

## THE PHENOMENON OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IN GREEK EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: THE ROLE OF SCHOOL DIRECTOR

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### Abstract

The phenomenon of Early School Leaving phenomenon (ESL) is observed in many educational systems. Unfortunately this situation can have major negative effects on those persons who have not completed the compulsory education (e.g. high unemployment). The Ministry of Education in many countries (including EU member states) follow specific politics in order to reduce the rate of ESL. In the present article a primary research was conducted using questionnaires and interviews in order to gather and present the opinions of school directors and school consultants. The study took into consideration also the current global economic crisis. The role of director in order to manage ESL is very important.

**Keywords:** *Early School Leaving, Greek Educational System, Director*

### Introduction

According to literature the definition used on the EU level describes the ESL phenomenon as a reference to “...those young people who leave education and training with only lower secondary education or less, and who are no longer in education and training...” (European Commission 2013).

The ESL rates are measured on a European level as the percentage of 18-24 year-old persons who have only lower secondary education or less and are no long in education or training. This is an “umbrella” term that is used to describe the phenomenon on a European level. However, many of the EU member states define ESL in different terms, and use different metrics in order to measure this phenomenon. Thus, ESL can be defined, among others, as leaving the education or training systems of any Member State before the end of compulsory schooling, before reaching a minimum qualification set by each State, or before completing upper secondary education (European Commission, 2013).

Furthermore, in the European level the definition the full-time compulsory education is encountered. It refers to the period of full-time education which is required for all students, who begin their school attendance at a certain starting age, differing among

the European states, even if they have similar education systems in all other aspects, and complete this compulsory education at a certain leaving age (European Commission, 2016).

## Early school leaving in Europe

During 2012, a percentage of 12.7% of all students (approximately 5.5 million persons) within the area of Europe, did not complete secondary education (European Commission, 2016). This percentage is larger for the male students than that of the female ones and is related mainly to entering the labour market. Some minorities such as the Roma (in Greece) or immigrants from Asia and Africa exhibit higher tendencies for ESL than others. As it was mentioned before, one of the main goals of the “Europe 2020” plan is to reduce the average European rate of early school leavers to less than 10%. In the past there had been also other government efforts in the same direction like “No Child Left Behind Act” on 2001 in the USA (USDOE, 2001) and “Lisbon 2000 which also set goals on a European Union level (Featherstone, 2010).

Researches show that early school leaving can be a very complicated issue, mainly because it depends on many factors which are very volatile. Therefore, any researchers that intent to study it, have to be careful in order to avoid the reproduction of stereotypes that can lead them to wrong conclusions. The causes that lead to ESL can be varied on many different levels. They can differ from school to school, from region to region in the same country and from country to country even in EU where there are many similarities in educational systems.

Another main issue that researchers have to consider is the fact that there are great differences in the percentage of early school leavers among European countries (even to those that participate in the EU), mainly because there are differences in the structure of educational systems. The first observation that can be made, is that the duration of compulsory education differs among countries. More specifically, in most European countries compulsory education lasts 9 or 10 years until the age of 15 or 16. But in Belgium, Germany (in 12 out of 17 of its confederate states), Luxembourg, Portugal, the United Kingdom and Turkey is 12 years, while in Germany (in the rest 5 confederate states), Hungary, the Netherlands and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) is compulsory education lasts for 13 years (European Commission, 2016). As it will be discussed later, one of the reasons that can lead to the phenomenon of ESL is the need for those students to enter into the market and gain a source of income (Gyönös, 2011).

Thus, it could be argue that plans to increase the period of compulsory could lead, to an extent, in the increase of the ESL phenomenon, as they will clash with the needs of the students to become members of the workforce. In order to give a clearer picture of the various policies that are relevant with ESL phenomenon in Europe, Steedman and Verdier (2010) conducted a comparative study, examining the policies used in three countries France, Germany and England.

## Parameters of school education in Greece

Greece, compared to other countries in the EU can be considered small, both in terms of population as well as in its economic output. It is expected that in the future the phenomenon of ageing of population because of birth deficit, will become more apparent, possibly cause adverse effects (Needs Analysis for Greece, 2015).

In addition, it has to be mentioned that during the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and increasing pace of changes can be observed in most fields of industry, economy, family and society. These changes of course affect education through many ways. The whole situation is very volatile and it is obvious from any external observer (Needs Analysis for Greece, 2015).

Together with that, one has to also consider the geographical features of Greece, with its many isolated islands especially in Aegean and Ionian Sea, and its restricted mountainous parts in Central and North Greece, and consider how this geographical segmentation affects the Greek educational system. There are many isolated regions (especially in winter, when internal transportations are rare since they are hindered by adverse weather conditions) and some of those school units, mainly senior high schools, are far away from big cities (Needs Analysis for Greece, 2015).

## Early school leaving in Greece

Based on data and information collected by the Internet Information System “Myschool” of Ministry of Education in Greece the percentage of early school leavers was reduced from 9% (2014) to 7.9% (2015), placing it under the average of 11% which exists in the European Union (27 countries). It is remarkable that in 1982 the percentage of ESL was 25.2%.

We must also mention that the way Greek educational system has been organized, affects ESL. When this is combined with the demographic data and social characteristics of the resident population of Greece, it indicates further future potential problems. According to 2011’s Population - Housing Census revision of 20/3/2014 the total population is approximately 10.800.000 people. 40% of the population is located in the region of Attica and 10% in Salonica (ELSTAT, 2014). This means that some regions in Greece are effectively isolated and sparsely populated. In some cases, there is only one school unit, especially for senior high schools, far away from the places where the majority of students resides.

## Early school leaving and effects in society

ESL is viewed by many as a phenomenon that can have important economic and social consequences in the wider society. Relatively recent studies such as Brunello and de Paola (2013) have shown however that an additional year of schooling can

increase an individual's lifetime earnings by between 4% and 10%, depending on the circumstances.

Studies such as Belfield (2008) and Psacharopoulos, (2007) have attempted to tackle the costs of ESL and their nature which can be private, fiscal and social. More specifically Belfield uses a cost-benefit analysis for each of those topics. For example:

- Private benefits include the expected gains in earnings and wealth, improved health and life expectancy and higher lifetime satisfaction. From these benefits one should subtract the additional private costs, which include foregone earnings.
- Fiscal benefits include increased tax payments, lower reliance on government transfers and reduced expenditures on criminal justice. If the government subsidizes education, the public costs of additional schooling should be subtracted from expected benefits.
- Social benefits include productivity externalities, the social value of better health and the gains from reduced crime.

Given the benefits of education as well as the costs caused by ESL, it has been shown that the different EU Member States employ different program approaches on the goal to decrease this phenomenon. Thibert (2013) states that most programs focus either on ESL prevention or compensation, which deals with the re-introduction of the youths to the academic standards so that they will join back to the school system. Other European programs, also use a third intermediary step, that of intervention. Generally, countries tend to promote prevention and intervention programs, rather than compensation programs which have been found to be costly and produce fewer results.

In essence, these attempts seem to focus on a pro-active rather than reactive approach when trying to deal with this issue. Furthermore, it has been shown that state policies on ESL tend to focus on specific problems by targeting specific groups of children with special programs, rather than target specific areas. Such children categories are children with special needs, migrants, minorities as well as children who exhibit special intellectual talent, among others (Demeuse et al., 2009).

## Methodological approach of ESL

In the present research, face to face interviews with school directors was also used as research tool. Comparing the method of interviews to the method of questionnaires (an other research tool) that was also used, it can be argued that interviews permit more interaction between the interviewer and respondent and allow the whole conversation to follow new leads as they arise.

Of course the interviewer has the ability to observe as well as listen and approach the experience of people. In addition to that, more complex questions can be used in comparison with other types of data collection (e.g. questionnaire) (Anon, 1997). A great advantage is that there is the ability to gain access to the teacher's behavior and

understand their actions (Seidman, 2013). It has to be also mentioned that according to bibliography, in a research based on interviews the researcher has to establish close relationships with the respondents in order to research the problem in depth.

Twenty directors, ten ex school directors and five school consultant took part in the research (April 2020) by giving interviews. The majority of schools are located in Piraeus, with half of them being afternoon Technical Vocational Schools. Other schools are located in North of Athens and isolated regions of Greece (Evritania, Arcadia, Argolida).

The interviews were semi structured and included both closed- and open- ended questions. The closed-ended questions were associated with whether the directors had participated in an official program by the Ministry of Education about early school leaving or, if not them, any member of the educational staff had done so (Bryman and Bell, 2007). Another question was whether they had noticed ESL in their school unit, or were informed by the educational staff is such phenomenon exists, and of course if the phenomenon has intensified due to the current economic situation in Greece. Then they mentioned the actions they consider as appropriate in order to prevent or reduce the specific phenomenon first of all in their school unit and then in a local level. At last, in the open-ended questions the directors mentioned their personal opinions and attitudes towards ESL. For this project the interviewees' answers will be presented anonymously. The duration of the interview was about 30 minutes and took place in the office of the directors and the consultants.

## Analysis of findings and discussion

According to interviewees, the phenomenon of ESL in Gymnasiums located in Athens is very low because of the compulsory character of the education, but it shows increasing trends in Lyceums in specific regions. The main causes are the economic difficulties in the families due the global economic crisis, parents with low educational level (due to this many students even in A class of Gymnasium didn't have the ability to write and read correctly) and strange family environment (divorces, unemployment, abandoned kids, etc).

Besides that the percentage of ESL is high in vocational education, since there the students are usually above 18 and they must combine work with education. The specific percentage is higher among women whether they are married with children or divorced. Sometimes students drop out because they are disappointed from the high unemployment rates that exist in the Greek labor market. A small percent of them believe that there is a bad connection between Greek education system and labor market, and it has an adverse impact on their decision making.

The majority of directors mentioned that the Ministry of Education has to find proper ways to measure ESL. Since now the data are collected from 'my school'. This system measures ESL rates among students from A class that abandon school. In some cases, in vocational education the phenomenon is observed that students who have completed general education (above 18 years old) continue their studies in

technical education in order to gain an extra specialization in their skills. This group of students has the opportunity to gain an extra degree in only two years, because according to Greek educational laws the starting class for them is the B class., these students often choose abandon school when they have the opportunity to enter labor market. However, the system of ‘my school’ does not include this category of students for its data measurements. Of course in this case we have to deal with school drop-outs rather than early school leavers, however it would be of interest to gather sufficient data for this student category also.

In order to deal with ESL possible solutions reported include cooperation among school, families and social workers. Meaningful conversation perhaps will persuade students and their parents to return to school. In addition, municipalities have to assist families with low income because a main cause of ESL is the fact that many students abandon school in order to enter the work market. Finally, the state should establish new various alternative structures of education in order give students the option to follow them. Such alternative pathways can be the second chance schools or afternoon schools. However, their number unfortunately is currently very low and in some regions, they do not even exist.

For women with children the creation of a kindergarten-like structures inside the school unit, where the mothers/students will have the ability to leave their children during the hours that they are in school. In these structures students will work. This will be affected by giving to students of vocational training institutions (IEK) or technological educational institutes (TEI) the opportunity to work in those structures during their internship periods (usually 6 months). These actions could also be financed through ESPA programs.

A possible solution is to further strengthen the “Mathiteia” structure in vocational education. This structure was first applied in 2016 in order to enable students who have finished C class (all of them are above 18) of vocational education to combine the continuation of their education while they are in the labor market for a period of eight months, during which they get also an income. This structure was applied experimentally during its first year in a few schools and for specific specializations. The Ministry of Education must try to extend this structure to more schools (especially in regions of Greece with high percentage of unemployment) and to all specializations.

According to the interviewee’s opinion, based on previous experience as a director of a second chance school, ESL is bigger in the vocational education where one can observe a high percentage of students that originate from other countries. The main causes are the inability to combine education with work. Even in second chance schools, whose duration is only two years and the lessons take place during the afternoon, a percentage of students can’t achieve to complete them. Another major issue is the small number of second chance schools and their geographical location. Possible solutions to this direction is the foundation of new schools (mainly EPAL and second chance schools) in isolated regions.

## E-learning and education in Greece

It is worth examining the potential of e-learning within the Greek educational system mainly because in other countries this practise is widely used in order to reduce ESL. In e-learning education, the teacher uses technological tools that are web-based in order to allow students who are far away to have access and participate in the educational process. Of course one of the main disadvantages in this approach is that the traditional face to face interaction between the student and the teacher has a significantly lesser impact (Moore et al, 2011).

In Greek secondary education, ICT (information and communication technologies) has changed the teaching process and structure during the last 20 years. Teachers who are familiar to them, or have participated in training programs, have access to resources associated with education that are online. However, it is important that e-learning techniques are combined with face to face education (Anderson, 2005),, according to the Greek laws there is no possibility for a student to attend education via e-learning technologies from his home unless he faces serious health problems. Perhaps new orientations in laws concerning this issue are required.

It has to be further mentioned that in other countries (e.g. USA, Australia) this practise is very common regarding certain isolated regions. One major benefit for the Greek educational system is that by using these e-learning methods for education, the cost for the transportation of students in some regions in Greece (especially in small isolated islands of the Aegean Sea) will be reduced. In these regions, there are schools, especially in primary education, with only one teacher and one student and sometimes in secondary education the number of teachers is bigger than the number of students.

We must mention that the Covid-19 pandemic has affected educational systems worldwide and of course Greece. One major change was that for a period of two months (March – May 2020) we had the distinctive rise of e-learning. Teaching was undertaken remotely through digital platforms (Zoom, Skype Business, Cisco Webex, Microsoft Teams). In the future students who are unable to access live education can attend through platforms.

## Results and Conclusions

Because this was an exploratory research (small sample) the focus was on the discovery of ideas and insights as opposed to collecting statistically accurate data. In this specific research the sample size (35 directors) was very small so conclusive results could not be reached. However certain tendencies were observed and these could be used as a basis for further research.

According to participants responses it seems that ESL is mainly observed among students of vocational education, where many of them are above 18 years old, students who face financial problems in their families and are forced to work in parallel with their education, or students who come from a foreign country.

School directors can have a special role in facing the problem of ESL. In schools where high ESL rates exists they have to step in and take initiatives. More particularly, they could educate their staff to handle the cases of ESL in proper and efficient way, because teachers are not well aware or professionally equipped to cope with this phenomenon. It is also obvious that school directors themselves have to be trained properly from relevant programs developed by the Ministry of Education. School directors, together with their other managerial duties, have to keep track and measure in a consistent manner the ESL rates of their school units. Such metrics could include for example the daily monitoring of the students' absences. Students who have a long-term behavior of absences and low grades should be considered to be in higher risk for ESL, and appropriate, relevant and feasible measures should be established in order to facilitate these students in continuing and completing their studies.

Participants also mention that Greek educational system should become more flexible. It can include cloud technologies and education via e-learning platforms. This practise is followed in Greek universities, and especially in post graduate programs (e.g. Hellenic Open University). This practise is also followed, as it was mentioned in previous sections, in secondary education systems of other countries, such as Australia or USA, to facilitate isolated regions which are far away from school units. In the same manner, e-leaning platforms can also be used in Greece, and especially in areas such as the Aegean islands, or in isolated villages in the central or northern regions. This practice was also followed during Covid 19 pandemic in all schools for a period of two months.

Of course it has to be understood that this solution would be a big innovation for Greek educational system. In order to facilitate the introduction of such innovations, the experimental application of such programs in specific types of schools is necessary in order to test it, use the feedback to improve it and then use it in schools that have high ESL rates. Of course it is obvious that only students who it's proven they are unable to attend classes is an alternative should have the alternative of attending school through e-learning platforms.

Finally school directors, as well as teachers, have to face each ESL case individually. To this direction they must discuss with students who present ESL tendencies, as well as their families. In this discussion, apart from the director and the teachers, social workers should also participate. The main purpose is to persuade the students to return to school and to find a solution in the problems which lead them to ESL.

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