ESL in the EU and Greece

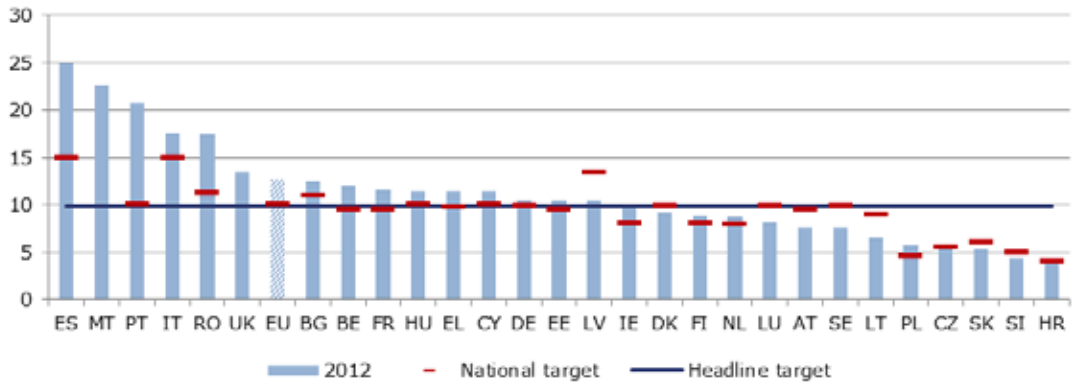
As educators we take upon ourselves the task of offering skills, knowledge, and education to all the students entrusted to us by their parents, aiming to shape not only well-qualified professionals and personalities with adequate background knowledge that will help them make it later on in life but also responsible citizens that will contribute to the common benefit of society locally, nationally, and internationally. Within this framework, we get in daily contact with our students, we work together, we guide them through their studies, and we encourage them to express themselves bringing out what is best in them as students and individuals. However, we can only do that as long as our students remain under the common roof we share and call "school".

Sometimes, students decide or are forced to stay away from educational or training institutions due to specific circumstances. It's a practice society looks so unfavourably on that we have devised the derogatory term "drop-outs" to refer to students who opt to follow this path. Nevertheless, it's such a widespread practice that the scientific term "early school leaving syndrome" has also been introduced to describe and help study it. According to the EU Education Ministers, "early school leavers [are] people aged 18-24 who have only lower secondary education or less and are no longer in education or training. Early school leavers are therefore those who have only achieved pre-primary, primary, lower secondary or a short upper secondary education of less than 2 years." (2)

This definition is somewhat unexpected to most people because we usually identify ESL with drop-outs from compulsory education. For the European Union, though, students who don't move on to complete their education and/or training on a post-secondary education level are considered to be early school leavers. Specifically, there are three categories of early school leavers (2):

1. Young people who have dropped out of school before the end of compulsory education,
2. Those who have completed compulsory schooling, but have not gained an upper secondary qualification, and
3. Those who have followed pre-vocational or vocational courses which did not lead to a qualification equivalent to upper secondary level.

As secondary education teachers, we are mostly preoccupied with the prevention of the first definition of early school leavers. However, early school leavers' numbers become staggeringly large when students covered by the second and third definitions are counted in. According to Eurostat and the data collected by the European Labour Force Survey (1), the country with the highest ESL problem in Europe is Spain, followed by Malta, Portugal, Italy, and Romania in fifth place, well above the EU average of 12.7%. Greece comes in eleventh place, while Poland is one of the countries with the smallest numbers of early school leavers among the 28 member states of the European Union. When Turkey is added into the picture, the percentages of early school leavers reach as high as 40% or even more (3).

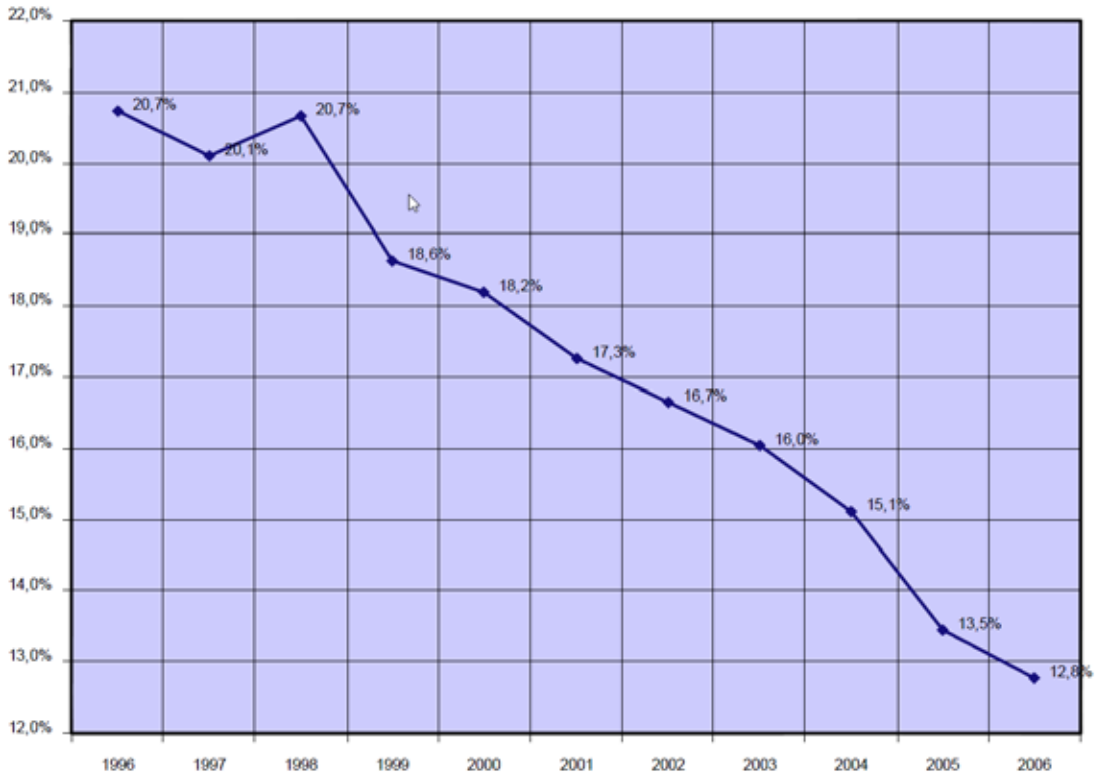


According to the European Commission, the effects early school leaving has on individuals, the economy, and the society at large are significant. Unemployment is the problem that permeates not only the statistical data itself but also the advice we regularly give to students that consider dropping out of school. Sometimes, early school leavers lack basic skills to ever make it into the labour market, risking social exclusion and dependence on social benefits or other kinds of support schemes. However, even if they make it into the labour market, they are most likely to receive minimum wage with detrimental effects on their social life, health, and opportunities to general advancement. Furthermore, their readiness to participate in democratic processes or other collective initiatives is usually limited, marginal, or non-existent (2).

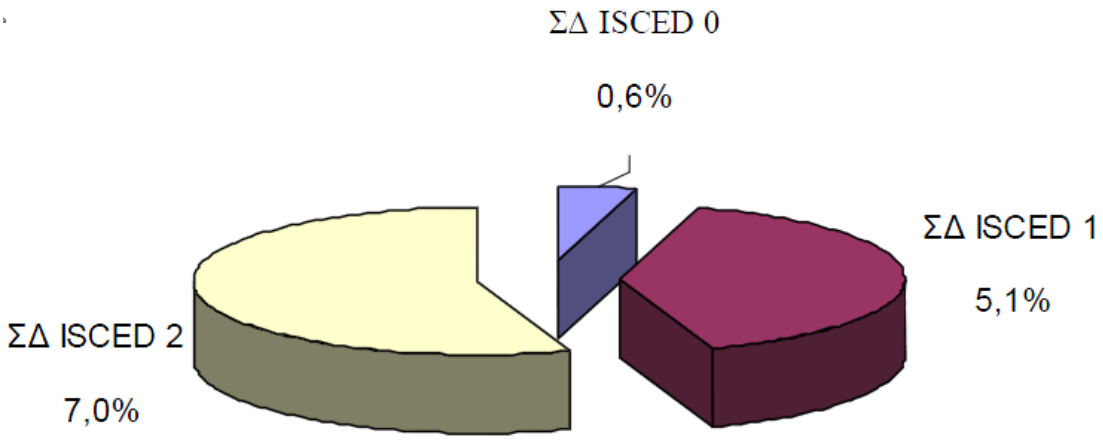
Furthermore, countries with a high percentage of early school leaving will normally also lack a skilled labour force, which can negatively affect their social development and economic growth. According to the European Commission, “reducing the average European rate of early school leaving by just 1 percentage point would provide the European economy each year with nearly half a million additional qualified potential young employees” (2). As a result, early school leaving is an issue that appears high in the EU agenda. Aiming at smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth for the European economy, the European Commission has made the reduction of the number of early school leavers one of its five top priorities in its strategy for Europe 2020. According to the relevant European Commission communication document, we need to reduce “the drop out rate to 10% from the current 15%, whilst increasing the share of the population aged 30-34 having completed tertiary education from 31% to at least 40% in 2020” (4).

This EU policy is supported by national targets set by the member states themselves which need to be met before the EU average drops to the headline target of 10%. As it can be seen, some member states have already met both the national and headline targets while others are still lagging behind and need to work harder to meet the policy requirements by the set date of 2020.

Greece is one of the countries that is near the EU headline target of 10% but hasn’t met it yet. Nevertheless, it was not always so. Some twenty years ago, things seemed pretty bleak as early school leaving was almost double what it is today (5):



Greece has nine years of obligatory schooling, six of which are spent in primary education and three in junior high school. Senior high school comes next with three more years in either general or vocational lyceum. As far as early school leaving in primary education is concerned, it is almost non-existent as it is normally less than 0.6%. Traditionally, most students dropped out of school either when they finished junior high school or during their studies in senior high school or later. According to a study conducted in 2006, ESL in junior high school has dropped from 9.4% in 1996 to 5.1% while early school leavers are at 7% in senior high school (5).



However, the situation is more problematic when the question of minority groups in Greece arises. The Roma or Kale people are a typical minority group which displays high percentages

in early school living both in Greece and in other countries. No actual statistical data is available to record this discrepancy compared to the general population. However, the fact that the Greek Parliament has passed laws to encourage the Roma families to keep their children in school in exchange for social benefits speaks volumes about the extent of the problem. It seems that the Roma children not only drop out of school at an earlier age but they also change schools often as their families move from place to place hindering their progress in education and making adaptation to the school environment difficult. As a result, some 60% of the Roma are illiterate, rendering their social and economic integration into the Greek society rather unlikely and creating a vicious circle of prejudice propagation, racial discrimination, and ESL that seems to be impossible to break.

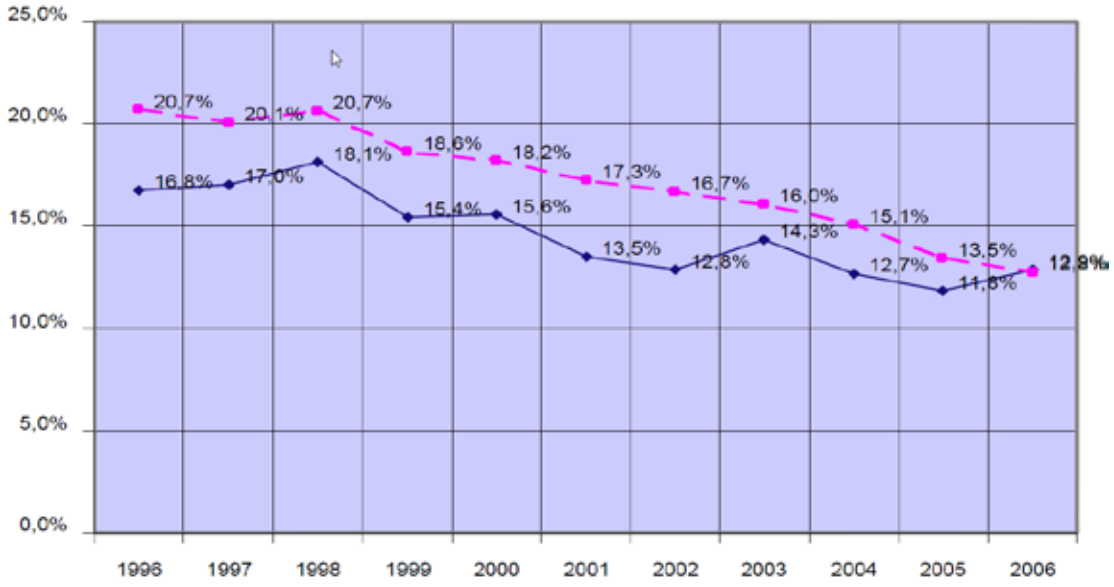
The Muslim minority in Thrace is also a special case in Greece. Minority primary schools in the area are bilingual and students are taught classes in Greek as well as Turkish. However, many students speak a local dialect of Bulgarian origin as their mother tongue, making it difficult for them to benefit from school. Furthermore, even though primary schools are bilingual, secondary education is only offered in Greek with Turkish language classes. As a result, school emigration to neighbouring Turkey has arisen as a solution to the students' inability to effectively attend and complete their studies in the local schools. Instead, in Turkey they had the chance to score higher at the final exams in their mother tongue and enter the university department of their choice. It is also important to mention that Roma families comprise a large portion of the Muslim minority in Thrace and ESL among them is exceptionally high.

Of course, it is not just the minority groups that suffer from higher ESL rates in Greece. Regional differences show that the problem is by no means uniform and the improvement observed over the past two decades has not made the issue acceptable or even manageable throughout the country.

The highest percentages of ESL are observed in Eastern Macedonia and Thrace, the Northern Aegean Islands, Mainland Greece, and the Ionian Islands in the west. It seems strange but areas with a lot of employment opportunities in the tourist industry seem to drag students out of school early (7). Athens and Eastern Attica, Epirus, and Western Macedonia seem to suffer less from ESL, while Thessaloniki and Central Macedonia, where our school is based, seem to be closer to the national ESL average (5).

Thessaloniki is the second-largest city in Greece and the administrative centre of the region of Central Macedonia. According to the 2011 census, the municipality of Thessaloniki has a population of 322,000 while the urban area around it reaches up to 800,000 people. Thessaloniki is the most important economic, industrial, and commercial centre in Northern Greece and its port is a major transportation hub not only for the local area but also for the Balkans. The city was last year's European Youth Capital and is host to one of the oldest and most prestigious higher education institutions of Greece and the largest university in the Balkans, the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, with more than 95,000 students. Nevertheless, it has been hit hard by the current financial crisis that has been pestering Greece since 2008. The local market has seen many shops roll down their shutters permanently while many of Thessaloniki's once thriving industries have been forced to lay off a large percentage of their employees, withdraw from traditional markets, or even cease their business altogether.

Nevertheless, Thessaloniki and the region of Central Macedonia have remained below national average for the most part, as far as ESL is concerned.



However, ESL in the area has had some outburst almost at regular 2-3 year-intervals, which have prevented the area to see the number of students leaving school early drop as fast as the rest of the country. As a result, Central Macedonia now is closer to the country average than ever before (5). Due to the financial crisis, the situation does not seem to be getting any better either. Last year, Central Macedonia topped the Greek charts in ESL at the primary education level as many families decided to emigrate to countries such as Germany or, in the case of immigrants, return to their homelands, taking a number of students the

size of a primary school with them (6). It is, of course, a relief that those students will continue their education at another school in a foreign country but this does not change the fact that they have left the Greek education system for good.

This kind of financially-triggered and migration-oriented early school leaving is difficult to prevent as it is based on family decisions that aim to improve the standards of education provided to the students instead of keeping them away from school. However, there are other factors that push students away from school that we can do something about. Social and educational inequalities are known to influence the environment in which students develop and their performance at school. Lower, underprivileged social classes usually lack the means to offer their members the support their need to perform adequately at school both due to the lack of the necessary financial means as well as because of the fact that the education level of the parents or guardians of the children involved is rather low. Social exclusion and poverty also contribute significantly to the intensification of the phenomenon. Immigrants are especially vulnerable in this respect as they find it difficult to adapt to a system of education and a foreign language they are not familiar with. Even if a student performs well at school on the primary and secondary level, the lack of financial support might keep him or her away from post-secondary education (5).

Even though sex does not seem to play an important role in ESL most of the times, in Greece boys are more likely to drop out of school due to pressure for premature integration in the labour market or because they tend to get more easily involved in drug and alcohol abuse, accidents, etc. Nevertheless, the situation is reversed in the case of Roma girls as they are often encouraged to get married early and start their own family even during their adolescence. Lack of self-esteem is also an important factor in the path to leaving school early. Students with low self-esteem do not build solid social relationships that could help them pursue their goals in life and are, therefore, more vulnerable when ESL issues come into play. Finally, urbanization also seems to play an important role in ESL in Greece. Fewer students manage to graduate from high school or enter a university department if they come from agricultural rather than urban areas (5).

The European Union has tried to tacked and control the problem of ESL on three different levels:

- With Strategic Level Responses,
- With Preventive Strategies, and
- With Reintegration Strategies

On the higher level of the strategic level responses, the European Labour Force Survey has taken upon itself the burden of measuring statistically and monitoring ESL across Europe which the European Commission coordinates policies adopted and measures taken by the member states. Targeted approaches have also been adopted as preventive strategies. Member states have been encouraged to target local or specific groups of people that are at risk of ESL to achieve better and more immediate results. Mentoring or “buddy” programmes have been proposed as a solution for students in transition from school to the labour market. Extra tuition and/or financial support for children with learning difficulties or

underprivileged background has also been adopted by some member states. Teacher training and curricular reforms is one of the structural responses that have been proposed as a measure that could potentially help reduce ESL. It is also part and parcel of our project and one of the reasons why we are here. Guidance and counselling are also considered good practices as a means to keep students at school or facilitate their transition to the labour market. Cooperation with parents or student guardians and the local community is also believed to help combat ESL (8).

These are all issues that we need to discuss during the time we are going to spend together. They are all nice theoretical guidelines but we, as educators and policy implementers, have valuable experience to share and ideas to exchange. Our different backgrounds and education systems are also an important contributing factor that could help us innovate and be more creative in our effort to reduce ESL in our communities. Therefore, let's seize this opportunity to achieve results that could benefit not only each one of our communities but also our common home, which we call Europe.

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