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Importance and dimensions of ESL in Poland – school staff's perception

Summary

Early school leaving (ESL) is an issue of serious concern of the European Union as one of the factors contributing to youth unemployment, poverty and low educational achievement (Commission of the European Communities 2001: 39). In Poland, however, the phenomenon is not perceived as a problem or a major challenge for the Polish education system for the future. Poland, having one of the lowest ESL rates among EU countries (about 5%), is mentioned among the countries which are already achieving the EU benchmark 2010 of less than 10% of ESLers (GHK 2005: 7).

The theoretical approach (called: multilevel or tripartite approach) applied in the RESL.eu project assumes that the falling out of education is a complex process, which has as its core three levels of overlapping factors: the individual, the institutional and the structural/systemic ones.

In this article we look at how the phenomenon of early school leaving is perceived by the staff of upper secondary schools in Warsaw. We present the results of analysis of individual interviews with principals, teachers, psychologists and pedagogical counsellors which took place in four schools situated in Praga and Targówek districts.

We argue that the staff from upper secondary schools, explaining the determinants of ESL, stress the significance of the micro level factors, referring to their everyday experiences in working with students experiencing school failure, or focus on the systemic/macro level factors and emphasise the shortcomings of the Polish education system, seeking possible sources in its deficiencies. Whereas the factors of the institutional, that is school level, are dismissed as relevant aspects that may help to explain this phenomenon.

Key words: early school leaving, multilevel/tripartite approach, reproduction theory, resilience, risk and protective factors.

Introduction

Early school leaving (ESL) is an issue of serious concern of the European Union as one of the factors contributing to youth unemployment, poverty and low educational achievement (Commission of the European Communities 2001: 39). In Poland, however, the phenomenon is not perceived as a problem or a major challenge for the Polish education system for the future. Poland, having one of the lowest ESL rates among EU countries (about 5%), is mentioned among the countries which were already achieving the EU benchmark 2010 of less than 10% of early school leavers (GHK 2005: 7). Therefore Poland would be a good model to be analysed and it can give a positive contribution to the discussion on this phenomenon. It can be an extremely interesting case and a point of reference for other countries that are struggling with reducing the level of early school leaving.

The structure of the article is as follows. Firstly, we present what is meant by early school leaving in European statistics and how this phenomenon has been defined within the RESL.eu project¹. Secondly, the theoretical frame of ESL is presented with the emphasis on a conceptual model of multilevel ESL analysis (Clycq et al. 2013). Then the results of previous research on ESL and dropout in Poland are discussed. Finally, the results of the analysis of interviews with school staff are described. The results presented at the moment are still fragmentary and preliminary and they focus on answering two main questions: How is the importance and scale of the problem of ESL in Poland perceived by staff of upper secondary schools? What are the factors influencing this phenomenon and which are considered the most important by the school staff?

For the purpose of this article two fundamental assumptions have been formulated. The first one assumes that in Poland, due to the absence of this phenomenon in the public and academic discourse and lack of knowledge of its existence, ESL is not seen as a serious problem and a challenge for the

¹ An international research project "Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe" (RESL.eu; 320223) received funding under the 7th Framework Programme and the funds for science allocated for the international co-financed project in the years 2013–18. The RESL.eu project, implemented in 9 EU countries, aims to generate a deep understanding of the processes influencing ESL and mechanisms behind them. To achieve this, mixed methods are applied (document review, survey, ethnographic research). The descriptive part includes analysing existing data and policy analysis in all partner countries. The analytical part includes gathering quantitative and qualitative data in schools and families, from students, parents and school staff.

Polish education system as a whole or for the schools involved in the research. Secondly, we assume that the staff from upper secondary schools, explaining the determinants of ESL focus on the personal or family (micro level) factors, referring to their everyday experiences in working with students experiencing school failure, or emphasise the shortcomings of the Polish education system (the systemic/macro level), seeking possible sources in its deficiencies.

We believe that that the lack of an institutional level in the perception of school staff results from the simplified, one-dimensional perception of the phenomenon. On the other hand, it is also dictated by the shift, or the retraction of responsibility for the educational failure from school to other social actors – young people themselves, family, system.

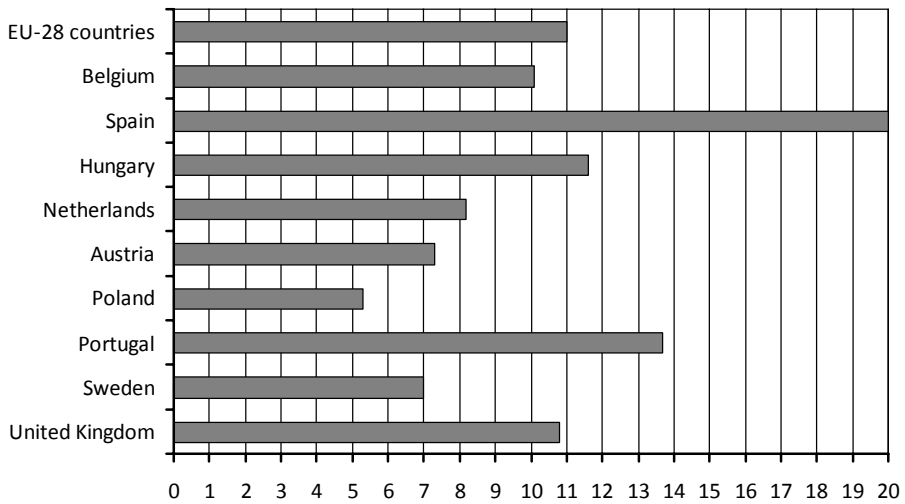
What is early school leaving?

The term early school leaving is used by policy makers to avoid the negative connotations associated with school dropout, especially in English speaking countries.

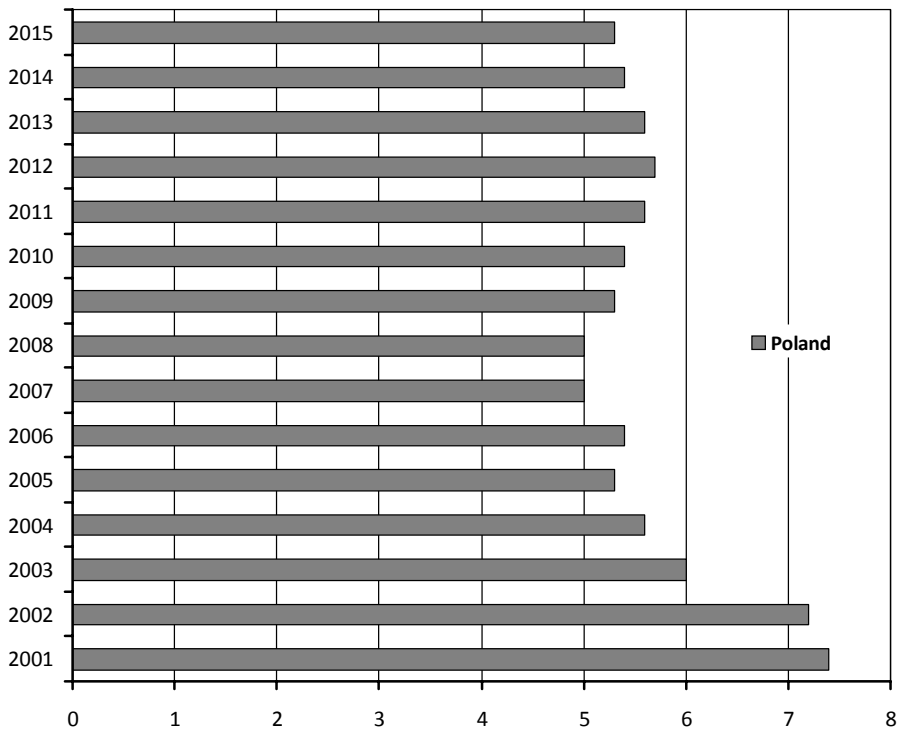
Early school leaving has various conceptualisations and its definition varies depending on the country education system and/or the statistics applied to measure it (Dale 2010). The definition most commonly used in Europe is the one of the Eurostat, which was based on the data from the Labour Force Survey. According to it, ESL is a situation in which young people leave the education system before completing upper secondary school, or, in other words have achieved as a maximum ISCED 2 level, and undertake no further education or training. In the Eurostat statistics the ESL rate is calculated on the basis of a declaration of those aged 18–24 who in the past four weeks preceding the survey did not participate formally or informally in any education or training.

Reduction of ESL is one of the objectives of education systems in the “Europe 2020” strategy and involves the reduction of this indicator to an average of 10% for all member countries (European Commission 2010: 11). Currently, the average ESL rate for the EU is 11% (Eurostat 2016). The ESL rates for the nine RESL.eu project partner countries are shown in the graph below.

As presented above, the level of ESL in Europe is quite diverse, and Poland with the percentage of 5.3% is a country with one of the lowest rates in the EU and the lowest among the countries participating in the project described. Moreover, the percentage of ESLers in our country has been fairly constant over the past 10 years (see Graph 2).



Graph 1. Early school leaving rates in 2015 in countries participating in the RESL.eu project
 Source: Eurostat [t2020_40]



Graph 2. Early school leaving rate in Poland, 2001–2015

Source: Eurostat [t2020_40]

The Eurostat definition, however, has a number of limitations. The detailed discussion on them can be found in NESSE report (Dale 2010). One of the core allegations is the limitation of this indicator only to a certain age group, or a very broad understanding of what is termed “being in education or training”, which includes even self-learning (Dale 2010: 10). For this reason, among others, the team involved in the project decided to develop a common working definition of ESL. It states that ESLers are young people “leaving education un(der)qualified (unqualified or under qualified)” (Araújo et al. 2013: 1). Such definition incorporates all young people who have left regular school without attaining a degree/certificate of upper secondary education or similar, equivalent to an ISCED 3 level. This definition is not linked to the compulsory school age, which differs among EU countries participating in RESL.eu project, but to the establishment of a minimum qualification level (Ibid).

Theoretical framework of ESL

Early school leaving can be analysed according to many different theoretical approaches used to understand the mechanisms of formation of educational inequalities reconstructed by education systems. One of the best known theories and an empirically proven one is certainly the theory of reproduction by Bourdieu and Passeron (1970, 2006). This theory, as well as other reproduction theories, “is grounded on a fundamental criticism of capitalist economic theorizing – that it imposes its paradigms onto non-economic domains such as education” (Clycq et al. 2013: 4).

According to Bourdieu (2006), cultural roles determine and reproduce hierarchies of power across societies. To explain dominance in a system, Bourdieu uses the following terms: status, economic capital and symbolic capital. He claims that members of subordinate groups accept the dominance of the dominant class, as they see its symbols as unavailable for them, and that it is the education system that is responsible for such an attitude towards cultural symbols in the lower class. Also, Bowles and Gintis (1976, 2002) demonstrated the existence of a phenomenon called inheritance of inequality. Furthermore, they showed that students were differently rewarded at school, depending on their social origin (after: Anyon 1980). As Anyon (1980) puts it, this unequal treatment of students belonging to different social classes is realised through hidden curriculum; when teachers use different methods of work with various groups of students, they

prepare them for different experiences in the future, therefore contributing to the reproduction of social inequality.

Also, several studies in Poland² have shown that socioeconomic status determines different levels of educational attainment. For instance, Kwieciński (1972, 2002) having studied dropout in rural areas in Poland, proved that there is a clear link between dropout and the socio-professional status of the family and their place of residence (countryside). Moreover, he developed a hypothesis about the *boomerang effect* of dropout: giving up education in the primary school by parents increases the likelihood that their children will also abandon education prematurely. Early school leaving, then, is a sounder predictor of future school failures than a high level of education a predictor of academic success (Boudon 1973, after: Kwieciński 2002: 236).

Mikiewicz (2011), a few decades after Kwieciński's studies, accentuates that quite a similar effect still exists, despite many reforms and profound changes in the Polish education system. According to him, the choice of a type of upper secondary school is socially-determined, as youngsters with different backgrounds are channeled into different educational paths (Mikiewicz 2011: 181). Thus, education of parents seems to influence young people's career choices: children whose parents have achieved university degrees usually decide to attend general secondary schools rather than the vocational or technical ones (Zawistowska 2012; Mikiewicz 2011).

However, contemporary researchers on educational inequalities and school failure indicate that the explanation of the mechanisms of their formation is far more complicated than it seemed to be for the precursors of the reproduction theory (Driesen 2001; Crespi 2004). Not always does it turn out that the ascribed (inherited) status becomes the achieved status in the course of training and subsequent job career. There are many factors influencing the fate of individual educational trajectories (Roskam & Nils 2007; Grigoras 2014). What determines the final result are mutual, overlapping relationships between factors situated at different levels: micro, meso and macro.

At this point it seems necessary to clarify the concept of a multilevel, tripartite approach to understanding and explaining the phenomenon of ESL.

² The term *early school leaving* does not appear in Polish academic literature. Researchers use the concepts which have a long tradition in Poland, such as school dropout (in Polish: *odpad szkolny*, which has an extremely pejorative meaning and its synonyms are: *reject*, *waste*, *trash*) and sieve (in Polish: *odsiew*) (Fatyga, Tyszkiewicz and Zieliński 2001; Kwieciński 1972, 2002; Putkiewicz and Zahorska 2001), or apply the concept of *dropout* as a synonym for *early school leaving* (Mikiewicz 2011).

We applied a macro-meso-micro model that follows the model of Coleman (1990). According to this concept the characteristics of the education system at the macro-level and school characteristics at the meso-level influence the relevance of individual attributes of students, their parents and teachers to the educational attainment of students (micro level) (Hadjar & Gross 2016: 19). Therefore in our understanding the family factors shall be construed in the category of individual characteristic, while the meso level refers to the school as an institution and the space in which the interactions between students, parents and teachers are taking place.

It is also particularly reasonable to look at the problem also from the perspective of the resilience theory. Resilience is connected with the ability to maintain positive adaptation by individuals despite experiences of difficulty and misfortune (Luthar et al. 2000: 543) or to overcome predictions of failure (Catterall 1998: 304). As far as educational research is concerned, resilience describes the situation in which young people function well in family life, school and work, in spite of exposure to multiple risk factors (Garmezy 1985; Werner 2000, after: Ostaszewski et al. 2011: 14). Recognising protective and risk factors and awareness of their interaction stands at the outset of developing effective methods of reducing risk behaviours in adolescents. Although previous studies on ESL (GHK 2005; GHK 2011; Dale 2010) tackle the issue of risk factors, they omit the protective factors. Nevertheless, the latter ones seem to be far more important in relation to building a strategy for ESL prevention.

The conceptual model³ takes into account: the education system and the socio-economic context on the macro/systemic level; social capital, cultural capital and school organisation and practices at the meso/institutional level and student's educational trajectory as well as resiliency on the individual/micro level. It accentuates though that individual students are not exclusively responsible for their educational trajectories, as their success is conditioned by many factors at different levels (individual, institutional and systemic), therefore the interplay between various levels and interactions between individuals should be analysed as key factors necessary to understand the phenomenon of ESL (Clycq et al. 2013: 5–6).

³ A graphic representation of this model can be found in the report on theoretical framework of ESL (Clycq et al. 2013: 12).

Dimensions of ESL as perceived by school staff

We analysed four individual and four group interviews with school staff (including principals, teachers, class tutors, pedagogical counsellors and heads of practical training) of upper secondary schools in Warsaw, conducted from October to December 2014. They took place in two general upper secondary schools, one technical school and one complex of two schools, consisting of a general vocational school and a technical school. In total, 21 people participated in this part of research.

Among other things, the interviewees were asked whether they perceived ESL as an important issue or a problem for education in Poland and particularly in their schools, and what the scale of this phenomenon was. They were also asked about the possible determinants of ESL.

What clearly draws attention is the fact that the school staff are not familiar with early school leaving as a statistical term and as an important European issue to be tackled by education systems. The unfamiliarity with the ESL concept is not necessarily surprising, but a total lack of knowledge of European education policy priorities, or the existence of Europe 2020 strategy and its benchmarks may be puzzling. This confirms the conclusion from the previously conducted document analysis that ESL is not a matter present in public discourse in Poland, or, even more narrowly, among those involved in the education of young people. However, the staff do know what school dropout is and they are familiar with the Polish term *odpad szkolny* and the negative connotations it carries.

Almost all interviewees agree that early school leaving is not a significant problem in our country. The exception was the principal and the staff of the vocational school, who pointed out that among the students of this school the problem is serious and affects up to 15% of young people. Moreover, in the vocational school, roughly half of the students finish school within the prescribed time, and usually it is the students who are already over 18 years of age that usually leave vocational school early, before completing their education. In other schools surveyed none or only single persons leave the system completely. As teachers in one of the general schools accentuate: "*in our school there was no, we have never faced (...) such a case that a youth leaves the education system.*"

What all school staff consider an important issue is educational failure and its consequences in the form of: grade repetition, moving to another school (assumed to have a lower level of education) or taking up education in schools for adults (i.e. centres for continuing education), which often give students an

opportunity to study at weekends, making it easier to combine education and work. One of the employees interviewed said: *“a different, less demanding general upper secondary school or a school for adults, i.e. a school which is part of a continuing education centre. This concerns, if I were to recall the statistics, about 10% of the students over three years. So within three years of education, about 8–10% of the students leave our school.”* Moving from school to school is a commonly used strategy and it is sometimes suggested by the school, especially when teachers feel they have already exhausted the available repertoire of pedagogical interventions towards a particular student. There is even cooperation between schools in the mutual transfer of ‘problem students’. This is how one of the teachers described it: *“and therefore, if we have difficulties with the cooperation with the parents, or if this change is ineffective, and it is impossible to change how they work at home and if our actions are exhausted, well, we offer [transition] to a different educational path. But this is not the case that we tell the students to take the documents and we do not care where they are, in which school, but we cooperate. The principal often contacts principals of other schools about transferring students with lower abilities, there are specific addresses. It is not that we throw them out the door, and we do not care about that child (...).”*

Yet another important aspect is the problem of a lower pass rate at school leaving exams (*Matura*), which means that although students formally finish upper secondary school (receive school leaving diploma), and have an ISCED 3 level of education, they cannot take up higher education. Formally, they are not included in the group of ESLers, but it is worth remembering that such a group also exists in our education system.

All school employees, however, agree that sooner or later, in one form or another, students return to the education system to complete the training. They do not believe that there are such cases where a person intentionally gives up education completely.

The results on the perception of determinants of ESL indicate that school staff give prominence to the micro level factors, which can be divided into three categories:

- *individual factors*: poor skills gained in previous stages of education, previous school failure, lack of motivation to learn, lack of educational aspirations, bad choice of school or educational profile, disease, and emotional and health disorders;
- *accidental factors*: e.g. pregnancy or other serious change of life situation, which results in the need to become independent or to undertake work;

- *family factors*: bad financial situation, pathologies (alcoholism, violence, etc.), accidental situations (e.g. death in the family), parental incapacity, previous bad experiences of parents with the school, guilt or shame associated with child's failure and parental helplessness; bad family relationships, conflicts between parents and children; lack of support from the parents; unreasonable educational aspirations of parents; a demanding attitude of parents'; inherited unemployment in the family.

It is interesting that family factors are definitely the ones that are most often mentioned and very strongly emphasised. The vocational school principal speaks directly: *"The main reason for this is the family dysfunction. I'm talking about the basic vocational school. It is well known that usually the school is to blame for, but I'm speaking from the school's perspective and see that these are family circumstances which are responsible [in the first place]."*

The meso level factors were basically, except for one, absent in the staff's thinking about the determinants of school failure. The exception is the lack of cooperation between parents and the school, with the school staff quite clearly showing that it is the parents who do not take the cooperation with them and not the opposite. In general, all schools stressed that they take a number of very diverse preventive measures to help students at risk and if they are unsuccessful, it is usually due to the fact that the students themselves do not want to take advantage of this opportunity. It can be concluded that, in this way, schools move away from the responsibility for any failure of the students by transferring it to the level of individual decisions, family circumstances or coincidence. Still, the schools emphasise their commitment to helping students and a wide and diverse cooperation with other institutions in order to achieve these objectives.

Finally, the last group are the macro/systemic factors, which appear in the statements primarily as a criticism of the existing system of education and its changes over the last few years. The school staff mentioned, among others, the malfunction or even destruction of vocational education, which results in 'overselection' of general upper secondary schools by the students, a change in the form of the matriculation examination (*Matura*); the lack of real support for the school from institutions such as the Education Office, which focuses exclusively on supervision and evaluation. At the local government level, staff from one of the schools mention a change in the funding of extra-curricular activities on the part of the Bureau of Education. In addition to the education system, a noticeable factor conditioning the difficulties at school is also in the demographic decline, which results in the strive of schools for every single student, accepting all students regardless of their abilities or outcomes and

results from the previous educational stages. This leads to a general reduction in the level of education, especially in these schools which group students with lower abilities. One of the principals also draws attention to such macrosystemic issues as overprotection of the state manifested in the access to social benefits without putting requirements. This in turn leads to the reinforcement of a demanding attitude, learned helplessness, or unwillingness to work. These attitudes, as he noted, pass down from generation to generation.

Conclusion

The main assumption – concentration on micro and macro level factors as explanation of ESL – is confirmed by the data collected. On the one hand, one of the reasons behind it might be the retraction of responsibility for the educational failures from the school to other possible explanatory factors. On the other hand, this case illustrates well an individualistic approach to the educational success or failure, in which the individual is fully responsible for his decisions and creates his educational trajectory. This change in thinking (a shift from the macro and institutional factors to the micro explanations), also at pan-European level was observed by Roger Dale⁴ who indicated a move away from the debate on youth unemployment (usually explained by macro level factors) towards ESL where it is a pupil who decides to leave school early (micro level explanation).

We can conclude that in the perception of the phenomenon of ESL by school staff we are dealing with two seemingly mutually exclusive visions. They agree on the fact that students in their educational decisions are strongly determined by family and social factors, thus confirming theories of social reproduction. At the same time they see the school leaving decision as young people's desire for emancipation, their self-empowerment and self-creation of their own biography, in accordance with the doctrine of individualisation (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002). However, as stressed by Atkinson (2010) in line with Beck, we are actually dealing with a "both/and" situation, in which external and individualised factors coexist.

Two other issues deserve special attention – lack of meso level/institutional factors in staff's perception and a very strong link between ESL and other school failures in thinking about the underlying determinants of ESL. Therefore one could

⁴ This idea was presented by Roger Dale during the discussion at the thematic symposium dedicated to ESL during ECER conference in Porto in 2014.

have an impression that school staff simply transfer some existing beliefs and stereotypes concerning the so-called “problem student” rather than actively reflect on the possible distinctive nature of the ESL phenomenon.

What can surprise is the scale of unfamiliarity with the concept of ESL among upper secondary school staff. The vast majority of them (if not all) have not heard about ESL before joining the project. Despite this lack of knowledge, the teachers could accurately estimate that the scale of ESL in Poland is not large, and list many possible factors that may explain its occurrence. What is very characteristic, school employees asked to estimate the scale of the problem immediately referred to their school or class. Similarly, asked about their perception on the determinants of ESL, the staff instantly alluded to their everyday work and cases of particular students.

Although the issue of tackling ESL is considered as one of the main goals of EU education policy, it is not reflected in any way in Polish national, regional or local strategic documents. At the moment, the way our education system is constructed and financed, the school obligation and its effectiveness and, last but not least, the educational aspirations of our society, protect us to a significant extent against this phenomenon (Marchlik & Tomaszewska-Pękała 2013). The question is for how long.

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