial difficulties. The lack of financial resources leads parents to view the direct financial impact of education as expensive, forcing students to leave school and enter the job market.

As a result of the family's financial difficulties, many students prefer to work in order to contribute to their family income, either because of their parents' job insecurity, or because of high unemployment rates (NESSE, 2010). The conditions that affect the living and working conditions, such as the level of income, affect ESL negatively and

force the youth to actively seek work (Boudesseul *et al.*, 2012). In this situation, the young people must contribute to boosting the family income or take on adult responsibilities in order to help support their family financially. Although, in this case, ESL has as its goal the financial benefit, it is often non-profitable as the dropouts that are looking for a job compete with people with more experience and qualification, a case that works to their detriment, especially in a shrinking job market with very few jobs (Eurofound, 2012). Therefore, youngsters with incomplete or low-level education face difficulties when searching for a job, as they compete with candidates for a higher level of education and training.

In addition, there is a significant increase in ESL indicators in rural areas, in remote regions, and in small settlements compared to urban, medium or large cities (De Witte & Van Klaveren, 2012). Regions with common characteristics have similar ESL rates among people living within certain geographic or political boundaries. Such characteristics affecting the ESL in certain areas are the high percentage of immigrants, minorities, accumulation of low-educated families, low income, low-performing students and families with similar vocational orientation. The non-homogeneous separation in the territory of a state forms the focalization of families with similar special characteristics in specific places and can lead to several forms of "ghettoization" of areas, including schools (Baye *et al.*, 2005; Eurofound, 2012; Patterson, 2008; Rumberger, 2001).

Steiner (2009) notices a link between work status and the possibility of ESL during a research conducted in Austria. He highlights the effect that the type of parental employment has on ESL. The possibility of dropping out with parents who work as auxiliary staff or belong to the working class is higher, while it decreases when they hold administrative positions (Ramsdal *et al.*, 2013).

Dekkers and Driessen (1997) conclude that the parents of young dropouts have a low level of education and are characterized by low expectations for their children's future, while refraining from getting involved in their education. Boudesseul, Grelet and Vivent (2012) note that a higher educational level of parents works as a deterrent to ESL and indicates that education is inherited between parents and their children, which assumes that schools reward the class-specific habitus of upper-class children (Louise, 2010).

#### **2.4. Educational Factors**

The environment of the educational system and the operational characteristics are also considered playing a role in the ESL, as they affect the academic achievements, the studying satisfaction etc. (Sonnert & Sadler, 2015; Trapmann *et al.*, 2007). Such characteristics are the number of students per class, the teacher-student ratio and the funding for improving the quality of education (Lee & Burkam, 2003; Rumberger, 2001). The communication skills of the teaching staff contribute to the development of good working relationships within the school unit, as Raptou, Stamatis, and Raptis (2017) conclude. The existence of a friendly atmosphere and good interpersonal relationships between students and teachers serve as an incentive to continue studying (Lee & Burkam, 2003). In contrast, conflicts with teachers and school bullying amongst classmates

discourage attendance in class, thus being a major cause of dropping out (Thibert, 2013). Aggravating reasons for ESL are the pressure for academic achievements and doing homework, while an atmosphere of trust helps towards the successful completion of an education program (NESSE, 2010). Negative interaction with teachers results in discouragement and isolation from the school environment, a decision that is usually the result of an extended period of feelings of failure experienced within the school (Brophy, 2004; Lyche, 2010).

### **3. Prevention Measures**

An important prevention measure, which contributes to the ESL decrease is the consultative education and the vocational guidance, through which, emphasis is given on the understanding of every student's capabilities, as well as on the studies selection and employment prospects (European Commission, 2014). Research findings of Polidano, Tabasso and Tseng (2013) show that through consulting, the school may help students choose appropriate studies.

In many European countries, efforts are being made to increase flexibility and facilitate the transition between levels of education or different types of education, thus helping decrease student dropout rates, as young people are usually asked to make educational and career-related choices at an early age; choices that later may be regretted. On this occasion, if it is not possible to move or switch to another educational direction, young people will probably choose to leave education, as it will not meet their desires and future goals (European Commission, 2014). A similar policy also implemented in Greece, is that of programs, such as the European Qualification Framework, which seek to streamline the relationship between professional qualifications, certified learning and skills, while "smoothing" the existing national asymmetries (European Commission, 2014a). These policies aim to expand the social composition of schools and increase the level of education in minority schools.

## **4. Material and Methods**

### **4.1 Research Method and Design**

The primary purpose of the interviews was to investigate the views of the school directors in the region Crete. Particularly, the questions were about the reasons for ESL, the prevention measures taken, as well as the evaluation of the actions implemented. This research aims to reveal the opinions regarding ESL by highlighting common ideological patterns arising from the recorded interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In this study, a qualitative research approach was chosen for conducting the current research and the instrument used for the data collection was that of the semi-structured interview. An interview schedule was prepared before the interviews and the questions posed to the director focused on: the causes of early school leaving in the school of the region; the prevention measures implemented by the directors; and whether these measures are effective. The interviews were taken either by telephone or by visits to the

schools. There were predefined questions, which, depending on the interviewee could be modified in matters of order, content, etc. The choice for this exact data collection tool was mainly made because of its flexibility in order to successfully complete this research (Creswell, 2002).

#### 4.2 Sampling, Sample and Setting

A combination of convenience and purposive sampling strategies were used as the participants were selected with specific criteria pre-established. Schools directors, that are closest to the researcher, were chosen for ease of access to serve as respondents and this process continued until the appropriate sample size was achieved (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2013). In particular, thirteen teachers who exhibited keen interest with the research subject were selected to participate in the interview. The interviews with school directors in the region of Crete were taken during the academic year of 2016-2017. Six of the sample school directors worked in elementary education, and seven of them in secondary education.

Prior to the conduction of the interviews, participants were provided with consent forms for their written, voluntary consent to participate in this study, and they were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

**Table 1:** Interviewed teachers' codes and demographic details

Interviewee code	Gender	Level of education	Location of school
I1	Male	Upper secondary education school	Urban area
I2	Female	Upper secondary education school	Rural area
I3	Male	Upper secondary education school	Rural area
I4	Male	Upper secondary education school	Rural area
I5	Male	Upper secondary education school	Urban area
I6	Female	Upper secondary education school	Rural area
I7	Male	Lower secondary education school	Urban area
I8	Male	Lower secondary education school	Rural area
I9	Male	Lower secondary education school	Rural area
I10	Male	Elementary school	Rural area
I11	Male	Elementary school	Rural area
I12	Male	Elementary school	Rural area
I13	Male	Elementary school	Rural area

#### 4.3 Data Analysis

After all the semi-structured interviews were conducted, the researcher transcribed, organised and separated the data into the research topics: causes of ESL; measures implemented; effectiveness of these measures. This helped coding the data through comparing into different units and patterns across these school units. This coding process included naming the particular theme and adding a brief description of the characteristic/s of the individual themes (Boyatzis, 1998).

## 5. Results

It is noted that ESL is an existing phenomenon in the region of Crete and most school directors responded that they have encountered similar situations during their professional career. More specifically, the participants reported that the number of students who leave school is about 4 students per year. In elementary education, as it was expected, zero values dominate, with 0-1 students leaving school per year, while in secondary school 3-4 students drop out school. In addition, the geographical distribution of schools does not show a difference in the number of students leaving school between the urban centers and the rural areas.

### 5.1. Causes of Early School Leaving

The participants expressed their opinions about the major reasons for ESL. The reasons vary from the more general, like social, financial and family reasons, to more special cases. The financial factors seem to play a vital role in the students' decision to drop out of school, with most school directors stating that the reason for dropping out is the need to learn a manual job and the decision to enter the job market. Especially, the participants emphasized on the students' engagement in the family businesses, which include agricultural and livestock activities, as the main financial reason. Characteristically, one school director mentioned:

*"They stay at home to help their parents in agricultural and mainly livestock businesses, because the families here live mostly on livestock earnings, beekeeping and agriculture."* (I5)

Some participants connect ESL with factors such as the students' ethnicity, stating that the immigrants leave school more often, while native students have decreased ESL rates. Therefore, here emphasis is given to the existence of the difficulties of learning the Greek language, which is the primary teaching language. Furthermore, they state that an ignorant parental attitude towards education is an early sign of disengagement. It was mentioned that:

*"Parental ignorance, with parents who often neither come to get their child's grades nor, of course, to ask about the student's performance, {SIGHS} is also a clue that shows that these students are at a greater risk of dropping out."* (I6)

*"Especially this year, some parents stated they want their children to learn arithmetic operations, reading and nothing more. So, everybody can understand that continuing education is not a priority for this family."* (I2)

Also, gender seems to play an important role, with the female students leaving school more often to start a family or get married:

*“Those who left were young girls, who came from lower socioeconomic background, in order to get married. Women, mostly young ladies, who wanted to settle down.” (I3)*

As regards the role of educational factors, there are differences between the participants' views. On the one hand, there were the school directors who believe that the structure of the educational system is very important for the decision to leave school and who also refer to other factors that act in combination, like the amount of effort that the teachers and the students put, as well as the students' learning difficulties. There were participants who claim that the role of the educational system is not important, and state that there are more significant and direct factors which lead to ESL, such as the location of the school unit and the family intensions and expectations as regards the educational outcomes of their children. Participants refer to truancy as a reason of dropping out, mentioning characteristically that:

*“When a student is often out of the class [...] hours or consecutive days absent, it is a first sign that he is in danger of dropping out.” (I1)*

## **5.2. Implemented Prevention Measures**

It is found out that most of the participants support and implement prevention strategies. Frequent communication with the parents was mentioned as the most effective, which aims to find a solution to difficulties student face and prevent the decision to give up education prematurely.

*“There is usually a teachers' meeting conducted where parents are invited. We try to change their minds, tell them the positive things of school and what the child will lose in the future.” (I7)*

Another prevention measure is the direct communication with the students, which aims to prompt the completion of compulsory education and the creation of a friendly school environment:

*“Creating an atmosphere of understanding between the educational community and the students is pursued {EMPHASISED}, urging students to stay, grow up, giving them motivation, with patience, mutual understanding and goal setting, so that they will complete compulsory education.” (I12)*

Most school directors believe that the cooperation among teachers is also considered an important strategy. The help offered by the teaching staff to weak students in basic courses and, especially, in the non-native students with difficulties in learning the Greek language is emphasized as a prevention measure. Furthermore, teaching activities that contribute to a smooth integration at school - in and out of the school context - such as the organization of cultural events and visits, aiming to create motivation to continue their studies, are often organized.

The participants also recognize the importance of supportive institutions to prevent ESL, such as the Committees of Diagnostic Educational Evaluation (EDEAY) and the Educational and Counselling Support Centers (KESYs) staffed with qualified personnel (social workers and psychologists). According to the interviewees' opinions, students at risk of leaving are proposed to the above institutions for diagnosis or evaluation:

*"This year, we have a social worker and a psychologist at school. We, as the teachers' association, recommend to some children with learning difficulties and either behavioral or learning issues to talk to a psychologist and a social worker, after having spoken with their parents {EMPHASISED}." (I11)*

### **5.3. Evaluation of the Prevention Measures**

The majority of the school directors think that the actions and the measures taken to prevent ESL are effective and their effectiveness is evaluated by regular discussions and teachers' meetings, as well as the feedback given by members of the Diagnostic Educational Evaluation and Support Committees.

The minority of the participants directly correlate the evaluation and effectiveness of the measures taken with the willingness of the Education Consultant of the school district. The Education Consultant's willingness to organize discussions and suggest good practices in schools affects the implementation of the preventative measures. Characteristically, some state that:

*"On the one hand, there are Education Consultants who will treat the problem seriously, while, on the other hand, there are Consultants who state that they cannot help. You may have a counselor who is very active {EMPHASISED}. He will come to school, organize actions, and arrange meetings with parents and the teaching staff. It is a matter of luck. Getting an Education Consultant doesn't necessarily mean you get help." (I13)*

All participants associate prevention effectiveness with government funding and are in favor of additional funding in the form of ensuring proper staff scheduling and rostering staff. Seven out of ten participants are of the opinion that the governments' lack of contribution is directly linked to ESL, while the remaining six participants state that it does not affect the decision of leaving education. Preventative measures which are linked to government grants are the ones covered directly by the state budget expenditures, such as the recruitment of specialized staff for the integration classes at the school units and the operation of school committees. Another portion of the funding considered being rather important is the one which is directly managed by schools, and covers the school expenses for seminar organization, workshops or activities in order to inform teachers and parents about ESL.



## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

The study supports the observation of high ESL rates among high schools and lyceums, and lower frequency among elementary schools.

With 60%-70% of the school directors stating that the major causes of Early School Leaving arise from financial factors (Bitsakos, 2021). The participants emphasized on the students' engagement in the family businesses, which include agricultural and livestock activities, as the main financial reason, as well as learning a manual job that can facilitate an early entry in the job market (Ramsdal *et al.*, 2013). According to the results, low recognition of the education's contribution by the parents often arises, indicating that this loss of commitment seems to be also adopted by the students (Brophy, 2004; Lyche, 2010). Gender seems to play an important role in dropping out in the regional school units, with women leaving studies in order to start a family or get married; a factor presented as an alternative to entering the job market (Coley, 1995).

All school directors state that they implement prevention strategies. The basic prevention strategy is the communication with the family environment, aiming at the prevention of leaving school and giving solution to the difficulties that students face. Our findings illustrate the link between a friendly environment inside the school unit and the motivation to successfully complete secondary education. This research associates an effective teacher-student communication with the teachers' ability to handle difficulties and effectively deal with students' disruptive and problematic behavior in the classroom (Lee & Burkam, 2003; Raptou, Stamatis & Raptis, 2017).

Evaluation of these prevention strategies and their outcome is carried out in teacher meetings in cooperation with the Education Consultant of each school district. The level of state funding seems to be an important criterion, underlying a correlation between government funding and the effectiveness of the prevention measures. The most effective tool against students leaving rates is equipping school districts with qualified personnel, such as psychologists and social workers, who work at Committees of Diagnostic Educational Evaluation (EDEAY) and the Educational and Counselling Support Centers (KESYs) (Polidano, Tabasso & Tseng, 2013).

Even though prevention measures are implemented, increased rates of ESL are observed in the region of Crete. Therefore, an exchange of good practices amongst school directors, as a source of inspiration for alternative solutions for the regional policy regarding ESL in order to address topics of common interest and exchange innovative practices, is considered to be essential. It is suggested that the educational staff get a more systematic, specialized training, as well as, an understanding of the need to recruit additional qualified staff, where necessary, in the entire range of school units.

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### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

### Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interests.

### About the Author

Dr. Nikolaos Bitsakos is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Crete and scientific collaborator of the Hellenic Mediterranean University, and his research relates to issues of sociology in education, early school leaving and social exclusion.

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