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An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure: reducing Early School Leaving in Slovakia

Studia Pedagogiczne. Problemy Społeczne, Edukacyjne i Artystyczne 24,
377-386

2014

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Reducing Early School Leaving in Slovakia

Lepiej zapobiegać niż leczyć. Zapobieganie przedwczesnemu opuszczaniu obowiązku nauki na Słowacji

Introduction

Reducing Early School Leaving (ESL) in Europe has been identified by European Commission (EC) as one of key challenges for European countries. The Europe 2020 strategy takes the reduction of ESL to 10% by 2020 as a headline target and emphasizes key reinforced issues: *smart growth* based on knowledge and innovation, *sustainable growth* promoting a greener economy and *inclusive growth* supporting high social cohesion. High rates of ESL negatively effects smart and inclusive growth, youth employment and are one of the factor of poverty and social exclusion. That is why tackling ESL became one of the priorities of EC and all European countries.

This study investigates early school living as multi-faceted social process and challenge for Europe. Within this educational discourse, there is an explicit assumption that being recognizes as one of the urgent task for European societies, reducing ESL requires policy on national and European level. Tackling ESL is important not only for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth of EU, but also necessary for educational institutions on local level. The aim of this paper is to discuss the policies and good practice measures from Slovakia – country with low ESL rates. To engage with this matter, in the first part of the paper I am doing an overview of European ESL policies. In the second part I am trying to find out the reasons for low numbers of young Slovakian leaving school premature and I am introducing the Slovakian national strategies against ESL, including education system. In doing so, I argue that transition between schools and different school levels are particularly difficult for pupils at risk of dropping out. Moreover, traditionally high value of education in Slovakia

and strategies taken on national level are good example for national policy aiming tackling dropping-out.

ESL is a multi-faceted and complex problem caused by a cumulative process of disengagement. Trying to prevent drop-out of pupils means a lot of time investing in educational achievement, building self-confidence and giving essential employment prospects of every young person. ESL starts at different school levels. Especially transition between schools are particularly difficult for pupils at risk of dropping out. The reasons why young people leaving education and training prematurely are individual. Coming from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, from vulnerable groups, this include young people with special needs, with public care background, with migration or Roma background, teenage mothers. Assessing the main challenges, aiming to reduce ESL in Europe, highlights the fact that students with migration background are at greater risk of ESL from school¹. In 2012 the ESL rate of young people born abroad was on average more than double the ESL rate of native young people (25.4% in contrast to 11.5% for natives). The risk of ESL is closely linked to the lower socioeconomic status of migrants, language barriers and their limited access to sufficient learning support.

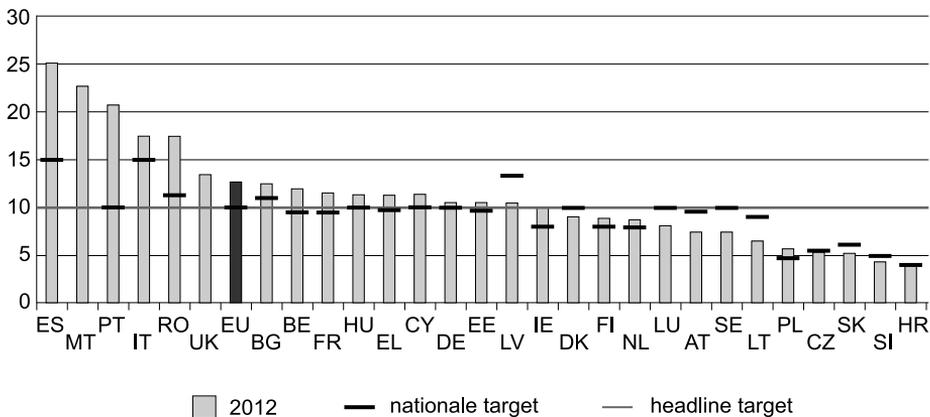
In June 2011, the Education Council adopted a Recommendation on policies to reduce early school leaving². The strategy mentioned in the document focus on *prevention* which seeks the possibilities to avoid the conditions from which leads to ESL, *intervention* addresses emerging difficulties at an early stage and seeks to prevent them from leading to ESL, as well as *compensation* which measures the offered opportunities for education and training for those who have dropped out.

In Europe there are some countries and regions with higher or lower ESL rates, being influenced by different factors, e.g. the structure of education system, access of educational provision, socio-economic conditions (like family background, living conditions, etc.) with different definitions measurement throughout EU countries. ESL in Europe is seen as “leaving education and training systems before the end of compulsory schooling, before reaching a minimum qualification or before completing upper secondary education.

¹ Europe 2020 target: Early Leavers from education and training, http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/themes/29_early_school_leaving.pdf [16.09.2014].

² Council Recommendation of 28 June 2011 on policies to reduce early school leaving, OJ C 191/2011, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2011:191:0001:0006:en:PDF> [16.09.2014].

Whilst the term ESL may include all forms of leaving education and training prematurely, the term 'school drop-out' often refers to someone discontinuing an on-going course, e.g. dropping out in the middle of the school term. Dropping-out from education can occur at any time and can be experienced by different age groups³. The European definition of ESL refers to all forms of leaving education and training before completing upper secondary education or equivalents in vocational training and education. In statistical terms, European ESL rates are measured as the percentage of 18–24 year olds with only lower secondary education or less and no longer in education or training⁴. Based on that ESL definition, the European Statistical Office collects information in relation to the number of young people 18 to 24 years old. According to it in 2012, 12.7% of all ESL had not completed upper secondary education and were no longer in education and training. In Spain, Malta or Portugal the ESL rates are the highest in Europe (up to nearly 30%). Member States like Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia and Croatia achieved recently rates below 5%.



Source: *Report Europe 2020 Target: Early Leavers from Education and Training* http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/themes/29_early_school_leaving.pdf [16.09.2014], based on Eurostat data.

Figure 1. ESL rate 2012, Europe 2020 target and national targets

³ European Commission, *Reducing Early School Leaving: Key Messages and Policy Support*, Brussels 2013, p. 8.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 8. http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/doc/esl-group-report_en.pdf [16.09.2014].

From prevention to intervention – good practice example from Slovakia

Eurostat⁵ statistics show the constant trend of early school leaving in Slovakia – around 6%. Over nearly 11 years there were ups and downs with the rates. Nevertheless, the highest percentage – 6,8% in 2004 – has been significantly reduced to 4,7% – the best result in the 2002–2013 period.

Table 1. Changing process of ESL in rates in EU countries (average amount) and in Slovakia

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
EU27	17,2	17,0	16,5	16,1	15,8	15,5	15,0	14,8	14,3	14,0	13,5	12,8	12,0
SK	n/a	6,7	5,3	6,8	6,3	6,6	6,5	4,9	4,7	4,9	5,1	5,3	6,3

Source: Eurostat.

The changing process of ESL in EU countries shows that Slovakia has got one of the lowest rates of ESL in Europe, comparing with countries like Malta 22,6–4,8% or Spain 24,9–28,4%. This phenomena is one of the reasons to look for good practice measures of outstanding contribution to prevention of drop-out.

One of the factors which affects ESL is education system. In particular transition between schools and different education levels are particularly difficult for pupils at risk of dropping out. Moreover early school education and care plays an important role in reducing ESL. The evidence of it is – the 2009 OECD's PISA assessment of students at age 15 shows that, for most countries, students who have attended pre-primary education have better results than those who have not. That evidence shows that access to good quality education at an early age increases school achievements, facilitates the development of key competences and reduces the risk of ESL at a later stage⁶.

General overview of Slovakian education system made below highlights the fact that flexible educational pathways, smooth transition between different levels of education as well as access to high quality education throughout life (including early childhood education and care), high quality Vocational Education and Training (VET) meets the challenges of a student dropping-out in Slovakia.

⁵ <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&plugin=1&language=en&pcode=tsdsc410> [1.03.2014].

⁶ European Commission, *Reducing Early School Leaving*, p. 18.

The central governmental body responsible for compulsory education in Slovakia is The Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic. On ministry level the developed educational aims, content and methods for education are set for the whole country. The Slovak Ministry of Education Science, Research and Sport cooperates with central bodies of state administration and other bodies and organizations in school matters. The State School Inspection is the body of state administration in education performing the function of state control over the level of pedagogical management and the level of education⁷.

The first stage of education system is pre-primary education (kindergarten), attended by children from three to six years. Primary and lower secondary education is organised as a single structure system, beginning at the age of six and consisting of nine years. The compulsory schooling, starting from 6 year of age lasts ten years up to the first year of upper secondary education. Secondary education is provided by 1) *Grammar schools*, preparing for further study at universities and other higher education institutions, being part of general secondary education, 2) *Specialized secondary schools*, chosen by students aiming vocational training and / or studying at higher education institutions, 3) *Vocational secondary school*, destined for students requiring higher level vocational education and a School Leaving Certificate, 4) *Apprentice Training Centres*, preparing school-leavers for professional activities, 5) *Conservatories* – a special type of professional school that provides courses in such fields as Singing, Music, Dancing and Dramatic Arts. Disable children, children with special educational needs attend special schools. Their education is carried out from pre-primary level up to the upper secondary level in special or mainstream schools. In mainstream schools the child with special educational needs may be integrated with its peer into a mainstream class (individual integration) or into a special class at mainstream school among children with the same kind of handicap (social integration). Secondary school graduate may continue their studies at higher education institutions, provided at the three levels – Bachelor, Master and PhD study programmes.

On one hand the reason for low numbers of young Slovakian dropped out school in the last years can be justified by traditionally high value of education in society. This might explain low ESL rates in other East European countries

⁷ Eurypedia – The European Encyclopedia on National Education Systems, http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/eurypedia_en.php [26.09.2014].

from former Eastern Bloc countries like Poland (2012 – 5,7%), Czech Republic (2012 – 5,5%) or Lithuania (2012 – 6,5%). Before 1990 the access to universities in these countries was limited and controlled by communist regime. After socio-political transition East European society faced new challenges. One of the more significant changes following the downfall of the former regime was the awareness and willingness to attend school and obtain university degree. As example from Poland shows, according to National Public Opinion Research Centre in last 10 years more than 70% adult poles strongly believe in education and see importance of education. In addition, education is under 5 main values which are in their opinion important for life, apart from education, placed as third one, it's been mentioned family people's kindness, interesting work and good material status⁸.

On the other hand, the report of Slovak Institute of Vocational Education⁹ points another reason of low ESL rates in Slovakia. The Eurostat stats, received from Slovakia government “do not reflect appropriately extremely unfavourable data of ethnic Roma, in particular those living in ‘marginalised communities’ of low living standard”¹⁰ due to ban of collecting of statistical data on ethnic groups in Slovakia and not including the race and ethnicity data on a national education data bases. Although early school leaving might be recognised on a local level, this problem is not visible in national statistics and can be one of the main factor affecting Slovakian low early school leaving attainment.

Slovakian government is aware of the problem of Roma early school leavers and agreed 2013 on EU level to focus on improving the performance of young people at high risk of early school leaving and with low basic skills, including children coming from ethnic groups. It has been estimated to achieve it, through early detection across the education system and by providing individual support¹¹. In addition, considering that social services dealing with children and childcare, are an important precondition for the prevention and reduction of child poverty, social exclusion and discrimination, social services should focused more on ESL. Other measures to keep low number of early school leavers in Slovakia, undertaken on government side, reflects in “structural changes of the education system that are permanently under discussion: extension of com-

⁸ Research from February 2010, <http://obop-arch.tnsglobal.pl/archive-report/id/253>

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-13-324_en.htm [date of extraction 1.03.2014].

pulsory education up to the age of 18 (covering at least 9 years of basic education and 3 years of upper secondary vocational education) and starting compulsory education from 3 years old to prepare all children to meet challenges of basic education”¹².

In addition to recommendations, the rough estimations of Slovak Institute of Vocational Education are showing that up to 80% of Ethnic Roma are early school leavers¹³. To reduce these high number has been recommended to¹⁴:

- improve performance in primary schools by improving early childhood education and early childhood intervention, by assisting children and families to meet challenges of mainstream education at basic schools;
- preventing dropping out, caused by a non-stimulating environment in families by day care programmes of primary schools;
- supporting integration and inclusion of children from socially disadvantaged families by creation of conditions in mainstream schools to accommodate their needs;
- opening the door to obtaining qualification outside formal vocational education by creation the National Qualifications System.

A good practice model from Slovakia focused on prevention of early school leaving was a project “Scholarships for students at risk of early school leaving due to social disadvantage”, led by Institute of Information and Prognoses of Education, from June 2004 to January 2006. Projects target group were mainly students whose parents depend on benefits, due to low incomes, disabilities or unemployment. In addition, school staff was seen as indirectly benefitting from the activity, because they received an instrument to improve their working conditions in schools.

Following specific project objectives have been brought into focus:

- increasing a number of students from families in a material need or families with incomes up to subsistence minimum in education,
- making students more involved in their learning,
- increasing motivation of students from these families to participate in education,
- improving the effectiveness and quality of education.

¹² J. Vantuch, D. Jelinkova, *Early Leaving from Vocational and Training in Slovakia 2013*, State Institute of Vocational Education/Slovak National Observatory of VET, Bratislava 2013, p. 22–23.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

Another part of project was financial support for students. The scholarship money should cover at least part of costs for education to stimulate them to complete education, like travel costs, food, accommodation, learning aids. The amount of monthly scholarship money were up to students average mark and amounted between 20 EUR and maximum 42 EUR.

Conclusion

Education and training are key drivers of economic growth, a higher standard of living and a socially cohesive community. Reducing Early School Leaving to less than 10% is one of the main challenge for education and training up to the year 2020 in Europe. Designing adequate policies to combat early school leaving is a difficult task. Some actions on national level such as from Slovakia – changes in minimum school leaving age or financial support – are good practice examples for measures taken to achieve reducing ESL. Research and existing experiences in EU Member States indicates that the comprehensive strategies must address the entire education spectrum and include prevention, intervention and compensation measures. There is also strong evidence that prevention of ESL shows better results than compensating the negative effects of ESL¹⁵.

Within the educational discourse in the paper, there is an explicit assumption that being recognizes as one of the urgent task for European societies, reducing ESL requires policy on national and European level. Tackling ESL is important not only for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth of EU, but also necessary for educational institutions on local level. Trying to find out good practice measures of outstanding contribution of Slovakia to low rates of ESL in Europe, one of papers' conclusions is that the education system, in particular transition between schools and different school levels are particularly difficult for pupils at risk of dropping out. Moreover, traditionally high value of education in Slovakia and strategies taken on national level are good example for national policy aiming tackling dropping-out.

Tackling early school leaving is first and foremost **investment in the future**. Young people who do not complete their upper secondary education creates high social and economic costs. They are more often affected by unemploy-

¹⁵ European Commission. Recommendation on Policies against Early School Leaving. 1 July 2010, http://ec.europa.eu/smart-regulation/impact/planned_ia/docs/411_eac_recomm_early_school_leaving_en.pdf [1.03.2014].

ment, are more likely to depend on social benefits, have a higher risk of social exclusion, participate less in democratic processes. They are often in more precarious and less well-paid jobs than those with training. Although the situation varies in different EU countries, the social phenomenon of early school leaving follows certain patterns. Early school leavers are more likely to have a lower socio-economic status or to belong to vulnerable social groups. On average, the rates of early school leavers with migrant backgrounds are higher than to native youth. However, the impacts of individual and social conditions are also affected by the set-up of the educational system and the environment in individual schools and training institutions. Since there is not a single reason for leaving education or vocational training, there are no easy answers.

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SUMMARY

Early school leaving (ESL) has been recognized as one of the main challenges for European societies. The purpose of the paper is to provide basic data on ESL in Europe. The paper outlines the main factors causing ESL and presents examples of

policies and measures to prevent or reduce it. Bringing up the issue of ESL, it shows on overview about the EU policy, main reasons, as well as some statistics data about ESL rates and national targets. It highlights strategies against ESL that are based on evidence consist of prevention, intervention and compensation measures, with special emphasis on Slovakia, Slovakian education system and national policy aiming reducing ESL.

KEY WORDS: compulsory education, early school leaving, EU education policy.

STRESZCZENIE

Celem artykułu jest zaprezentowanie problemu wczesnego opuszczania obowiązku nauki w Europie. Przedstawiono w nim politykę UE w tym zakresie, omówiono skalę zjawiska i podstawowe powody szybszego kończenia edukacji w Europie. Odnieziono się też do dokumentów UE, wskazujących na potrzebę podejmowania działań w szkole i poza nią, koncentrujących się na potrzebie prewencji, interwencji i kompensacji potrzeb uczniów zagrożonych wczesnym opuszczeniem obowiązku nauki bądź uczniów, którzy taki obowiązek już zaniechali. W drugiej części omówiono możliwości przeciwdziałania wczesnemu opuszczaniu obowiązku nauki na przykładzie działań podejmowanych na Słowacji. Przedstawiono opis systemu oświaty tego kraju oraz omówiono ogólnie priorytety edukacyjne na Słowacji.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: obowiązek szkolny i nauki, zapobieganie opuszczaniu szkoły, polityka edukacyjna UE.