REDUCING THE RISK THAT YOUTH WITH A MIGRANT BACKGROUND IN EUROPE WILL LEAVE SCHOOL EARLY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Even as the European Union (EU) in general moves closer to the EU 2020 target of reducing early school leaving (ESL) to a 10 per cent threshold, wide disparities remain. Varied rates of progress can be seen not only across Member States and regions, but also among social and ethnic groups within the 28 Member States. With the exception of the United Kingdom and Portugal, youth with an immigrant background are over-represented among those who leave school early. Migrant youth therefore remain a target group for EU policy recommendations regarding strategies, policies, and measures to reduce ESL.

In this policy brief the authors focus on empirical findings, theoretical insights, and promising measures that may inform further policy action addressing the disproportionately high level of ESL among youth with a migrant background. The following three questions structure the content of this brief:

➢ What can be learned from empirical research on ESL among migrant youth?
➢ What features of national and regional education systems can prevent ESL among migrant youth?
➢ What specific settings are promising for the implementation of measures to prevent, intervene in, and compensate for ESL among migrant youth?

This policy brief strongly recommends a holistic approach that includes institutional-level support and structural reforms to improve the graduation rates of migrant pupils from upper secondary schools. Such an approach should also build on the social and cultural capital available in migrant communities, rather than only seeking to compensate for (presumed) deficiencies in migrant households.

I. INTRODUCTION

Education is widely seen as fundamental to human existence; access to education is a basic human right. However, while *entry* into a high-quality education is of the utmost importance, policy attention has recently shifted toward the moment of *exit*—that is, graduation. In most EU countries the majority of youth receive at least an upper secondary education qualification. But a significant number of students leave

early (that is, before receiving an ISCED[2] level 3 qualification). In 2013 the overall rate of ESL was 11.9 per cent across the 28 EU Member States—an improvement from 13.9 per cent in 2010.
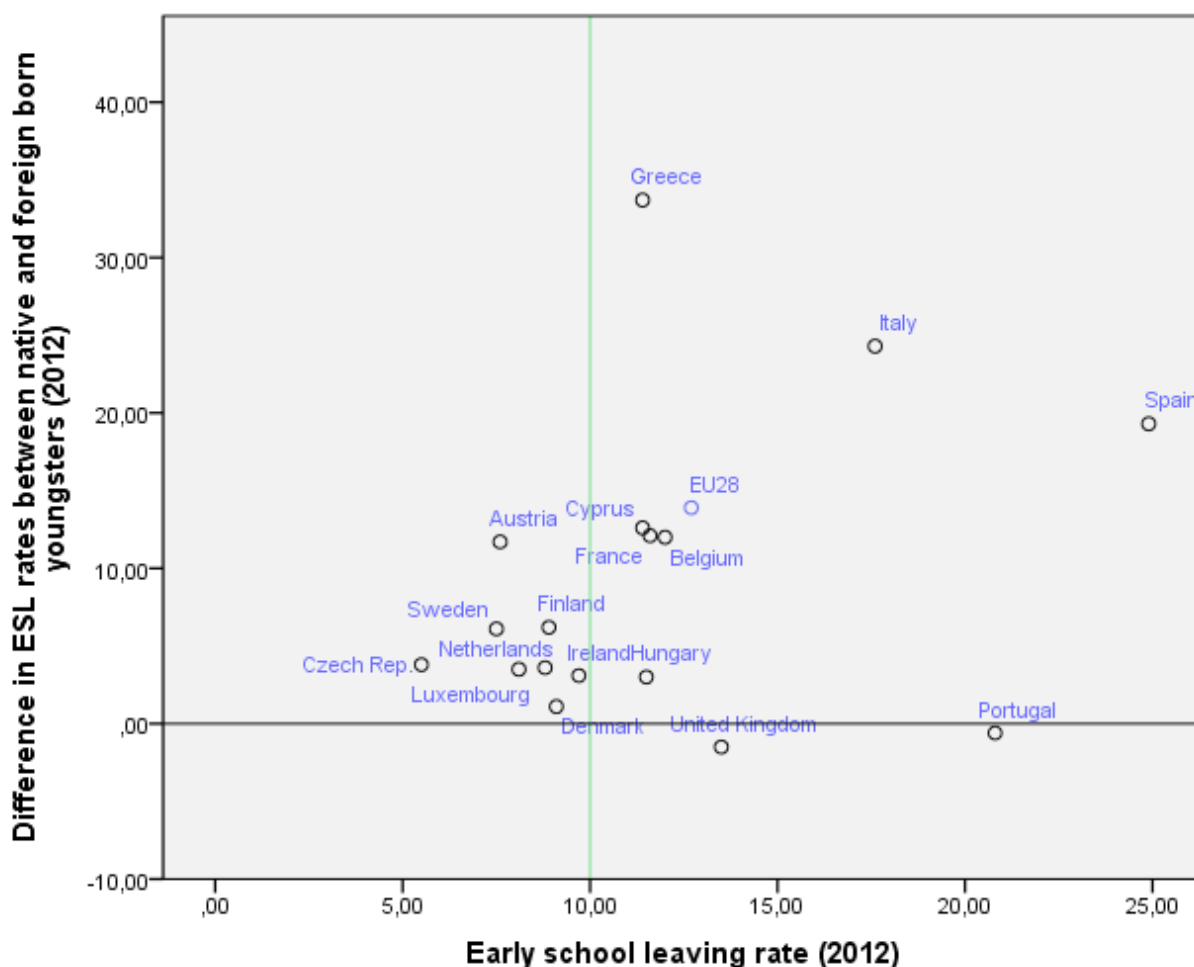
However, these general EU-level figures conceal important differences, often related to the socioeconomic status (SES), migration background, and gender of the youth in question. Figure 1 shows that in most EU countries, foreign-born pupils are over-represented in ESL figures.[3] In 2012 the ESL rate of young people born abroad was, on average, more than double the ESL rate of natives (25.4 per cent in comparison with 11.5 per cent).

Young people with a migrant background are therefore one of two main groups (the other being male youth in general) targeted by EU policy recommendations to re-

duce ESL.[4] Meanwhile, education systems across the European Union vary widely in their structural features and educational policies. These differences, alongside others, contribute to the differences in ESL rates seen across EU Member States and specific EU regions.

Before discussing practices that promise to reduce migrant youths' increased risk of ESL (when compared against the native born), we first introduce current empirical findings on ESL and, in particular, the disadvantaged educational position of youth with a migrant background. Next, we describe how educational policies designed and implemented in different EU Member States can influence ESL rates. In the final section, we present two specific, promising practices at the local policy level that invest in reducing ESL rates. Both measures focus special attention on youth and families with a migrant background.

Figure 1. ESL rates and the ethnic gap in ESL rates in EU Member States, 2012

Note: Excludes Member States without figures on early school leaving rates for foreign-born youth.
Source: European Commission, 'Europe 2020 Target: Early Leavers From Education and Training', accessed 5 February 2015, http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/themes/29_early_school_leaving_02.pdf.

II. GRASPING THE INCREASED RISK OF ESL AMONG MIGRANT YOUTH

Many researchers[5] perceive ESL as a process occurring over time and in a specific context, and therefore not as the isolated decision of an individual youth. Research commonly distinguishes between risk and protective factors. These factors can be situated at different levels, from the individual to the institutional to the structural. In this policy brief we focus on empirical findings and theoretical frameworks explaining why migrant youth are more at risk for ESL than their native-born peers.

A. Empirical findings on the increased risk of ESL among migrant youth

The over-representation of migrant youth in ESL rates across the European Union implies that having a migration background is among the most important risk indicators for ESL. Nonetheless, research suggests that the increased risk of ESL for this particular group can be explained, at least to a large degree, by other factors. The resources (present or absent) in a specific family, community, and school context—together with structural factors—complicate the relationship between a migration background and ESL.[6]

Although the increased risk of ESL among migrant youth can be largely explained by socioeconomic inequalities between migrant and native youth, a higher socioeconomic status does not provide the same protection against ESL for migrant pupils as it does for native pupils.

Empirical findings on the correlations between migration background, SES, and ESL can illustrate these complex relations: although the increased risk of ESL among migrant youth can be largely explained by socioeconomic inequalities between migrant and native youth, a higher socioeconomic status does not provide the same protection against ESL for migrant pupils as it does for native pupils.[7] Even though SES plays a crucial role, it does not alone explain ESL risk.

Students' beliefs, values, and attitudes help us to understand the underlying mechanisms behind the effects of more rigid background characteristics such as gender, SES, and ethnicity. Two psychometric indicators that are widely linked to ESL are pupils' educational expectations and school engagement:

> ➢ *Higher educational expectations are shown to reduce the risk of ESL.* Immigrant pupils are more likely than their native-born peers to be enrolled in schools with a higher share of socially disadvantaged pupils and lower achievement levels,[8] a setting that can lower migrant pupils' educational expectations and induce self-fulfilling prophecies.[9]

> ➢ *School engagement—a multi-dimensional concept that entails pupils' behavioural participation, emotional identification, and cognitive involvement in education—is broadly acknowledged as an important risk indicator for ESL.* School engagement alsois strongly related with social support networks (for example, involving parents, peers, and teachers).[10] A lack of adequate support networks and subsequent negative effects on school engagement may help explain the high ESL rates among migrant youth.[11]

As mentioned, individual risk and protective factors are often linked to pupils' social contexts. The school as an institution is acknowledged to be one of the main contexts explaining ESL. Where secondary schools predominantly serve students with low SES—a factor that in many EU countries correlates to the schools' ethnic composition—educational achievement is often lower.

School composition, however, impacts educational outcomes mainly through effects on the school climate and student-teacher relations.[12] The following findings provide examples of such effects:

> ➢ Positive inter-group relations with peers and teachers significantly decrease ESL rates among migrant students, even after taking into account the negative impact of school segregation.[13]

> ➢ Students who perceive more support from teachers throughout their school career have a lower risk of leaving school before attaining an upper secondary education qualification.[14]

> ➢ Adolescent pupils who receive care and guidance from teachers are more likely to persist through graduation; those who benefit most from such caring and supporting relationships

are students at risk for ESL.[15]

> Feeling accepted by teachers is positively related to the perceived status of students' native language, the feeling of being welcomed at school, and the legitimisation of students' cultural background within the classroom.[16]

> The existence of historically entrenched linguistic and cultural hierarchies among native and migrant groups contribute to teachers' inability to recognise and build on the social and linguistic capital of migrant pupils, which in turn leads to low academic expectations among teachers.[17]

Furthermore, the ESL risk level among migrant pupils can be explained by the presence or lack of support networks and social capital within students' neighbourhood and ethnic community:

> The concentration of young people from poor households in communities characterised by low rates of employment and educational achievement contributes to a form of class and ethnic 'ghettoisation' that increases the risk of ESL.[18]

> A higher neighbourhood density of university-educated co-ethnics effectively support second-generation attainment.[19]

> Strong community ties based on religious, political, or ethnic grounds can generate social and cultural capital that can compensate for the financial capital shortages of migrant families, and help young people to achieve a higher qualification.[20]

> Migrant community organisations and faith groups can compensate for language barriers and parents' lack of familiarity with the educational system by offering additional education support to migrant families.[21]

Further research is needed to explore the role of students' beliefs, values, and attitudes in the ESL process—and how these factors are influenced by various support networks. These factors will now be discussed in the context of a holistic theoretical framework.

B. A holistic approach to decreasing ESL risk among migrant youth

As noted, research posits the choice to leave school as a complex process involving the interactions of actors and factors at the individual, institutional, and structural levels. A comprehensive framework is therefore necessary to address the issue. Traditional social reproduction theories remain relevant in explaining why educational systems to a large extent reproduce existing inequalities and differences.[22] While education is often framed as an equalising and democratic institution whereby pupils can aspire to an achieved status (based on merit) instead of an ascribed status (based on family background), research continues to show

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Box 1. What can be learned from empirical research on ESL among migrant youth?

> Although the increased risk of ESL among migrant youth can be largely explained by socioeconomic inequalities, a higher SES alone does not provide the same protection for migrant pupils as it does for native pupils.

> Pupils' educational expectations and school engagement are important predictors of ESL and are affected by the presence or lack of relevant resources and social networks.

> Promoting a better social mix in schools can support educational outcomes, as it can have positive effects on academic school climate and increase teachers' expectations.

> Investing in supportive student-teacher relations—regardless of the school composition—raises pupils' emotional identification with school and reduces the risk of ESL.

> Migrant/neighbourhood communities and organizations can provide additional support networks and social capital to compensate for possible financial and information shortages within migrant families.

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that youth more often maintain than transcend their families' socioeconomic and educational status.[23]

Whereas in the past socioeconomic differences were mainly used to explain why working-class pupils are more likely to fail in an educational system dominated by the middle class, researchers' focus has since enlarged to take into account the presence of specific ethnocultural groups. Where early research on social reproduction in education posited that working-class families are portrayed as lacking the right attitudes, knowledge, and motivation to become successful, today the cultural background of migrant families is in turn portrayed as problematic and among the main obstacles to student success.[24] Differences in outcomes are thus often explained in deficit terms: what deficiencies (of, for example, motivation or language proficiency) are holding the migrant pupil and family back from success?

However, scholars posit a more complex explanation, whereby the causes for differences in educational outcomes are also sought within the school environment (for example, teachers' expectations and classroom interactions). As research shows that migrant pupils and parents in general value education highly and see it as a means for upward social mobility, more focus should be put on the mismatch between what is valued and rewarded in the family environment and in the school environment.[25]

The historical decline in ESL rates has not been distributed evenly among different social groups.

Moreover, these deficit perspectives are often based upon stereotypes about migrant pupils and parents. It is important to note that stigmatisation can have far-reaching effects on pupils' (dis)engagement in education. If the school environment is perceived as hostile and not as an 'identity-safe' space for the expression of individual identity, this can negatively influence educational outcomes.[26]

As this brief overview of theoretical insights shows, explaining the ESL process is a complex exercise. While empirical research typically isolates a few (f)actors for analysis, theoretical frameworks can help paint a more holistic picture.

Furthermore, theoretical insights on social reproduction and stigmatisation can inform the design and implementation of policy measures that seek to prevent or remediate ESL. In the next section we will discuss how various configurations of EU and national or regional educational policy systems can influence the risk of ESL among socially disadvantaged and migrant youth.

III. THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL POLICY CONFIGURATIONS IN ESL AMONG MIGRANT YOUTH

Macroeconomic research indicates that, historically, economic growth leads to a strong decline in ESL; more public funding for education also plays an important role in this trend.[27] However, the historical decline in ESL rates has not been distributed evenly among different social groups. Mechanisms for reproducing social inequalities and processes of educational stratification underlie the structure of educational systems.[28] Meanwhile, the current economic crisis and high youth unemployment rates in most EU countries have further constrained policies from addressing problems of social and ethnic stratification in educational outcomes, as priority is placed on the needs of the labour market.[29]

A central systemic feature of some EU education systems—and one that furthers the social and ethnic stratification of educational outcomes—is early tracking in secondary education. EU Member States with a more comprehensive system that provides later tracking into academic or vocational educational trajectories tend to have less social divisions across different qualification levels. While overall graduation rates are high in many systems characterised by early tracking (for example, Germany, Austria, and Flanders), socially disadvantaged and migrant pupils are over-represented in vocational tracks and among early school leavers.[30]

A comparative study of second-generation Turkish immigrants in seven EU Member States suggests how educational systems can be modified to combat ethnically stratified educational outcomes by focusing on pivotal points in pupils' educational careers. Maurice Crul and Jens Schneider[31] present the following policy recommendations to increase the educational success of children of migrants:

➢ Encouraging an early start to migrant children's educational careers in quality preschool education can foster language acquisition, and thus promote later educational opportunities.

➢ Postponing educational tracking and offering alternative educational routes to higher education can remediate educational disadvantages among migrant children.

➢ Providing quality apprenticeship opportunities in a dual system can prevent ESL and smooth the transition to the labour market for those youth not pursuing higher education.

Finally, the marketisation of education, the role of parental choice, and socioethnic school segregation are important systemic features affecting migrant youths' risk for ESL. Although some EU Member States (e.g., France and Germany) restrict parental choice on the basis of catchment areas, many European educational systems have become increasingly marketised (e.g., Sweden and Denmark) or have a long tradition of providing parents the freedom to choose their children's school, whether for religious, ideological, or other reasons (e.g., Flanders and the Netherlands). The marketisation of education—that is, increased parental choice and competition among schools—increases school segregation. This is because native-born, middle-class parents are likely to opt out of schools with a concentration of socially disadvantaged and ethnic minority pupils,[32] in effect furthering these schools' segregation—with associated negative effects on student-teacher relations and academic school climate as pointed out above.

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IV. PROMISING EFFORTS TO REDUCE THE RISK OF ESL AMONG MIGRANT YOUTH

The EU Council Recommendation on Policies to Reduce Early School Leaving[33] differentiates between prevention, intervention, and compensation measures. Such measures may be universal or specifically target students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including—but only rarely focusing on—first- or second-generation migrants.

Preventive and intervention measures often address educational achievement, transitions between different segments of the education system, academic aspirations, and parental involvement. In most cases, young people with migrant backgrounds are not specifically targeted by these measures. Nevertheless the following two examples are promising practices that may help reduce the risk of ESL among migrant youth:

➢ The Danish programme *We Need All Youngsters*[34] is based on the observation that young people with a migrant background have significantly lower educational and employment prospects than native-born Danes. The programme combines activities that aim to:[35]

Box 3. What programme features promise to reduce the risk of ESL among migrant youth?

- Preventive and intervention measures can reduce ESL among migrant youth by:
    - supporting better-informed choices by students and their families at pivotal moments in students' educational careers;
    - providing additional educational resources such as extracurricular homework classes;
    - raising aspirations by connecting students with role models who have similar backgrounds and were able to overcome educational and social disadvantages; and
    - promoting trusting relations between schools and parents, thus encouraging both to become partners in supporting the academic careers of community youth.

- Compensatory measures can remediate ESL among migrant youth by:

    - providing individualised support of personal development, work-based learning, and basic educational and professional skills;
    - developing and implementing culturally sensitive outreach strategies by engaging staff who have access to and credibility in migrant communities; and
    - maintaining an encouraging, empowering, and positive approach toward youth.

Source: Authors' research, facilitated by Mentorproject SKC project leaders.

- advocate for better-informed educational choices, by raising awareness among migrant pupils and their parents of possible educational routes and outcomes;
- support educational achievement by offering additional educational resources such as helping disadvantaged pupils with homework; and
- raise aspirations by providing role models who reveal future opportunities to migrant youth as well as advise them in how to face possible adverse circumstances in their educational careers.

The profiles of these role models are particularly interesting: they are young people who are the first in their families to have succeeded in their education (general or vocational). They have struggled with language barriers and overcome academic disadvantages themselves and have often made difficult educational choices while lacking adequate support.[36]

➢ In France the initiative Parent's Tool Box (La mallette des parents)[37] aims to improve parents' engagement in their children's education.[38] The measure was specifically tested in urban areas where a high proportion of pupils have a migrant background. Its main aim is to promote a trusting relationship between schools and parents. Regular meetings are held to ensure that all parents feel comfortable engaging in a dialogue (interpreters are used if needed). This intervention is in particular focused on pivotal

moments in the school trajectory (for example, the transition from primary to lower secondary classes). The initiative provides a structured set of topics to be discussed with parents (for example, how the school and the academic year is organised, how to communicate with children about school, and so on). Schools may choose a method that fits their school context. A rigorous evaluation of this initiative showed a significant decrease in absenteeism and conflicts between pupils and the school.[39]

These measures address many of the risk and protective factors affecting ESL, as outlined in this policy brief. The programmes also acknowledge the importance of making informed choices at pivotal moments in a pupil's school career, and supporting migrant youth in overcoming educational disadvantages while building on the social and cultural capital available in migrant communities.

In addition to preventive and intervention measures, compensatory measures re-engage early school leavers back into education, training, or employment. These measures provide individualised support, often of work-based learning (or other vocational forms of learning) and basic skills education (that is, literacy and numeracy), as well as the development of behavioural traits compatible with education and employment. Again, these measures rarely target migrants but apply to all who have left school early.

Reaching out to early school leavers, meanwhile, is often the most critical issue. A culturally sensitive ap-

proach is found to be essential when engaging with migrant populations. Organisations conducting outreach often engage people who know migrant communities first-hand, who are aware of the specific challenges young people from a given community face, and who have access to and credibility within these communities. Once young people are re-engaged, it is crucial that an encouraging, empowering, and positive approach be maintained.

less, only half of Member States specifically target youth with a migrant background in their national and regional policy actions on ESL. Moreover, to a large extent these specific measures only invest in additional language support.[40]

Once young people are re-engaged, it is crucial that an encouraging, empowering, and positive approach be maintained.

V. CONCLUSION

Youth with a migrant background are over-represented among early school leavers in most EU Member States and are formally recognised as a main target group in EU policy recommendations regarding ESL. Neverthe-

This policy brief strongly recommends a more holistic approach that includes institutional-level support and structural reforms to strengthen the upper secondary graduation rates of migrant pupils. Such an approach should build on the social and cultural capital available in migrant communities rather than only compensating for (presumed) deficiencies in migrant households.

ENDNOTES

1   Both Ward Nouwen and Noel Clycq are researchers in the research project 'Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe (RESL.eu)', funded by the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme. For more, see University of Antwerp, 'RESL.eu – Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe', accessed 5 February 2015, www.resl-eu.org.

2   For more on levels, see UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 'ISCED: International Standard Classification of Education', accessed 5 February 2015, www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/international-standard-classification-of-education.aspx.

3   *Y*-values greater than zero mark a situation where migrant youngsters are over-represented in early school leaving (ESL) rates. The United Kingdom and Portugal are therefore the only EU Member States in which migrant youth are not over-represented.

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