



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

Erasmus+ Programme – Strategic Partnership
Project Nr:
2016-1-RO01-KA201-024523 RESCUE

Strategic Partnerships for School Education
Cooperation for innovation and
the exchange of good practices

Reading Early School leaving signals - RESCUE

School Interviews Analysis Summary

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RESCUE
READING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING SIGNALS

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1. Some evidence from country reports

The analysis of country reports shows us some possible reasons related to early school leaving. As expected, they are linked to the specific environmental and economic situation of the family and to the political situation, culture and ideas of each country. However, the *Country Report* also underlines some common threads, like family environment, ethno-cultural characteristics, social and economic situation of families and community. These variables have a serious impact on the ability, motivation and strength of children in relation to school attendance.

Family situation

As country reports highlights, children who dropped out of school might have a family background characterised by low incomes. In Bulgaria, for example, one third of children who dropped out of school lives in families with one or two unemployed people. In all countries analysed, most children do not go to school because of family's economic difficulties. As a result, children do not have the money needed to pay school, transports, books and all the materials they should have. On the one hand boys are urged to find a job before they complete compulsory school attendance, as to contribute to the family income. On the other, girls are often pressed to marry and have children prematurely.

Another problem is that this specific situation is often associated with lack of parents' education. In Bulgaria again, for example, more than 50% of parents of children out of school are usually with little or no education. Also In Italy and Romania cultural capital of the families proves to be a pivotal factor: parents with low levels of education are less likely to support children in studying and doing homework, as well as encourage children's attendance and investments in education, and help them develop their own cultural capital.

This is partly connected with parents' ideas of education: some of them does not think school is important for their children's future, as they consider education like a residual option that could be ignored without worries. Italian report confirm that household income, parental unemployment, and low level of parental education are possible markers of ESL. Especially

in the South, living in a family affected by poverty coupled with parental low educational levels has a negative effect on children school performances and outcomes, thus worsening the risk of drop-out. In Italy 6 out of 10 children (0-17 years old) whose parental level of education is low are at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

Another point to be underlined is that family's social problems have a relevant impact on children; a family environment connoted by drug addiction, drunkenness or violence easily lead children to leave school. Our analysis shows that living in an unstable situation due to social problems has a strong influence on children, who cannot find support and guidance that could allow them to persist and success on attending school.

Especially in Bulgaria and Romania, many parents leave the country to work abroad. Consequently, children are asked to stay and live with other relatives, who cannot ensure the same level of emotional caring, as well as exercise the same authority on children. Lack of parental supervision is another cause of ESL: it seems that if parents are not involved in the educational system of school, they don't invest in their children's school path and don't care about it.

In Italy, analysis shows that family-related factors influence the chance of leaving the education system early. For example, living in a large family or in single-parent family affects the available income for family members, as well as the availability of parents supporting children's education in terms of economic investments and time to participate in their school life.

Romanian report too underlines socio-economic status of family as a possible risk of ESL – including a high rate of poverty at household level, especially for children and youth living at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Parents have to pay for supplementary tuition, school supplies, transportation to school, sport and school equipment, and sometimes for refurbishment and maintenance of the school buildings, payment of private security staff when local budget cannot cover these costs. Poorer families who cannot afford such contributions, often decide not to send their children to school, so increasing the non-enrolment rate.

Individual motivation and school practices

In addition to these themes, our analysis show that sometimes children opt not to attend school anymore because of their own personal decision. In this case, they make lots of unexcused absences, or they choose to exhibit aggressive and challenging behaviour in order to be expelled from school. Rarely school are able to use methods or techniques to keep them enrolled: as a result, some students have to repeat 3-4 times the school year and for this reason decide to give up.

As Romanian report clarifies, the lack of public investment and expenditure in education is a major issue to be disentangled: one specific issue relates to the lack of continuous professional training of teachers, as it would represent a necessary condition for improving teachers' skills and making school more inclusive than now.

The Italian analysis shows that gender as well as cultural background of students contribute to enlarge the educational gap that leads to ESL. In Italy, male students tend to leave the education system earlier than female students. As regard to cultural background, students who were born abroad tend to leave the education system more frequently than Italian students do. This is especially related to language barriers, who make school path difficult for all of those students who don't have Italian as mother tongue. Moreover, factors as low performances, irregular attendance at school, repeated grades influence students' performances, their school career and their investment in education. It must be underlined that also students' personal characteristics may have an impact on ESL risk: learning difficulties, behaviour problems and problems in socialization could increase the sense of disengagement and demotivation among children, which can make school life harder, and let them give up school to preserve their identity. Bulgarian report too stresses out that it is not rare that children, especially teenagers, leave school for lack of motivation and involvement.

Geographic area

As our analysis shows, some geographic areas seem more exposed to ESL phenomenon. For example, Italian report underlines that the Southern regions and Islands are the most deprived areas in Italy. Male students, students of foreign origins (and particularly those who were born

abroad), young people who live in the southern regions, socio-economically disadvantaged students, obtain lower performances, and they risk to leave school early.

Romania report too shows that early school leaving rate in Romania remains well above the EU average; the availability and access of early childhood education and care services is limited, especially in rural areas and for the Roma community. In turn, this lead to economic problem, social protection, serious consequences such as unemployment, social exclusion and poverty.

Another issue related to this point is poor coordination among key stakeholders at national and local level. Report underlines that the more a school, an area, an educational service is isolated, the less it could create network with the surrounding area and other services that can help improve possible educational projects.

Regarding Bulgaria, the analysis shows that the “gone abroad” family phenomenon is a source of concern: children leave school to follow their parents abroad and not always they carry on with their school path. Consequently, it is important that the majority of students continue their education in countries where their family is settling.

All the reports point out the lack of a socio-educational and holistic approach of child and youth participation in school, as well as the lack of social workers specialized to work as case managers (especially in rural areas), the lack of social protection payments, insufficient human resources in the social field, not functional community advisory councils. The latter are activated only on paper, so there is no coordination and a system for reporting or accountability of members who are working on voluntarily basis.

2. Interviews Analysis

The analysis of the interviews made in Italy, Bulgaria and Romania confirm the results highlighted by the reports previously examined. Italian team made 6 interviews to school teachers. Romanian team distributed a questionnaire to more than 100 teachers of two primary schools and interviewed 17 teachers. Bulgarian team distributed the questionnaire to 60 teachers and interviewed 12 teachers. The analysis of the data collected can be divided into two parts: quantitative analysis of the questionnaires; qualitative analysis of the interviews.

2.1 Quantitative Analysis

The questionnaires were distributed to 160 teachers approximately. They were mainly female teachers, with more than 10 years' experience on teaching. They questionnaires emphasised as possible factors contributing to young people early school leaving the following dimensions:

- Socio-economic disadvantage;
- Family problems (drug or alcohol-related problems etc.);
- Family history of early school leaving;
- Low academic ability or special educational need;
- Lack of individual motivation and/or goals;
- Behaviour difficulties and/or emotional problems.

In the opinion of teachers, these characteristics may assist students in doing well at school and avoiding ESL despite they suffer from one or more of the previously cited conditions:

- To be a "hard worker" student;
- To like or have an interest in school;
- To be respectful of teachers' authority.

2.2 Qualitative Analysis

The analysis of interviews' data could be summarized in three categories, which reflects what the quantitative analysis and the country reports told us:

- 1) need to create networks with families and other professional roles;
- 2) need for change aimed at developing a new kind of school, and
- 3) critical issues.

2.2.1 *Creating networks*

➤ *With family*

The analysis shows us that teachers consider a pivotal goal for the school to create a solid partnership with children's parents or caregivers. As a teacher comments: "School-family-association network work has allowed parents to understand the importance of the school as a resource and investment for the future, and not just as a formality and guarantee of a place in the authorized field". Almost all the teachers agree that families have an essential role in their pupils' future. However, in practical terms they do not always feel at ease about intervening in confrontational situations, especially discussing about the role of education in ensuring the future of children, or when parents come from a different cultural background. As an Italian teacher said, "School cannot replace families, it can only reinforce and support their intervention".

Family culture. Family has the essential function of providing security to its members and educating children, as they acquire language and cultural skills through the socialisation process. By imitation and identification with their parents, children achieve fundamental role-models that influence their perspective about the meaning and practice of schooling. Parents' positive attitude toward school can induce the child a powerful motivation to

learning. For this reason, the family needs also to express an adequate interest in the child's school performance. Teachers maintain that the main reason for ESL depends on family positioning and attitudes towards school: sometimes the family chooses a school unsuitable for the characteristics of the child or does not support it sufficiently. As a result, school failure is unavoidable.

Many teachers add that one of the biggest challenges for schools is parents' poor education. This in turn produces an inability from the parents to understand that without school their children will be condemned to a difficult future. From the teachers' point of view, family's culture is important to create a comfortable setting for children to grow peacefully and sufficiently supported. The cultural level of the family plays a pivotal role for the family members. As a Bulgarian teacher states: "The cultural level is important for a normal development of the child up to the entry to school, and then for supporting the child throughout the school path". This way a level of comfort and confidence in teachers and in school can be ensured: "A family with a low level of education will not have the necessary capacity to explain the child why school is important. However, there are also families with a higher level of education, even if this condition is not certified by formal diplomas", a Romanian teacher suggested.

Family's cultural capital (not always tightly coupled with the actual economical capital) plays a crucial role on assessing what is truly valuable in pursuing school education. If the cultural level of the family is medium or high, the family can better support their children and their choices, as well as help them in the event of failure and reorientation. Conversely, if the cultural level of the family is low, parents often push children to give up on school both directly (asking children not to go to school) or indirectly (simply taking them at home). Several demanding situations can then surface, especially where in the family teenager children are asked to look upon other children or start doing odd (often illegal) jobs. As we mentioned, many children have to go to work as soon as possible to contribute to the family poor budget. All teachers underline that families living in socio-economic disadvantaged conditions regularly represent at risk situations for children. In this environment, boys would rather day work to earn money, as girls are "betrothed" at an early age. Situations of child abuse are not uncommon in this environment. Consequently, efforts should be taken to prevent early marriages by talking with parents and students, as well as by working in collaboration with social services to promote family planning and sexual education.

Some parents express their beliefs that “you won’t get too far with education”, “If you learn more, you win little money” or “In Italy I won’t be asked for a diploma”. In teachers’ opinion, parents think that finding a job is more important than getting a diploma: it seems that the less children stay at school, the more they could work. In plain words, “Less is enough”. Poor economic condition and lack of culture show consequently strong interrelation. Moreover, this is linked to the lack of support families could give to the children. More generally, teachers’ interviews support the idea that the chances a student to leave school before graduating are greater if parents also dropped out prematurely from school.

Collaboration with family. “It’s important to try to work with family, not only for them”, said an Italian teacher. Teachers emphasise that school must collaborate with family and create networks with it, working both with students and with their parents. In teachers’ opinion, parents are not enough involved to keep their children in school. School-family network plays an important role, as it enables parents to understand the importance of the school as a resource and investment for the future, and not as a chore or a waste of time. “It would be important to organize various programs for both students and parents” a Romanian teacher said.

Parents' attention, its environment and interest in the child's school activities are essential to make school suitable for children. School has to try as much as possible to build a climate of collaboration with the families, sharing with them the projects, ideas, values and progresses of school life. As a Bulgarian teacher comments “I think we need more parent-teacher activities”. Poor or lack of communication with parents, low education level of parents and the impossibility for them to acknowledge the role of education for their children are assumed as possible ESL causes.

Disadvantaged conditions. Disadvantaged conditions in family could create a state of restlessness, moods, little attention in children. As an Italian teacher said “There are families that, due to the economic conditions or the difficult environment, didn’t have the chance to develop from a cultural point of view. The primary effort I am making as a teacher is to introduce the students to a system of values”. Social and familiar discomfort and lack of parents’ involvement in school matters are presented as one of the possible causes of ESL. As a Romanian teacher says: “Financial problems, dysfunctional families, poor academic

performance, learning difficulties” are at the basis of students’ disaffection from school. Some teachers told that in the past they visited the families of those students who dropped-out from school and found out that unwillingness of students and parents' attitudes towards education are the main factors that lead to school dropout. Other factors are financial problems, dysfunctional families, poor academic performance, learning difficulties, and both family’s and child's lack of interest in school. From the teachers’ perspective, socio-economic conditions of the family are very important, as they provide the psychological comfort every individual needs to carry on with the school path. However, some teachers highlight that schools can play a pivotal role in preventing ESL through educational interventions. As a Bulgarian teacher suggested: “Our needs are simple: improving the physical environment - more places for sports, recreation and communication. Library. Changing the classroom-learning system with a project-based learning model. New methodologies and technologies for developing learning techniques for pupils and teachers”.

➤ *With other schools*

The analysis of the interviews shows that teachers need to set up effective networks with associations that works on the surrounding area and with practitioners who can help them. Above all, teachers need to create networks with other resources in the school, especially with other teachers, who can offer support and reciprocal consultancy in their fight against ESL. As an Italian teacher said, “The problem is to find a shared intervention strategy with other colleagues”. “Cooperation and collaboration between all teachers to create a relaxing atmosphere is important” recommended a Romanian teacher, expressing the wish to define common educational strategies with other colleagues. Analysis shows that it is important for the school to have a shared vision to provide equal educational opportunities to all children. Teachers also propose to implement additional actions, as after-school activities, supporting peer groups, and internships organised by the school. On this line of thought, they also propose to open the school in the afternoon to provide additional educational activities, including specialisation courses that students can attend in agreement with the families. Supporting students’ attendance and success is seen as a daily practice that should involve all the school practitioners. This challenge requires to achieve a certain level of harmonization

between the various school components, as an outcome of cooperation and collaboration developed between all teachers to create an atmosphere of reciprocal care and encouragement.

➤ *With other practitioners*

Many teachers commented during the interviews that some schools should have psychological and educational support and re-orienting service for students and families. A Bulgarian teacher also commented that “there is already a pedagogical advisor who consults students, teachers and parents. Individual support programs have been developed”. However, more systematic support is needed. Teachers suggest that it would be important that every school could collaborate with support teachers, as well as school cultural mediators, social workers, school psychologists, and speech therapists. As a Romanian teacher said, “This reflects the concern of the teachers for better communication within the educational community”. Many teachers point out that a counselling service in school could make easier communication between teachers, children, families, and administration. Other teachers advocated for a service which could promote individual counselling, as well as for promoting focus groups organized on the initiative of the head-teacher (with the participation of pupils, teachers and parents) to prevent the drop out. Teachers also emphasize the role of social workers in order to offer support and orientation to the families. “

➤ *With the local institutions*

Teachers think it would be necessary to enhance network with local stakeholders, institutions, as well as with the working world. In addition, they say that involvement of all local institutions (the municipality, the police, the voluntary associations, and so on) should be encouraged in order to support the achievement of both students’ education and parents’ counselling activities (parents’ school). This support would be especially valuable for children who are at risk of dropping out. As an Italian teacher said: “Through this we would create some collaboration with local authorities”. “I would find partners in the community to contribute to social small farms where the parents with no income could work” a Romanian

teacher recommended.

➤ *With the associations*

Teachers point out the importance of NGO's work in and with schools. They would promote extracurricular activities and projects inside and outside school, for example manual workshops, for the production of artefacts that can also be exhibited or sold to find additional resources. This would compensate for the chronic lack of financial contribution from the state. Poor communication with local associations is also indicated as a possible cause of the lack of good practices in the school area. From this perspective, creating a sense of community through educational activities could be a possible solution to spread and share values and good practices, as well as create a sense of belonging and change that would enhance engagement in school and public sphere involvement. Teachers underline that school must work with the local communities, using support and resources that can be found in the surrounding area. In addition, a Bulgarian teacher pinpoints that "coordination of our work with local services could be introduced to improve school access" to the school. A disciplined and controlled collaboration between governmental and nongovernmental actors would help implement optimal strategies to improve access and retention of students in school, involving private bodies (NGOs, sponsors, etc.) in the community. Moreover, teachers add that sometimes NGOs have promptly offered material and support whenever necessary: We have worked yet with NGO's as WeWorld"; "NGOs helped us working with some Roma students".

2.2.2 Need for change

One teachers' common claim is about the need to change the educational system As an Italian teacher stated: "School ethics and culture must be transformed". "A school adapted to the requirements of society, a school for the soul of each student" a Romanian teacher said. According to teachers, change should especially involve the curriculum and pedagogy of school. They see students as entrapped in a system that requires them to study to abstract or inadequate subjects: not the 21st century skills and the development of personality and

society, the different ways of thinking and creating, but the undoing of unnecessary facts in an unnatural environment. Teachers say that, as a consequence, children lose their motivation to learn at school, as there is not a caring attitude towards them and they are being judged if they do not fit into the "class mould".

Teachers express a need to develop active teaching that could support them in doing classes with at risk students. Some teachers told that it is really important to encourage students, especially those at risk highlighting the little progresses, rewarding goodwill and desire to participate and collaborate, trying to support them by making examples that come from the experiences of everyday life.

In their opinion, school in general is undermined by an excess of theory and far from matching with the current demands of society. Some teachers stress out the role of creating an enjoyable environment while working in the classroom. They suggest that tasks for students should be "very simple and comfortable", such as "listen to the TG that speaks of this event". In addition, they recommend to focus on creating a fun and relaxing learning environment prevalently based on group practice. In this sense, practical activities must be strengthened to help school link to real life and make it closer with the new global communication environment. As a Bulgarian teacher said: "Systemic change is needed, as teachers and students are currently locked in a system that requires them to study wrong things".

In addition to this, teachers highlight the importance to change the school curriculum. In their opinion, the traditional curriculum is too complicated, and the amount of information that children need to achieve in school is unrealistically high. The school curriculum is often inconsistent with pupils' needs and real interests, as theoretical knowledge prevails and there is a lack of connections with real life. The delay or even lack of practical application of knowledge ends up to demotivate students. Teachers also offer some possible solutions to the problem: building different curricula for the different children; calibrating educational and didactic proposals based on the needs of each pupil; setting up spaces, activities and ways of working that not only promote learning processes but also children participation; planning a School Development Plan that helps design the development of partnership with families and the community; and organizing a more efficient educational environment.

In their opinion, teachers also need an ongoing and more qualified training. It should be focused on children's new needs and use technologies as a way to make teaching more interesting, suitable, and enjoying. E-learning, interactive whiteboards, and new learning and

cooperating approaches are only a few examples mentioned by the teachers. Many teachers emphasise that school has to develop citizen's skills, as school culture and ethos are very important for the students who spend large time of the daily life in school. Teachers advocate for a school able to match with the requirements of society, a school for the soul of each student, a school that implements truly civic and moral values. To change schools, flexibility is seen as a fundamental value. In addition, teachers support the use of new textbooks (updated with new evidences and information), as well as new technologies, to support school learning and the development of educational projects. The latter would enable to creation of collaboration and cooperation not only among students in the classrooms, but also among different stakeholders in the community.

In sum, teachers suggest a new kind of school, less dominated by bureaucracy and more practical and suitable to children's needs: "less words, more actions". They propose to promote during school hours more concrete activities based on children interests, connecting the learning process to real life, as well as new extracurricular laboratories and activities to try to motivate students and keep them engaged in the school path.

Teachers also recommend the involvement of the stakeholders into the development of vocational workshops aimed to show the "working world" to children. In fact, this should be part of the linking activities of the school with the local bodies, which should be considered as partners of school. They see cooperation and collaboration between teachers and public or private associations and with families as pivotal to create a positive and inclusive environment.

More generally, teachers speak about inclusive education as a way to promote a new kind of didactic, teaching, and living school that support what every single student can do with suitable and enjoying activities, designed to make the school environment fruitful for everyone.

2.2.3 Critical issues

From the interviews' analysis, some critical issues have emerged that seems valuable, even though they don't fit under the previous categories: economic problems, environmental aspects and peer pressure.

Economic problems

Most of teachers agree that the lack of money is one serious and important issue for the school: As an Italian teacher stated “poor economic conditions have an important impact on the students’ life”. It is worth to be noted that economic issues affect both families and schools. As for the families, we previously commented that sometimes children are forced to leave school and go to work to support the family. “In order to change this situation more money is needed” as a Romanian teacher explained. This lack of money from the family is usually connected with a lack of school materials, as it is difficult to “purchase additional materials for pupils from the school budget (pens, notepads, notebooks, etc.) and cover students’ transport costs for visits to various educational events and/or career days” as a Bulgarian teacher commented. Students who do not attend school or leave school early often come from especially destitute families. Providing a richer environment with resources and additional support would be a solution for ESL. But this requires available funds that school rarely have. As a consequence, new or extracurricular activities cannot be implemented as there is no money to invest in it. Related to this point, one teacher told that investing in education today actually means to invest in the country’s future. Hence, changing the paradigm, the curricula, the structure, the mentality, all these should be done as soon as possible by providing adequate financial support. Some schools assume and do what they are supposed to do. But those schools have their own financial power. Other cannot afford this challenge, because state loans are not used for school actions: “the socio-economic conditions of the family are important, even though disadvantage is related not only to the family economic conditions, but also to other factors such as the level of parental education, the area and the conditions of residence, etc”. Some teachers underline that improving teachers’ salaries would be mandatory: in their opinion, paying teachers what they’re worth could transform teaching into the prestigious, desirable, financially viable, and professionally exciting job it should be. Some teachers also suggest that the solution would be to provide school financial autonomy, this way making it the first sponsor of itself. In their opinion, school could provide textbooks, computers, and also snacks and meals for students.

Environmental aspects

Another big problem highlighted by teachers are school and geographical environment. Regarding the first aspect, teachers say that many schools are old, dirty, without technologies, materials, and instruments to teach properly. This kind of problem is related to money question, which we have discussed above. As for the geographical environment, teachers comment that many children cannot come to school just because there is no public transport service available. Especially in the rural areas from where many children come, public transport often does not exist and, knowing the poor financial condition of many families, parents could not afford to bring children to school by car. According to the teachers, creating school buses lines in these areas would be a crucial step in ensuring the right of children to attend school.

Peer pressure

Not all the teachers speak about peer pressure, but all of them recognized that it is very important to create a fair, exciting and non-violent environment at school. This is seen as a good practice that could help to keep students in school. All teachers recognise that school climate is important, acknowledging that helping students to get along with the other students is pivotal to ensure school attendance. “School mates and entourage have a great influence on the student's behaviour” said a Romanian teacher. The acceptance or rejection of a child may have positive or negative influence on him/her: a child who is accepted by the others is more cooperative and active, while the rejected one is more at risk of ESL.

Some teachers would like to create a kind of school more focused on building companionship and developing activities aimed at increasing participation and socialization. They note that stimulating co-operative work in the classroom can support and facilitate some relationships that would not spontaneously arise and limit other ones. But “the peer relationship has to be controlled also by families. Where there is a solid family behind, it is easier to limit and manage dangerous relationships”, as an Italian teacher said. Many teachers suggest that creating a sense of belonging to the group, developing communication skills, promoting

teamwork, using inclusive educational approaches are ways by which each student might find his place in school, to feel appreciated and valued. Some teachers note that peer pressure can be useful as an important incentive for students to perform well in school. However, on the negative side, peer influence can lead as well to discipline problems and deviant behaviour both inside and outside school. Notwithstanding, most teachers confirm that let children grow with others in school is still the best way to let them become responsible citizens.



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