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Early School Leaving in the Context of Policy-making in Hungary



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ABOUT THE PROJECT

The **RESL.eu** project is positioned within the broad topic of Education systems in the 21st century by systematically studying from different angles the issue of early school/training leaving (ESL) in nine European countries, selected for their specific and relevant profiles with respect to this issue (Belgium, United Kingdom, Sweden, Portugal, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Austria and Hungary). The rationale behind this approach is the belief that the high rate of ESL in the EU is a symptom of the traditional education system's inability to adapt to these new realities. The research undertaking aims to provide insights into the mechanisms and processes that influence a student's decision to leave school or training early; as well as into the decision of school leavers to enroll in alternative learning arena's unrelated to a regular school.

ABOUT THE PAPER

Working Papers reflect the on-going work of academic staff members and researchers associated with CPS. They are intended to facilitate communication between CPS and other researchers on timely issues. They are disseminated to stimulate commentary and policy discussion among the international community of scholars. This paper was authored within the project's *Work Package 2*. Within the RESL.eu project, it has been partly published by the Centre for Migration and Intercultural Studies at University of Antwerp.

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**EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING
IN THE CONTEXT OF POLICY-MAKING IN HUNGARY**

Julia Szalai and Agnes Kende

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INTRODUCTION

The large-scale research project ‘Reducing Early School Leaving in the EU’ (RESL.eu) was born on the ground of the collective efforts of researchers in nine EU member states to reveal the causes and perpetuating mechanisms behind the disturbingly high – in certain cases increasing – occurrences of early school leaving (ESL) and to assist in finding relevant policy responses for dwindling down the phenomenon. The initiative was shaped by the widely shared recognition of a close association between the high occurrence of early school failures and the marginalisation and frequent terminal social exclusion among the most vulnerable poor and minority youth groups across Europe. In consideration of these associations, the project takes as its point of departure the acknowledgment that, while ESL is intimately related to poverty and marginalisation everywhere, the immediate causes behind the phenomenon show great variation as well as do the ways of how societies respond with policies and measures within the school system and outside of it. Further, ESL is conditioned by the diverse structural features of the educational systems and the risks involved in it differ with regard to their longer-term implications on young people’s labour force participation and career outlook. By taking into account the great diversity of the causes, the paths of intra- and intergenerational reproduction and the attempts at ameliorating the situation on individual and collective levels,

[t]his project aims to provide insights into the mechanisms and processes that influence a pupil’s decision to leave school or training early; as well as into the decision of school leavers to enroll in alternative learning arenas unrelated to a regular school. Furthermore, the RESL.eu project aims to identify and analyse the intervention and compensation measures that did succeed in transferring knowledge and in keeping pupils in education or training, although they showed high (theoretical) risk of ESL. By framing the complex and often subtle interplay of factors influencing ESL on a macro, meso and micro level; and by deconstructing these different configurations of influencing factors in the specific contexts where they occur, we expect to uncover specific configurations of variables and contexts influencing the processes related to ESL. This will allow us to formulate conceptual models useful for the development and implementation of policies and specific measures to influence ESL, making the project not only relevant to academics, but also to policy makers, school staff and representatives from the civil society. (RESL.eu project documents: Description of Work, 2011)

Although all the nine countries participating in the RESL.eu project¹ subscribed to the agreed European goal of reducing ESL in the targeted age group of 18-24-year-old youth below 10 per cent by 2020, it turned out within a short while that the actual conceptualisation of ESL within the country

1 The nine countries participating in the RESL.eu research project are: Austria, Belgium, Hungary, the Netherlands, Portugal, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

contexts and also the scope of policies that governments consider as anti-ESL interventions vary to a large extent. Hence, it seemed appropriate to devote the first phase of the research to exploring these differences in ESL policies in a systematic way.

This Working Paper grew out of this first research phase. In this phase we made an attempt to present in an overarching framework the co-existing definitions that the Hungarian authorities use for the external purposes of negotiations with Brussels in the process of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) on issues of education and training and those concepts and methods that have been developed for domestic applications and that primarily target the at-risk groups of 14-17-year-old adolescents on the verge of dropping out of schooling.

In what follows we aim to show how ESL has been taken on board in national- and local-level policy-making and how tackling the phenomenon has become the leading drive of certain public and civil educational initiatives in Hungary.

As will be demonstrated in detail, these policies and practices are characterised by a good deal of ambiguity. On the one hand, Hungary as a member state of the European Union subscribed to reduce the ratio of ESL youth below 10 per cent by 2020. In line with this goal, measuring the ratio of early school leavers in the 18-24-year-old age group has become part of the yearly statistical reporting on education and it also has been developed as one of the core indicators of monitoring the country's educational performance, while it has provided a yardstick in the elaboration of country-specific targets in EU-level OMC on education and training. On the other hand, a strange duality has evolved: while occupying an important aspect in external relations, the concept of ESL is entirely missing from domestic policy-making and also from the public discourse on tensions and problems in education and training. Instead, there are two clusters of concepts that navigate the evolving policies and programmes that have a direct relationship to early school leaving.

First, it has been widely recognised by experts and teachers alike that *dropping out* in the last phase of compulsory education (affecting mainly the 14-17-year-old population and relating to structural problems in vocational training) has been on an increase.² Second, the complexity of factors behind the *educational failures* of Roma youth manifesting itself in the intergenerational reproduction of a low level of schooling and the lack of qualifications are considered to be a prime area for policy and action for reducing educational inequalities and exclusion from quality schooling as well as for moving toward inter-ethnic integration.

It follows from the indicated duality of the concepts and approaches that neither the target groups nor the policies for reaching out are harmonised between the European and the national/local levels. While Hungary's yearly reports on ESL recurrently show relatively low rates (around 11.5 per cent) of ESL among the 18-24-year-old cohort, these favourable figures leave in the dark the worsening trends of falling enrolment and increasing dropping out in vocational training, and do not address the intensification of the harsh segregation of Roma children in primary education (and the consequential deterioration of their competence indicators and the high occurrence of class repetition and early leave among them). The departure between the external and internal framing of the problem induces a rather disturbing divergence in policy focuses and also in the recommended means for improvement. From

2 While the phenomenon has been widely and unanimously recorded by practitioners, teachers, regional educational offices and local labour offices, we do not have exact statistics about the numbers and the socioeconomic, gender and ethnic composition of the dropout population. Instead, some expert estimates based mainly on the sharp drop of the number of students in the second and onward years in vocational training provide an insight into the magnitude and the structure of the phenomenon.

a European-level approach to ESL, it is issues of higher education and the various forms of tertiary-level continuation of vocational training that are in the centre as those domains where schooling for the 18-24-year-old group should be meliorated by various means. At the same time, the complexity of problems ranging from poverty to segregation and to deprivation from the right for educational continuation is seen affecting the younger group of youth (the 14-17-year-olds) and, especially, Roma among them. The national- and local-level policies and measures that are recommended emphasise the primacy of early childhood education and care, and thus focus on preschools and primary education. At the same time, these latter policies can establish a bridge toward understanding ESL: in accordance with the invigorating European-level expert debates about the phenomenon, interest in early childhood education and in complex measures against poverty and social exclusion has been on a rise in domestic research and planning (in accordance with similar developments across Europe).

Given the above briefly described duality (that we will introduce in detail below), this Working Paper intends to show both trends. While we demonstrate how ESL has appeared in governmental materials facilitating the OMC process, we also present a ‘translation’ of the concept as it appears in key domestic educational policy documents. Thus, we introduce and discuss the recent governmental documents on a ‘national strategy of education’ and on the ‘strategy for Roma inclusion’. We will show how the issues of dropping out, segregation, and exclusionary educational inequalities are broken down into their constituent parts, such as poverty, ethnicised exclusion (racism), social and territorial inequalities and their manifestations in poor educational performance and the giving up of studying.

In order to put ESL and the related domestic phenomena into a dialogical context, in addition to considering the key documents mentioned above and the reflections on them that emerged in the academic discourse of recent years, we interviewed a group of experts, policy-makers and practitioners who have been participating in shaping recent ESL policies at the European level (or have provided expertise to the process), and/or who played an important role in specifying goals in domestic policy-making to tackle ESL in its local manifestations. Our local-level interviewees also provided useful information about some new initiatives within their sight, as well as helped us in understanding the sources, motivations and forms of resistance and opposition to such attempts.

We are grateful to the following people for helping our work by giving an interview on ESL and its ambiguous reception by key actors in education and training:

European level:

- Dr. KG³: Member of the European Parliament (Socialist faction); member of the Education and Employment Committee and also of the Human Rights Committee. Earlier Minister of Social Affairs (2002-2006)

National-level decision-making:

- Mr. PR: Advisor to the former Minister of Education (2002-2010); currently involved in shadow-governmental research and development in education

National-level administration of education/training:

- Mr. TB: Vice-president of the Hungarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (since 1993), where he is the Chief Administrator of Vocational Training Schools and Programmes

3 We will refer to our interviewees by the initials of their names.

Local-level expertise:

- Mr. GM: researcher and senior advisor on reforming vocational training; also a participant in the Expert Group preparing a national strategy on ESL
- Dr. MB: expert and manager of the most successful local-level Springboard Programme for combating ESL (with recent dissemination of the Programme in a number of other EU-member countries)

Local-level practice:

- Mrs. ZRH: regional principal supervisor on education (in a northern Hungarian school district that is densely populated by Roma in deep poverty)
- Mr. JV: director of a regional vocational school with a special scheme to reduce dropping out among Roma and poor adolescents

The interviews followed the agreed guideline used in all the nine participating countries of the RESL.eu project. However, the general interview guide was complemented with country-specific questions on the ongoing reform in secondary-level education and vocational training, and further, detailed inquiries were introduced to reveal the various overt and covert forms of resistance and opposition regarding the implementation of national- and local-level policies for reducing dropout rates and under-education. Due to the lack of data about students who have dropped out, their families and the broader environment, we mainly relied on the facts, trends and figures revealed during the interviews with our invited experts. The case is similar with the phenomenon of resisting or opposing policies and measures for tackling ESL: we largely drew on our experts' personal experiences and their broad knowledge about the hidden aspects of school policies regarding ESL and the schools' controversial stands vis-à-vis the students who are involved. As will be shown, these personal experiences are diverse enough to signal a wide range of controversial interests and motivations behind the local practice of letting 'problem students' disappear from the schools' sight and tacitly agreeing to their early departure from schooling. At the same time, our interviewees' personal experiences also provided us with a rich source of good and innovative practices focused on developing methods of non-conventional teaching with the clear aim of keeping such 'problem students' in education. As we will discuss in detail below, these innovative projects usually grew out of new forms of cooperation between schools, training institutions and local civil organisations. A closer look at the constituents of their success highlights how educators develop new ways of instruction and assessment and how they capitalise on students' daily experiences (both within the school environment and outside of it) to make attempts at diverting anti-school attitudes and at developing interests in continuing education and training according to the mainstream routines.

CHANGES IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM SINCE THE MILLENNIUM

The history of the European-level conceptualisation of ESL considers the Lisbon Strategy of 2000 as its point of departure. The Strategy was the first agreed official document of the then member states of the European Union that drew attention to ESL as a major hindrance to achieve the primary goals

of developing Europe a leading actor of producing and reproducing high-quality knowledge and of making it a most competent player in the sharp competition on a global scale. Although the Strategy has been refined during the subsequent years, it is still the 2000 phrasing of the problem that members (including also the ones joining the EU later) consider in measuring progress and highlighting new tensions and problems.

Since Hungary subscribed to the Lisbon Strategy of 2000 in the process of accession, two ideologically contradictory strands of educational policies have been enforced in the domestic context. On the one hand, the administration of public education has been decentralised by putting it into the hands of local governance; on the other hand, important steps were taken to reduce educational inequalities on ethno-social grounds by centrally initiated policies and programmes of integration and inclusion.

In a cross-country comparison, Hungarian public education qualified as one of the most decentralised systems until 2010, where, in the three-pole political power field formed by the state, local self-governments and institutions, an equilibrium developed guaranteeing considerable authority to institutional licenses.

The legal provision of public education in Hungary has been in a constant process of change since the early 1990s. (...) The Act on Public Education declares, on the one hand, that it is the child's right to receive education corresponding to his or her abilities, interests and capacities, and also to receive education that corresponds to his or her national or ethnic origins. Parents, on the other hand, have the right to choose a suitable educational institute for their child. This right of the parents is now blamed by many experts for the increased segregation of Roma and marginalised non-Roma children. Moreover, (...) the parents' right of free choice of school obstructs the right for quality education in the case of Roma and socially disadvantaged children.. (Molnár and Dupcsik, 2008)

After the 1980s, with the establishment of the system of local self-governance in 1990, the adoption of the Act on Public Education in 1993 and its several subsequent modifications, and the adoption of the National Curriculum in 1996, a decentralised and liberalised public education system developed that constrained the scope of activity of governmental educational policies as well. This system, on the one hand, provided for the possibility for individual schools' adopting to local needs, while, on the other hand, making it difficult to implement a consistent integration policy and to handle unevenness in professional work and service providing. (Szendrey, 2012)

With the 2003 modification of the Act on Public Education, the educational governance in power after 2002 wanted to respond to the severe problems regarding fairness and equal opportunities that had gradually intensified since 1990 until raising the attention of the international community. During the governing cycle between 2002 and 2006 Hungary became a member of the European Union (in 2004). The acquired membership provided an opportunity for the educational sector to initiate governmental interventions based on European Union funds in the fields corresponding to community politics and related community regulations. Motivated partly by European Union requirements and partly by internal efforts, a lifelong learning strategy (Ministry of Education, 2005) was prepared by 2005. This step can be considered as an important milestone in developing anti-ESL measures by contextualising the problem within the first comprehensive strategic document adopted at high level (Halász, 2006a).

One characteristic of the Hungarian education system that concerns the ESL problem is that

[t]he system of financing and the institutional system of public education provide very few opportunities for disadvantaged students to access extra resources – in particular, pedagogic services – necessary for their inclusion, sometimes accessing even the provision of basic services is involving difficulties. (...) Within the framework of a free choice of school, it is impossible to implement a consistent policy of equality in education or operate systems of quality control and accountability with appropriate orientation, and there is no institutional guarantee for schools educating the most deprived children to provide quality pedagogic services. (Varga, 2008)

Between 2002 and 2010 (the period of a Socialist-Liberal coalition in power) the reinforcement of a more or less liberal educational policy was complemented by attempts at reducing inequalities and segregation via centrally launched programmes of integration. The country's poor PISA results demonstrating huge inequalities in performance as well as the extremely selective character of the educational system – in particular, the reinforcement of the segregation of Roma children – triggered the introduction of a complex set of interventions supporting educational integration. This policy of the national educational authorities was closely related to the issue of ESL discussed here, since the vast majority of early school leavers and young dropouts are from Roma origins or come from extremely poor backgrounds. The policy of integration, consisting of desegregation measures and the support of multi-ethnic arrangements in education coupled with pedagogic methodological innovation, was fully in accordance with the requirements of the European Union, although the vocabulary of ESL was not used at the time.

With the change of government in 2010, the incoming Conservative government launched an educational programme that has been based on dual centralisation. On the one hand, the state took away the former licenses of the local self-governments in deciding on profiles, admission policies, development and financing of the local public schools; on the other hand, the decision-making power and the authority of the school principals regarding professional, organisational and practical matters was substantially curtailed while they became completely deprived of their earlier right to run an autonomous policy of employment.

The new government saw it necessary to organise the field according to new concepts with regard of the entire public and higher education. This involved the massive transformation of the regulative background determining the functioning of public education institutions in accordance with a new Act on National Public Education (Act no. CXC) , adopted in December 2011, while the change of content is regulated in the new National Curriculum. The main objectives, directions and measures of the reforms in Hungarian public and higher education and their connection to the educational targets of the Europe 2020 Strategy were signalled by references to the European initiatives on lifelong learning while the aims of reducing educational inequalities were seen to be reached primarily via an increase in the role of early childhood education. The National Reform Programme (NRP) of 2011 sets these goals in the following way:

- a) The public education system promotes the development and improvement of the competencies necessary for lifelong learning, the reduction of drop-out rates and the enhancement of the level of qualification. In other words, it assists the improvement of the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of public

education. ... regulatory solutions prescribe that every child is obliged to attend school until the age of 16, which does not mean that the pupil is removed from education in the school system; the prevention of early school leaving is served by the reinforcement of education in early childhood, modern pedagogical methods and, in the case of groups exposed to the risk of dropout, targeted programmes for the disadvantaged and children with special educational needs (skills development preparatory courses, scholarship programmes, Arany János programme for assisting continued education), while dropouts may re-integrate into education with the support of the designated component of the Bridge Programme that is designed for those beyond the mandatory school attendance age and the Second Chance programmes.

- b) In the interest of preventing social exclusion and promoting success in school, provides for the reinforcement of education in early childhood, the organisation of integrated education (sessions in small groups assisting differentiated development), correctional solutions (Bridge Programmes) and talent fostering. (NRP, 2011)

In terms of the rhetoric used in the Programme, the government's new educational administration maintained an unbroken continuation with the past. However, a closer look at the manner of governance, the flow of finances and the ordering of hierarchical tasks reveals deeply rooted changes that essentially aim to cut back the autonomy of the local educational authorities and the schools while strengthening the ideological and managerial power of the central state.

As a crucial step into the new direction, the system of maintenance and financing of public education institutions has been fundamentally changed: as of January 1, 2013, schools managed by local governments have been transferred to the direct control of the state.

The coming into power of the new government in 2010 also brought radical changes in the organisation of education, in particular in the field of vocational training. The main changes in education directly related to the issue of ESL include the following: reduction of the compulsory school age from 18 to 16 years of age; reestablishment of the 'dual VET model'⁴; and the launching of the Bridge I and Bridge II Programmes.

The Bridge Programmes for providing education and training outside of the public school system but in close collaboration with local schools were set up to reduce the educational failures of students at the verge of dropping out or disappearing from the education system. The Programmes were conceptualised and set in motion by the Public Education Law of December 2011 and were seen as complementary elements of mainstream education. The Bridge Programmes represent a form of training in the school system which provides assistance for poorly performing pupils in elementary education and offers a chance to those unable to complete their elementary studies to continue schooling at the secondary level. Students below the mandatory school attendance age who completed their elementary studies but had not gained admission to a secondary school may continue their studies in the framework of the Bridge I Programme. The training provided in this Programme offers the students the chance to catch

4 In the dual VET model, vocational school programmes run for three years, simultaneously providing general education as well as vocational education and training, as opposed to the preceding four-year (or 2+2) programme, in which two years of general education was followed by two years of practical training.

up on missing fundamental skills and competencies that are necessary for the continuation of studies. If a student below the mandatory school attendance age concluded his/her studies at the primary level but does not wish to continue studying in an 'ordinary' secondary school, the given elementary school initiates the pupil's admission to the Bridge II Programme. The Bridge II Programme is meant to prepare pupils failing to complete their primary level schooling by the mandatory school attendance age with continuing education in vocational training. The training provided in the Bridge II Programme motivates learning and develops the skills necessary for the acquisition of an occupation.

The public education and training system in Hungary as framed by the new Act on Public Education (2013)

Type of education/training		Admission requirements	Grade level	Age group (years of age)
Primary	Pre-primary (preschool) (ISCED 0)	none (compulsory)	none	3-5
	Primary school (ISCED 1)	none (compulsory)	1-4	6-9
	Lower secondary school (ISCED 2)	none (compulsory)	5-8	10-14
Secondary	Secondary technical school (4-year program)	basic education certificate + entrance examination	9-12	14-18
	Grammar school I (4-year program)	basic education certificate + entrance examination	9-12	14-18
	Grammar school II (6-year program)	certificate of grade 6 in lower secondary + entrance examination	7-12	12-18
	Grammar school III (8-year program)	certificate of grade 4 in primary + entrance examination	5-18	10-18
Vocational ⁴	Special vocational training¹	none	9-11 (tentative)	14-17
	Bridge II (ISCED: none) ²	none	none	14-17
	Vocational I training (Bridge I) (ISCED 3C/2C) ³	basic education certificate + entrance examination (conditional)	9-11	14-17
	Vocational II training (ISCED 3C/2C)	basic education certificate + entrance examination	9-11	14-17

Notes for the diagram

1. *In special vocational programmes the number of years is not regulated by law; it is defined by the special framework curricula applied by the institution.*
2. *Bridge II: one-year-long special catching-up programme for students aged 16 or over without the primary school graduation certificate but completed six years, providing career orientation and a partial qualification (ISCED 2C) in order to obtain the competences necessary for entering a vocational training programme or the labour market.*
3. *Bridge I: one-year-long preparatory and career-orientation programme for students who have obtained a primary school graduation certificate but were not admitted to secondary education. Prepares students for the entrance examination to upper-secondary education.*
4. *Graduates of vocational schools will be able to obtain the secondary level graduation certificate in a two-year programme. They can then obtain an OKJ (National Qualifications Register) vocational qualification of a higher level in VET (Vocational Education and Training) training, providing service for two to three years of secondary vocational schools. Or, having passed a master craftsman examination (mestervizsga) and having worked at least for five years, they will be able also to pursue higher education studies in a field that matches the sector of their VET training.*

All the three new important elements of recent changes in the school system (dual vocational school programmes, the Bridge Programmes, and the lowering of the age of mandatory school attendance) are subject to heated debate in the national professional discourse as well as internationally. The views are rather polarised when assessing whether the new system would be beneficial regarding the old tensions and shortcomings of vocational education that manifested themselves in mass educational failures and large-scale dropout among the students, or, contrarily, whether the changes would result in even more drastic segregation and the pushing out of young people from the educational system earlier than before. Given that the programmes effectively start in 2013/2014, their impact on ESL cannot be assessed yet.

At the same time, in order to understand the context of the new regulations, it is important to know that the previous national educational policy – claimed by educational experts to be more ‘in conformity with the EU’ – was only partially successful because it lacked the necessary support. Although enjoying political consensus in professional circles, the politics of integration was unpopular among many teachers and parents and its implementation was vehemently opposed by society and school staff. The present, right-wing Conservative government argues that it is responding to the ‘social demand’ when it refrains from forcing integration and places greater emphasis instead on the support services promoting remedial education. Yet it is too early to determine to what extent the results of the two political approaches will differ in terms of dropout.

THE VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (VET) SYSTEM

The immediate antecedent of the current VET system emerged after World War II, within the framework of a new nationalised public education system. The majority of skilled workers were trained in ‘skilled workers’ training schools’ (*szakmunkásképző iskola*) that offered short-term (two- or three-

year) training programmes. Apprenticeship training was integrated into the formal school system in 1969, and together with this, the legal status of apprentices became identical with that of other students. ‘Secondary technical schools’ (*szakközépiskola*, SZKI) were set up by the 1961 Education Act in order to train skilled workers and also provide them with a secondary school graduation certificate (*érettségi bizonyítvány*) that allows access to tertiary and higher level studies. Four-grade ‘technical schools’ (*technikum*) were set up in 1950-51 to provide access to further studies as well as to the labour market in medium-level management positions or jobs involving skilled works. However, after 1969 these schools were transformed into ‘secondary technical schools’ for the most part, and a few were reorganised as technical colleges. The systemic changes of 1989 brought along profound alterations in the economy by transforming the earlier system of central planning into a market-regulated one and by swiftly modifying the corresponding social relations. These radical changes fundamentally affected the conditions and the entire environment of vocational education and called for new tasks of VET. The 1990s were characterised by the expansion of secondary (general) and higher education at the expense of ‘skilled workers’ training schools’ and their successor ‘vocational schools’ (*szakiskola*, SZI). Although the structure of VET was also transformed in the second half of the 1990s (general education was extended until grade 10 or 12 and as a result, VET was partly moved to post-secondary level in ‘secondary technical schools’, SZKI), while a new form of VET was introduced in 1998 at ISCED 5B level, the prestige and attractiveness of VET continued to decrease. ‘Vocational schools’ (SZI) have by now become the repositories of disadvantaged students with very poor prior education and motivation for learning. These students are usually the victims of failures on the earlier educational levels that proved to be unable to neutralise the devastating effects of social inequality. At any rate, besides uncertainties in functions and tasks, the concentration of ‘problem students’ has also importantly contributed to the ever-decreasing effectiveness of VET (ReferNet Hungary, 2011).

The central idea of a dual vocational system is to combine working and studying in a simultaneous way. This ‘work therapy’ is thought to help young people to successfully join in the world of labour or to continue on a lifelong learning course.

While the recent measures (the lowering of the compulsory education age, reintroduction of the three-year-long dual vocational training programme) intend to help young people to ‘enter the realm of labour’, the goal is considered unviable by some professionals who argue that without appropriate training and work experience it is virtually impossible to find a job. Yet the new Act on Public Education was passed despite the fact that the background report (Joó, 2011) prepared for the draft legislation states, too, that exiting from public education at the age of 16 will constitute a severe problem.

In this context, it is widely debated whether the age of 14 is too early to choose one’s career path or if it can be considered the right point in time. At any rate, it has to be noted that before the re-introduction of the dual vocational education system, students had two more years after concluding the 8th grade to make a choice. However, the problem apparently is not only timing. According to the European practices, in most countries, students choose a career at the age of 14, and if the student’s school performance and motivation is to become a skilled worker, and if his/her family supports this goal, the age of 14 is the right time to start down this path.⁵

The heated emotions around the new regulations of VET are reflected in a frequently raised argument that this new system ‘trains slaves’. Despite its exaggeration, the claim points to some serious

5 At the same time, later corrections by transference to secondary (and higher) education are provided in most of these systems, while the corresponding building blocks and routes are lacking from the Hungarian system of public education.

shortcomings of the current system that may keep students caught in a very narrow circle of potential occupations. It goes without saying that it is Hungary's interest to train computer-literate, foreign-language-speaking skilled workers. However, little has been implemented of such a far-fetched vision so far. Hence, although the three-year-long vocational system is a closed system lacking educational and training programmes toward such new ends, there is a broad consensus that it is important to create flexible paths that provide a chance for students to pass the secondary school examination in another type of school. But such calls for flexibility have remained on paper thus far, and the forms and paths have not yet been worked out. The shifted and recurrently unmet expectations increase frustration and contribute to seeing VET as the source of widespread failure. It is in this context that uncertainties accompanying the 2012 (re)introduction of the dual training system have come to the fore: there seems to be a pressing need to determine whether a three-year-long training period is long enough across all vocations to provide adequate preparation for learners to enter the labour market. The first indications call for some differentiation; however, no such systematic assessments have taken place so far.

The situation of vocational training, i.e. the kind of education providing only vocational certificates, has become critical over the past 30 years with respect to equal opportunities. About 3-5 per cent of the students finishing primary school do not go on to further study, while about 5-10 per cent of those entering secondary education will become early school leavers. A significant number of these students drop out of vocational schools. Economists estimate that 20 per cent of working-age people enter the labour market with very poor knowledge and skills as well as possessing a low level of adaptability: that is, these people have not acquired the skills and routines of how to learn at school and, consequently, they face huge difficulties in following the changing conditions and requirements in the realm of work, or fail to do so at all.

The proportion of young people leaving education and training early is lower (11.2%) than the EU average of 13.5%. This can partly be explained by the expansion of secondary education and the opportunity to acquire the first vocational qualification free of charge in full-time education. The fact that around 95 per cent of students pass the secondary general or the vocational examination should also be considered. Similarly to other East-Central European countries, the percentage of the population aged 20 to 24 having completed at least upper secondary education has been permanently higher in Hungary than the EU average. Nevertheless, the relatively high rate of early school leavers is a serious problem, particularly in 'vocational schools' (SZI). As research studies confirm, the Hungarian education system has become exceedingly selective and polarized. Disadvantaged students are more likely to end up in 'vocational schools' that are unable to compensate for their drawbacks, and thus produce high drop-out rates contributing to the reproduction of inequalities. (...) Despite various measures in recent years to increase participation in adult education and training, rates have remained far below the EU average, with a downward trend since 2004. The national target by 2013 – as opposed to the EU targets of 12.5% for 2010 and 15% for 2020 – is 8%. As regards gender, fewer men tend to partake in lifelong learning (LLL) than women, and the gender gap is significantly wider than in other countries. One of the reasons for these low figures is that adult learning activity is concentrated in the more educated and younger population who tend to be more motivated to be trained. (Bükki et al., 2012)

TB, the vice-president of the Hungarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, gives an account of the problems of VET in the following way:

There is a hope that the dropout rate will be much lower as the students do not have to study hated subjects for another two years after the 8th grade, but they can start working right after the 8th grade (the highest number of dropout cases happen in the 9th and the 10th grade). The previous 2+2 years system is not appropriate for these children, who are poor, mainly having Roma origin, no hygiene, etc. The only solution is to put them in a disciplined world and teach them basic things they did not learn in their families. Attending a dual vocational school and getting a vocational examination is the dropout prevention policy in Hungary. There are no tools to influence the primary and lower secondary education to improve children's basic competences, which is the fundamental problem of the vocational training system. The Bridge Programme represents the possibility to 'clear' the vocational schools of the most problematic and hardly teachable students. The original idea behind the Bridge Programme is to increase the number of students in vocational schools, while decreasing the number of students in grammar schools, and exclude the most problematic students in the whole system by putting them in the Bridge Programme. Reducing compulsory school age from 18 to 16 is a good idea because children spend too much time at school. There are vocational training programmes that are only two years long, so children have a possibility to get a vocational certificate before they reach the end of compulsory school age. Of course, it is not an aim that children leave the school system at the age of 16, but school is a place of hard work and not a place for hiding unemployment.

The other interviewees, on the contrary, are on the opinion that vocational schools do not have any disadvantage compensation policies. Without a good motivating scholarship system and without purposeful pedagogical services and assistance for students in need, the attractiveness of the vocational schools and the rates of dropout cannot be improved.

GM, who has been working in the Expert Group preparing a national strategy on ESL, talks about the monopolistic power of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, representing an opposite approach to the tackling of ESL as compared to the pedagogical profession and also to the views of all other experts interviewed in this research.

The Chamber's power is monopolistic⁶ in defining what are the vocations that are in need – this is clearly a hidden support to enterprises (those lobbying efficiently at the Chamber).

6 “From 2012, the institution assisting the ministry responsible for VET and adult training in tasks related to development, coordination, research, information and counselling services operates as the VET and Adult Education Directorate of the National Labour Office (Nemzeti Munkaügyi Hivatal, Szakképzési és Felnőttképzési Igazgatóság, NMH SZFI). (...) The role of the Hungarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Magyar Kereskedelmi és Iparkamara, MKIK) has been increasingly significant; it has become a key actor in shaping VET policy and has been assigned duties to perform following its 2010 agreement with the government. The MKIK is now responsible for developing core curricula and examination procedures for the majority of qualifications preparing for blue-collar jobs; participates in the organisation of VET examinations; and performs quality assurance functions, among others, in cooperation with national economic interest representation organisations. (...) At national level, social partners are involved in various advisory councils set up under the law: (a) the National Economic and Social Council (Nemzeti Gazdasági és Társadalmi Tanács, NGTT), a multi-sided forum for strategic VET issues; (b) the National Vocational and Adult Training Council (Nemzeti Szakképzési és Felnőttképzési Tanács, NSZFT), a consultative-advisory body to the minister in charge, participating in OKJ development and allocation of funds and resources; (c) the National Qualifications Committee (Nemzeti Képesítési Bizottság), advising OKJ development. (...) The county/capital (until 2012: regional) development and training committees (megyei/fővárosi fejlesztési és képzési bizottságok, MFKB) play a very important advisory and consultative role in VET financing and development” (Bükki et al., 2012).

Furthermore, at many places it is the 'old' workers who found their way to vocational training and lobbied for old-fashioned programmes. These do not serve the students' future, but the sustenance of the 'old' staff, providing them a living as opposed to unemployment or early retirement.

THE IMPACT OF THE LISBON STRATEGY ON HUNGARIAN ESL POLICY

The Lisbon Strategy intended to deal with the low productivity and stagnation of economic growth in the EU, through the formulation of various policy initiatives to be taken by all EU member states. The broader objectives set out by the Lisbon Strategy were to be attained by 2010. The Strategy was adopted by the European Council for a ten-year period starting in 2000. It broadly aimed to “*make Europe, by 2010, the most competitive and the most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world*”. Europe 2020 is a new ten-year strategy proposed by the European Commission on 3 March, 2010 for the advancement of the economy of the European Union. It aims at “*smart, sustainable, inclusive growth*” with greater coordination between the national- and European-level policies. In a certain sense, it can be regarded as an extension of the 2000-2010 Lisbon Strategy for the new period of 2010-2020.

By adopting the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, the European heads of state and governments acknowledged this concern and renewed the commitment that was made by the Lisbon Growth and Jobs Strategy (and benchmarked by the Education Council in 2003) to reduce early school leaving rates to less than 10 per cent by 2020.

Early school leaving was identified as one of the key issues in national priorities with regard to inclusion and education. Despite the priority given to ESL in policy documents at national and European level, the INTMEAS study [Inclusion and Education in European Countries] concluded that the policies and measures did not reach the benchmark set in the Lisbon Strategy.⁷ Also the skewed distribution between EU countries and regions was not reduced as targeted, especially [as] some Mediterranean countries still suffered high rates of ESL beyond 20 per cent (i.e. Malta, Portugal, Spain and Italy). Although the INTMEAS study acknowledged [that it was] only (...) able to report very tentative comparative results, the author concluded that because of the insufficient urgency given to ESL in some EU countries, the EU and the member states may have to consider giving the EU Commission a more statutory role to negotiate reduction rates, monitor reduction measures and adjust ineffective plans and measures in the different member states.⁸ In order to report on comparative findings and to support such conclusions, a more thorough study focusing on the topic of early school leaving in the EU should be introduced. (RESL.eu, Description of Work, 2010)

It is hard to define what community politics imply in fact for education in Hungary. The impact of community politics on processes within the national system is especially conspicuous in the areas

7 Muskens, 2009.

8 Muskens, 2009.

of vocational training and higher education. One of the main findings of various analytical studies on the European level is that improved economic performance cannot be produced without massive investments and reforms in education. The unfavourable PISA results in 2000, 2003 and 2006 influenced the domestic education policy for introducing competence-based education as a main driver in education until 2010. According to PR, the advisor of the former minister of education, that was the time when the contents of education policy in the EU and in Hungary were in complete harmony.

The European Council called attention to the dangers of the changes in the Hungarian education system starting by 2010. In its country-specific recommendations of 2012, the EC highlighted that certain elements of the new Act on Public Education involve the risks of increasing segregation and dropping out (European Commission, 2012), and the next country-specific Council recommendations of 2013 deal with these questions in detail. In the recommendations of 2013, it is emphasised that Hungary was successful in reducing the yearly rates of ESL before 2010, however, the new elements of the school system can have a negative impact on social inequalities and segregation that may imply an increase in the number and the ratio of early school leavers. Hungary is encouraged to prepare a national strategy on ESL and to provide for the ensuring of basic competences, skills and training for all young people involved in the education system so that they have easy access to the labour market. According to the recommendations, the inclusive approach in primary and lower secondary education has to be improved and made accessible, especially for Roma students. It is also underlined that the different stages of the school system as well as the transition to the labour market should be supported by governmental means (European Commission, 2013b). The response of the Hungarian government was to issue a government resolution on preparing a national framework strategy on ESL.⁹

It is worth noting that the rupture caused by the change of government in the trends for strengthening inclusion and reducing inequalities in education remains invisible on the level of strategies. The rhetoric of the strategies continues to be completely ‘in conformity with the EU’ and corresponds to the recommendations of other transnational organisations as well. The reasoning for the measures included in these documents apparently reflects international norms.

At the same time, some of the experts involved in national policy debates claim that the measures adopted by the current government will have contrary effects to the recommendations. It is envisaged that the participants in the Bridge I and II Programmes will be those remaining outside of vocational education and training; it is also argued that the three-year programme of vocational training is insufficient to provide marketable knowledge, while the lowering of the age limit of compulsory education will induce the expansion of a group of young people without proper education and training who most probably will face unemployment and poverty from the outset. According to GM, who has been working in the Expert Group preparing a national strategy on ESL in Hungary, any attempts at meaningful changes have to face substantial difficulties:

ESL is unknown in Hungary; one can experience opposition but is always targeted against given programmes and structures. Before 2010, the left-liberal government had some achievements in quality matters: PISA 2009 indicates improvement in reading competences. A follow-up of the individual students should be the base for complex interventions, however, this does not exist in Hungary. (...) An efficient intervention does not work without systematic data collection on risks and actual ESL cases. The Bridge Programme could start to provide services, however, it is heavily segregating and thus, does not work toward this direction.

9 The national strategy on ESL has been prepared but it has not yet been officially accepted, so it is not available for the public.

Despite all the difficulties and the experienced reluctance in implementing inclusive measures that tackle ESL in a direct or indirect way, the number of official governmental policy documents that have some relevance to the phenomenon has been on an increase. One has to mention the annually issued National Reform Programmes for 2011, 2012 and 2013; the National Social Inclusion Strategy (though it currently exists only on paper); the National Youth Strategy; the National Strategy on ‘Making Things Better for Our Children’, 2007-2032 (which is the official long-term national programme for combating child poverty), and the operational educational policy documents concerning public education, in particular those discussing the vocational education and training system.

The National Reform Programme (NRP) adopted in April 2011 presents the measures that ground the national undertakings related to the Europe 2020 Strategy. Similar National Reform Programmes reinforcing the foundations of the governmental policies in the domain of public education were issued in 2012 and 2013 as well.

The national targets linked to the Europe 2020 Strategy’s headline goals are the following:

As part of the Europe 2020 objective aimed at the improvement of the level of education, Hungary intends to increase the share of the population (aged 30-34) having tertiary level or equivalent qualifications to 30.3 per cent and to reduce the early school leaving rate (in the 18-24 age group) to 10 per cent by 2020. (NRP, 2011, 2012, 2013)

The yearly reiterated characterisation of the educational failures concluding in early school leaving is the following:

The school dropout rate among the 18-24-year-old population was 10.5 per cent in 2010. Reducing this rate depends largely on the success of students considered socially, culturally, or economically disadvantaged. The share of the disadvantaged among those of school age is growing. The reasons for leaving the school early are of course very complex: poverty, cultural and health-related disadvantages, employment and housing problems. These can become especially challenging when exacerbated by regional disadvantages. (...) By introducing various forms of support for schooling, raising the quality standards and attractiveness of vocational training and by means of a scholarship system, the government intends to improve school retention and to promote attendance. (NRP, 2011)

The labour market participation rate of those having completed only elementary school is extremely low; their employment rate falls some 20 per cent behind the EU average. (...) A large number of disadvantaged children, often struggling with major skill deficiencies, gained admission to vocational training; as a consequence, the performance and efficiency of vocational schools gradually deteriorated and there is a higher than average dropout rate in these schools (almost 30 per cent), further, almost one half of the disadvantaged students are unable to obtain qualifications. (NRP, 2012)

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It has to be noted that none of the cited documents deal with early school leaving as a distinct category; a new national strategy addressing this issue has been under preparation, but the first draft has not yet gone through the necessary official consultations and thus the text is not accessible for public discussions. For the time being, only the headlines are available for the document that carries the title ‘Drawing Up and Implementing a Comprehensive National Strategy Aimed at Reducing the Number of Early School Leavers’.

As a result of the measure [i.e. the launching of a complex programme for combating early school leaving – the authors], a comprehensive strategy will be drawn up, the goals of which are centred around the three levels of reducing early school leaving rates (prevention, intervention, compensation), and the main priorities, which are improving the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of education. Achieving the aims of the strategy – which is currently under preparation – will be supported by measures like the broadening of education for small children, the strengthening of basic competences to improve higher education statistics and the reduction of early school leaving, the organisation of education aimed at promoting success in school (support measures for student groups that require special attention from teachers, modern teaching methods, Tanoda programmes implemented by NGOs and religious organisations), and correction measures (Bridge [Híd] programmes and Second Chance [Második Esély] programmes). (NRP, 2013)

It is for the first time that the yearly NRP addresses ESL in a direct form, but it is only the above-cited, rather general, paragraph on a desirable policy that deals with the issue. Likewise, when the current educational policy documents are concerned, one can identify certain political objectives, action plans and recommendations with a probable impact on ESL. However, the ideas and measures are not usually conceived as explicitly forming part of a consistent ESL policy but address more overarching issues ranging from early childhood development to compensation for educational disadvantages, or argue for the strengthening and spreading of extramural forms of education and learning. It is noteworthy that, while the NRP documents related to the official EU 2020 undertakings mention educational integration and the need for changing the pedagogical practices of schools as well as other up-to-date educational interventions with probable impact on decreasing ESL, these exigencies are not emphasised anymore in the educational policies that have actually been implemented, based on the new Act on Public Education and its measures.

As required by the European Commission, the strategic domestic documents concerning ESL define the ESL target rate below 10 per cent in accordance with the agreed EU 2020 goal. These documents dedicate no more than a few sentences to the causes of ESL, and if they engage in deeper explanations they are concerned mainly with the problem of school dropouts.

With its focus on Roma youth, who are the most affected by the risk of dropping out from education at a very early stage, the programme known as the Roma Integration Strategy is one of the most important and relevant documents for tackling the complexity of the problem. Within the Roma population of an estimated size of 800,000 people, the number of those living in deep poverty is around 500,000-600,000. Half of the 400,000 children living below the poverty line are of Roma origin; moreover, the majority of the Roma population is concentrated in the most disadvantaged regions of the country. The causes of the school failures of Roma students are not rooted in these reasons alone, but also in malfunctions of the educational system concluding in dramatic inequalities and ethno-social segregation that are accentuated by the widespread and deep prejudices of the non-Roma majority toward Roma.

The Hungarian EU presidency in 2011 initiated the drafting of an EU-level Roma framework strategy. As a result of the activities of the Hungarian government, the European Council decided upon supporting a so-called framework document entitled ‘EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020’ which was meant to provide guidance to the preparation of the national strategy documents of the member states. The Roma Framework Strategy of the European Union heavily draws on the programme of the Decade of Roma Inclusion, 2005-2015, defining the priority target areas accordingly by depicting education, employment, healthcare and housing.

In accordance with the Framework Strategy, the member states were required to prepare or revise their already existing Roma integration strategy by the end of December 2011. Hungary was the first member state to submit its National Social Inclusion Strategy to the European Commission. As the historical account on the process notes:

The National Social Inclusion Strategy was prepared primarily to integrate and complement special problem-area strategies (education, housing, employment, healthcare) and manage them in a unified framework system, thereby enhancing the efficiency of necessary inter-sectoral approaches. (Szendrey, 2012)

Hungary’s social inclusion policy was drafted by taking account of the Commission’s communication regarding the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, according to which Hungary would extend its already existing national Roma integration strategy up to 2020 (Parliament of Hungary, 2007b). The national Inclusion Strategy expresses intentions for turning public and political attention to the urgency of immediate action. It is argued that the processes of exclusion and segregation, also forming a significant obstacle in the way of economic development, may deepen and become increasingly severe without proper intervention. Specific aims of the Inclusion Strategy include “the comprehensive goal of preventing the reproduction of poverty and exclusion” that involve “the (...) decrease of dropping out from school” (State Secretariat for Social Inclusion, 2011).

The areas of intervention of the Inclusion Strategy concerning ESL are the following: compulsory kindergarten education; providing of an inclusive school environment; reinforcing the mastery of education in compensating for social disadvantages; helping disadvantaged young people – including Roma youths – in entering and completing secondary and higher education.

It can be pointed out that the European-level policy discourses and action plans importantly influenced the shaping of the domestic inclusion strategy by establishing close associations between the two key areas of Roma inclusion: education and employment.

KG, Member of the European Parliament, underlines that the two committees she has been serving on (Employment and Education Committee and Human Rights Committee) emphasise the necessity of a firm Roma strategy with regard to both education and employment, and adds that Roma ESL comes in on both ways. Furthermore, it is more and more evident across the whole of the European political bodies that the ‘Roma question’ is not only a problem of Central and Eastern Europe. In the framework of a broader thinking, ESL is becoming more and more part of the public concern in the light of the evident correlation between well-being and high levels of education.

The National Youth Strategy enjoys full consensus among the professional circles and the youth organisations. At the same time, there is neither legal nor interest reconciliation in youth matters in Hungary, although appropriate regulations and the setting up of normative yardsticks would be essential to tackle the tensions in education and the labour market that induce an unstoppable growth of at-risk groups among the young.

Although the Youth Strategy underscores its close observance of “*the youth policy of EU Member States, but also the youth guidelines of the Council of Europe and the European Union, as well as the 2nd National Development Plan and the related documents*”,¹⁰ it barely touches upon the issue of dropping out from school, let alone the complexity of problems behind ESL. The only statement with implications on ESL mentions that “*the majority of disadvantaged young Roma people drop out of the first or second grade of vocational schools. The rate of early school-leavers is the highest in vocational schools of the lowest reputation*” (Ministry of Social and Employment Affairs, 2009).

Following years of intense scholarly and policy-making work for raising public awareness of the outstanding risks of poverty and exclusion among children, the Socialist-Liberal government adopted the long-term National Strategy on ‘Making Things Better for Our Children’, 2007-2032, in 2007. Even though the strategy is not focused on education alone, it says the following with regard to ESL:

Whether coming from a poor and uneducated family, living in a deteriorated and segregated area, having disabilities, a migrant background or extraordinary talent, all children have to receive education according to their abilities throughout their lives, without being exposed to prejudices, stereotypes, biased expectations or negative discrimination. Therefore, this should be the most important priority of Hungarian educational policy. (Parliament of Hungary, 2007a)

In sum, we can state that all the above-referred strategies are in full accordance with the conceptualisation of the European Commission on educational failures and ESL as well as with the most ambitious professional standards. Their impact, however, is highly questionable with respect to ESL, as the regulation of education and, in particular, vocational training does not harmonise with the plans included in these strategies. As mentioned earlier, when considering the impact of the new regulations on public education, it is too early at this point to make detailed and meaningful prognoses on the probable effects of the changes on dropping out of school and on ESL in general. At the same time, it is important to point out that the general norms of fair and inclusive schooling, founded on the grounds of equal opportunities and also deemed effective with respect to ESL, have been removed from

10 The strategy affirms the importance of promoting “*the use of procedures in the organization of learning that, in responding to individual learning needs, promote successful further studying and entry to the labour market*” (Ministry of Social and Employment Affairs, 2009).

the agenda of the current educational policies. While turning away from the goals of inclusion certainly carries the risks of growing inequalities and segregation and the deepening of the ethno-social divide in education, it is hard to predict the negative effects of any of the specific measures.

ESL AS A ROMA ISSUE

The European (KG), national-level (PR) and local-level (GM, MB, JV) interviewees all agree that ESL in Hungary is a Roma issue at its core. The lessons of in-depth inquiries of the past two decades into the nature of segregation and the reproductive mechanisms of ethno-social inequalities in education seem to support strongly their assessment.

Data from the Waves of Life Course Survey conducted between 2006 and 2009 show that the dropout rate in day-time schools among students of poorly educated parents is 25 per cent higher in the case of Roma students than among their non-Roma peers (Kertesi and Kézdi, 2010).

A study by Gábor Kertesi and Gábor Kézdi (2012) quantifies the achievement gap between Roma and non-Roma students in Hungary and assesses the potential causes behind the gap. When looked at closely, the reading and mathematics test scores measured in the 8th grade show a substantial gap. Its magnitude is similar to the gap between African-American and white students in the United States in the early 1980s. By breaking down the data, it turns out that the gap between Roma and non-Roma students is almost entirely explained by social differences in income, wealth and parental education, and ethnic factors do not play a significant role. Besides differences in health, the social disadvantages of Roma students generate lower performance and skills through two major mechanisms. Their home environment is less favourable for cognitive development, and their schools prove to provide lower quality educational services. Ethnic differences in the home environment are, again, explained by socioeconomic differences, and ethnicity seems to play no additional role. On the other hand, while access to higher quality schools is strongly related to social differences, Roma students seem to face additional spatial and educational disadvantages. The results suggest that besides policies that aim at alleviating poverty, well-designed interventions influencing the transmission mechanisms can also improve the skill development of Roma and other disadvantaged children. According to the study of Ilona Liskó (2008) on vocational training and dropout,

[e]ven though the level of education has improved among the population since the systemic change in Hungary (1989), there is a quite significant poorly educated stratum that is constantly reproduced. In each year, 2 per cent of the students fail to complete lower secondary school until the age of 16, and 9 per cent of the students do not enter any form of secondary or vocational education or drop out from such schools. While there are a number of economic and social factors behind the reproduction of poorly educated young people who become excluded from the labour market, the responsibility of public education is beyond dispute concerning its inability to break the cycle of becoming poorly educated and therefore socially disadvantaged. Most of the cases of dropping out before attaining a certificate occur in vocational schools. There is a strong necessity of reforming the vocational school system in order

to keep these students within, or reintegrate them into, the education system. However, it is not only dropouts but also young people with a vocational training certificate who have very poor opportunities on the labour market. Within secondary education, the hardest pressures for adjustment and the most difficult pedagogical challenges were imposed on vocational schools by changes in the social and economic life and the policy interventions over the past 15 years. Since vocational education has become a form of continuing education chosen exclusively by the most disadvantaged students, the improvement of vocational training is decisive in terms of the long-term opportunities of this social group.

As PR, advisor to the former minister of education states,

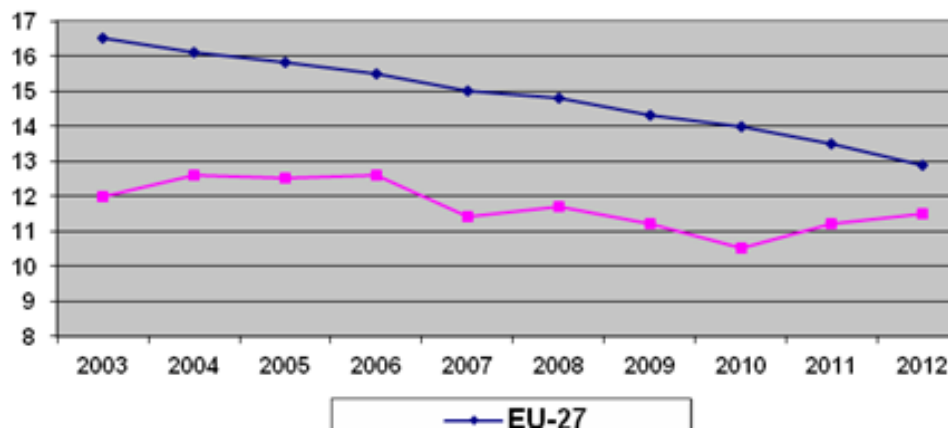
Hungary, as other Central and Eastern European countries, is among the best in the EU concerning the indicators of progression within the school system. The dropout rate in vocational schools ruins our national results, which are extremely high comparing to other countries. This strange portfolio comes from an intrinsic feature of the Hungarian school system that is the most selective system in the whole of Europe.

The extreme selectivity of the school system separates children according to their social and cultural backgrounds starting as early as the first years of schooling. Such a separation also involves selection along markedly different levels and qualities of their education. The lack of basic competences of the poorest and most vulnerable children – with a high proportion of Roma among them – determines their school career, their path to the vocational school and an increasing risk of dropping out. MB, programme leader of the successful Springboard Programme for combating ESL, underlines the importance of the first years of education by pointing out that “*it is very important to pay attention to the early signs that make ESL probable to occur*”.

MEASURING ESL AND THE RISKS OF DROPPING OUT

In 2013, the ESL rate was around 11 per cent in Hungary. ESL rates are calculated in the European Union since 1992 and in Hungary since 1997. During the past ten years the trend in the EU has shown continuous improvement, while in Hungary it has been fluctuating: the period between 2004 and 2006 was marked by stagnation, and then from 2006 to 2010 by decrease, and since 2010 by increase, i.e. the situation has become worse in recent years.

ESL rates in the EU and in Hungary from 2003 to 2012

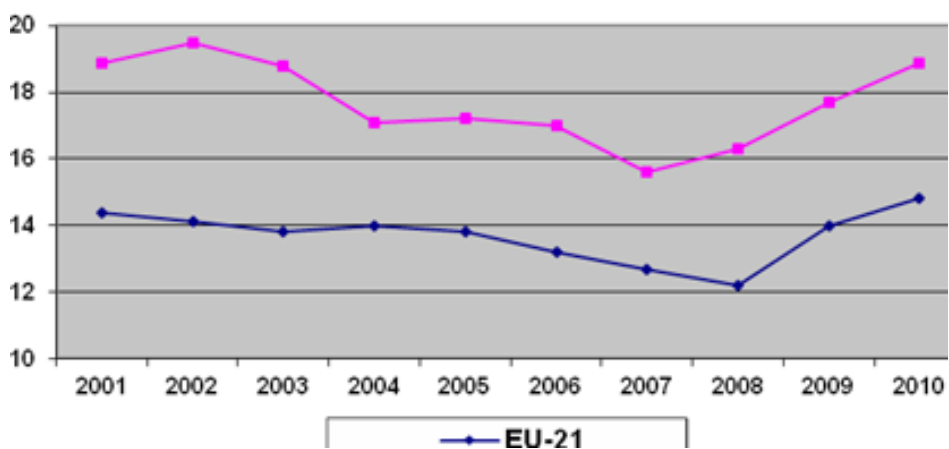


Source: Eurostat Database, September 2013

During the 1990s, attempts were made to develop new operationalised concepts for a more accurate statistical approach to the problem of ESL that simultaneously highlights the most pressing consequences of the phenomenon. These attempts have led to the introduction of categorising at-risk youths under the label NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training).

Initially, the application of the term NEET differed from ESL in that it did not include the level of education, but focused only on the end result, that is, the young person's labour market status. However, information about the NEET population today also includes the level of education, broken down according to age groups (15-19, 20-24 and 25-29). During the past decades, NEET rates were much higher as compared with ESL rates both in the EU and in Hungary, since a small proportion of people with higher education degrees are also included in the NEET category, while early school leavers in employment are not. In comparison to the statistical data on ESL, the NEET indicators generally prove more sensitive, which is reflected in the departing trends for the years of the global economic crisis: while the ESL indicators show improvement, the NEET indicators are on a steady rise in contrast to the preceding period of improvement both in the EU and in Hungary.

The rate of NEET (15-29) in the EU and in Hungary



Source: Education at a Glance 2012, OECD

According to the NEET index, Hungary belongs to the cluster of Eastern European countries that are somewhat better performers than the Southern European member countries of the European Union. Important conclusions can be drawn by comparing the two sets of data, those of the ESL and of the NEET rates: while ESL rates have increased in Hungary over the past two years, they are still better than the EU average; NEET rates, however, have stubbornly remained 3-4 per cent below the EU average. Given that the labour market position of people with secondary education is only slightly worse in Hungary than in the EU, and the position of those with higher education is equal to the European average, in Hungary the correlation between high youth unemployment rates and low education levels is even stronger than in the European Union as a whole. Since young people's exclusion from the labour market on the ground of poor and inadequate education results in a high occurrence of terminal unemployment and the involved permanent inactive status, it follows that the primary policy goal of increasing the ratio of people in employment cannot be approached without tackling the problem of ESL.

There is a strong interconnectedness between the above-presented ESL and NEET categories and the less exact though also very important term 'dropout'. The first two represent statistical categories relating to outcomes, while the concept of 'dropout' refers to a process, allowing for an in-depth examination and analysis of the causes. Thus, in speaking about the reasons for early school leaving, we can actually research and present the reasons for dropping out that conclude in leaving behind education early in time and simultaneously failing to become integrated in employment.¹¹ However, little has been done so far in this direction: longer-term studies and qualitative inquiries into the individual, familial and institutional factors and the reproductive processes that these generate are missing from the map of educational and employment research. It follows that our knowledge about the problems of dropout and ESL is rather tentative and concentrates on case descriptions. Given this situation, studies in the broad field of educational disadvantages focus mainly on the measurable aspects of education and training, and attempt to draw trends mainly from macro-level statistical associations.

In accepting that there is a very strong connection between ESL and the extremely low level of school competences, the drop in the PISA results for 2012 predicts a negative tendency for the future (OECD, 2013). The general worsening of Hungarian students' performance levels (especially in mathematics) is an alarming trend. It implies that the number of students most threatened by the risk of becoming early school leavers will strongly increase in the coming years.

In sum, concepts that are in accordance with the Lisbon Strategy and the EU 2020 Strategy have been in force in Hungary under the governments in power since 2002. However, behind the curtain of the statistical measures indicating certain continuities, the content and the leading drives of the educational policy have undergone important changes. While the preceding Socialist-Liberal government made attempts to incorporate the leading European values of lifelong learning and integrated education through 'soft' incentives for navigating in the decentralised public education system, the Conservative government now in power since 2010 took firm steps toward centralising the system and applying a set of corporatist-conservative values of status reproduction (however, it has done so by maintaining commitment to the European ideas of equality and equity on a rhetoric level). It can be expected that the changes also will be reflected in the statistical indices and values. However, since the new measures of the profoundly changed educational policy were put in place only a year ago, a few years will have to pass before solid comparisons between the pre-2010 and post-2010 tendencies can be made.

11 The data used in the subsequent paragraphs are from the unpublished national strategy on ESL.

THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS AND POLICY IMPLEMENTATION OF ESL

Although the European Union offers a range of forms of transnational cooperation and coordination, the national implementation of the EU goals is still determined by domestic legislative actions. The extraordinary dependence of the policy actors on the law is perceptible in various fields and respects: in the form of a strong wish and need for the legal regulation of mechanisms, procedures and rules, and in manifestations of great insecurity and diffidence in fields lacking such legal regulations. The (social-) historical and cultural factors in the background of this phenomenon can be changed only in the course of a slow process.

For the time being, the intensive and extensive employment of OMC would enhance understanding and acceptance. It would promote the spread of a culture of evaluation, which so far is completely missing in the Hungarian policy culture. In this sense, EU reports are welcome, imposing at least some constraint to ensure feedback. (...) There may be significant differences among EU member states in the motivation of following EU goals. In Hungary, beyond the already mentioned legal constraint, financial incentives could represent an important factor. However, as for the moment, the sanctioning function of financing is stronger, triggering specific strategies of avoidance – only rarely and incidentally coinciding with the realization of one or the other EU norm. (...) In terms of involving stakeholders, Hungary has great disadvantages in almost all fields. (...) Key actors in Hungary are hard to involve in discussions that explicitly concern EU targets. Neither the culture, nor the institutional background is present for this purpose. (Lannert, 2008)

As PR, advisor to the former minister of education, states in his interview:

The OMC is a soft mechanism. The only hard element is money. There were only three moments since we joined the EU when Hungarian politics took seriously the EU policies of education: 2003 – planning of the Human Resource Development Operational Programme I; 2006 – planning of the Social Renewal Operation Programme; 2013 – planning of the Human Resource Development Operational Programme II.

While KG, Member of the European Parliament, is deeply involved in shaping European-level strategies in employment (and partly also in education), she claims that there is practically no contact with the current right-wing government: they closed down the formerly functioning channels. Thus there is no feedback on the European initiatives to and from Hungarian politicians:

The Hungarian ministry is not interested in what is going on in Europe. It is not to say that anybody of the old staff in the ministry, who remained, would be afraid to contact a socialist politician. Informal relations still work, but there is no contact with formal politics and policies. Civil organisations try to do a bottom-up ‘whispering’, but have no channels to the formal levels. Having fragmented discussions with MEPs is not a way to collect integrated knowledge about hot policy issues.

A study was prepared in 2009 examining the operation of the OMC in four Central and Eastern European countries. While this study concerns the period of the previous governmental cycle, the processes and the modus operandi referred to in it have most probably remained unchanged.

The culture of process-oriented implementation (i.e. a learning process) of duties is lacking in the ministry as such, inhibiting OMC and thus hindering engaging in European processes in a more integrated manner. Administration based on sheer regulations (while legislation is sufficient) and an output-centred perspective have their own historical traditions. As a result, forms and mechanisms of information and knowledge transference characterising the whole organisation have not been developed, the staff of the ministry has not been socialised to participate in such processes, the level of team work and project-mindedness is low, and a professional discourse is lacking. (...) Only a narrow circle of the staff receives EU documents to give an opinion on a regular basis. Due to the lack of time, their discussion within a broader circle is unfeasible. No routines have been developed to disseminate, interpret and present the accepted documents. Information transferring and communication is not based on any strategic considerations; the processes are not regulated and they do not address any well-defined target group. The most important constituents of the system are the personal networks of relationships and the invisible coalitions of motivations. The transferability of knowledge is often dependent on the presence of persons in the given professional field of the ministry with an 'outlook', that is, with interest in the international context or data. (...) Efficient information dissemination is also hindered by the lack of knowledge regarding the expectations of generally identified target groups. Mainly due to capacity problems, there is no needs assessment with respect to the content or nature of information or the form of information forwarding. There is no ongoing and strategically based communication and no relationship with stakeholders. The lack of appropriate language skills everywhere, but especially in the post-socialist countries, also represents a significant obstacle in the way of information flow. (Lannert, 2008)

As already mentioned, according to OECD indicators, by the early 1990s Hungarian public education has become one of the most decentralised systems (OECD, 1998),

[g]iving way to a determining trend after the mid-1990s of gradually developing (and teaching the use of) governmental tools and techniques through which fundamental public policy goals can be enforced in a decentralized system. This included, primarily, the definition of the planning authority of actors at different levels, the development of planning capacities and the establishment of coordination among the various levels of planning. (...) This process has greatly impacted secondary level vocation as well. (Halász, 2011)

Below is some information regarding the integration policy of the decentralised educational system in force prior to 2010:

A) Local decision-makers primarily influence central decision-making through lobbying (without exception against desegregation) to influence parliamentary decision-making and ensure the success of their town's application for being granted by EU projects. The majority of the local authorities resist the central integration initiatives and their knowledge-use is oriented towards creatively avoiding participation in practicing such policies and the exact mandates of the law.

B) (...)

C) Lay actors' knowledge and agenda is primarily concerned with school choice. Knowledgeable lay school users 'vote with their feet' but their choice relies on gossip and anecdotal knowledge. Data driven assessment and other comparative 'evidence' are rarely studied by parents. For lay actors (i.e. the parents) the proportion of Roma children in each school is highly relevant and they try to get informed about ethnic composition before choosing a school. Once a school has a bad reputation in the neighbourhood, the process of migration or 'flight' soon becomes intensified. Although most people seem to be in favour of integration in general, when it comes to the question of their own child, the majority of the middle class and lower class parents, who are non-Roma, choose schools not attended by the Roma.

D) When a professional wishes to bring forward ideas toward project development (or the development of training courses) s/he needs to present herself as an expert (recommended by other reliable experts) and validate the suggested ideas by their consent and voice. (Bajomi et al., 2010)

The implementation of the integration policy in force until 2010 entailed several problems of organisation and administration, especially due to widespread local-level opposition (on the part of the municipalities as maintaining institutions and the schools, i.e. pedagogues responsible for day-to-day management). At the same time, some subtle and less visible processes can be accounted for (the apparent transformation of the professional discourse can perhaps be mentioned in the first place) and, under the influence of the policy of integration, segregating solutions previously considered compatible with norms have been discarded and educational segregation as such has been rejected at least at the level of rhetoric. In the eyes of teachers, methodological innovation entailed in the introduction of competence-based education was more popular than any other aspects of integrating measures (as, for example, the control over the proportion of Roma and non-Roma students attending the same school/class). At the same time, the failure of integration policies cannot be attributed to local opposition only; the supportive policies and a regulative system in the service of integration had no compulsory force or sanctioning functions, operating 'only' through incentives in the form of adjunct material interests.

Opposition to the measures of the educational governance in power since 2010 is manifested primarily in the area of regulating teachers' professional and career advancement, that is in fields unrelated to the issue of ESL. What is more, the same government has not planned any steps in terms of ESL policy that would elicit negative responses from anyone but a few professionals (e.g. the new administration refrained from any desegregating measures that might induce substantial social opposition). Furthermore, according to PR, the advisor to the former minister of education, the newly selected responsible bureaucrats in the reorganised Ministry of Education do not have any experience with EU policies and directives, since their selection followed more the requirements of political loyalty than the principles of professionalism and expertise. Apart from mandatory reporting and the regular rounds of OMC, there is no connection and communication between the respective EU bodies and the Hungarian policy of education. In line with spreading Euroskepticism supported and generated by the government, the present policy of education opposes the EU policy without knowing it. It is more accurate to say that there is no organised resistance; rather, those in charge are not even conscious about their oppositional stand.

The interviewees also give accounts of hindrances in implementing ESL-related policies. KG, Member of the European Parliament says:

When good things start, jealousy arises, creating tensions in local communities. Opposition is usually strong against any new initiatives. There is (and has been) quite substantial social opposition against all important educational programmes of the past decade. A clear example is desegregation. Local societies and teachers are often against it. Nevertheless, the climate has been slowly changing.

ZRH, the principal supervisor of education in a regional school district, paints a broad picture about teachers' motivations and argues that teachers' struggle for survival to keep their job is in the centre of attention, and children are just a tool of this struggle:

One-third of the students would have a good school performance preventing them from ESL with extra help, but teachers do not have the right pedagogical methodology to deal with these children.

With regard of the good practices of tackling the ESL problem, MB, an expert on ESL, speaks of multiple hindrances:

There is opposition at the ministerial level: such programmes are expensive; and there is opposition also at the institutional level: Why do these children get exceptional care and provisions?; Why are teachers working with them better equipped than other teachers? – so there is substantial opposition rooted in jealousy at schools.

MB, who, besides advising on anti-dropout and ESL policies, has developed and managed at local level the successful Springboard Programme for combating ESL, outlines a way out:

The key was to combine individual teaching with teachers' training, school development both physically and mentally, and all these based on the cooperation of different professions and all kinds of people coming from active teaching, the universities (research and follow-up) and labour market management. The Springboard Programme focused on a very individually orientated way of teaching that was backed by a supportive system of mutual help. Ultimately, the Programme died out, primarily because of the lack of interest on the part of the new government leading, of course, to a lack of funding.

The Springboard Programme provided the basis of the Bridge Programme. Bridge I is based on the curriculum that had been developed for Springboard, but does not involve any change in the working of the school and the way teachers work. These latter elements were taken out. In contrast to Springboard, the Bridge Programme is very segregating because the new educational law does not allow children to continue in primary education. Furthermore, children have to travel long distances, paid from the families' non-existent resources. As a balance sheet, it can be stated that while Springboard died out without continuation within the country, an increasing interest has been experienced from abroad.

While desegregation efforts have been suspended, and the most comprehensive programme for mitigating ESL (Springboard) has died out, new initiatives were launched to approach the problem

of ESL primarily from the perspective of entrance to the labour market. Enjoying the support of the European Commission, a 15-month-long, large-scale research project started in March, 2013 with the title 'QALL – Qualification for All' to represent the new direction. The purpose of QALL is to support efforts against early school leaving through national and international research activities, extensive social consultation (by way of the development of a regional-level coordination network, workshop activities related to training and the organisation of a regional conference) and policy recommendations. The expected results of the project include the initiation of an extensive and active professional network intersecting the educational, social and employment sectors, as well as the preparation of policy recommendations based on the experiences of the regional conferences. As a secondary aim, the research also intends to provide a detailed mapping about the attitudes of the different stakeholders toward the currently prevailing EU ESL initiatives and thus explore readiness for the introduction of new incentives.

AN INVENTORY OF 'GOOD PRACTICES'

In tackling the ESL problem, all our interviewees agreed on some cornerstones: the interventions should target all important aspects of ESL in a complex, simultaneous and coordinated way; in addition, there should be a focus on early childhood programmes and the very first years of schooling. While their full consensus indicates the possibility of a common political agreement on goals and aims as the foundations of a potential long-term educational policy, in terms of the immediate practical implications they generally agreed that without the proper means for implementation and financing, the entire effort would stay at the rhetorical level.

Given the controversies of the current educational policy and the general shortage of funds, the interviewees emphasised the need to capitalise on existing initiatives that imply one or another aspect of an ideal, complex anti-ESL programme. In their views, a real breakthrough could be attained by improving early childcare and education. A good start could be provided by the Sure Start Children's Houses that apply a new approach of childcare in a complex way by inviting parents into the programme. One of the aims is that mothers be part of the arrangement. This approach is of key importance for combating ESL; the belief is that ESL can be reduced only through complex actions built on parental involvement and parents' clearly structured, active participation with distinct roles and contributions. The second important source to capitalise on is the programme of the still-functioning inclusive schools that are the strongholds of observing human rights and combating discrimination. The anti-discrimination stand is of crucial importance: if children are discriminated against, then even the best project can run into a side track and fail. The third source to build on is the relatively new dropout prevention programme found in a range of vocational schools.

While the Hungarian school system is missing a powerful national policy on equity in education, there are successful model programmes run as projects with limited possibilities in time and resources. A common trait of the distinctive model programmes described below is their temporary character: all they have been finished during the past years; at the same time, we have no information about any new initiatives coming in to replace them. A shared characteristic of these past model programmes was

their focusing on individual needs and capacities that provided the basis for designing intervention in a differentiated and individualised manner. According to expert evaluations, such initiatives proved successful in significantly improving the participants' educational performance; however, less success could be demonstrated with regard to assisting labour market entrance and participation. It has to be noted that while the programmes targeting ESL through complex familial interventions in an educational context have disappeared, direct interventions have gained extended ground: the so-called Second-Chance Programmes, financed from Social Renewal Operational Programme (SROP) funds and targeting explicitly ESL, are still running and they do so with some spatial spreading.

The sample of model programmes briefly introduced below generated new knowledge about tackling certain important aspects of ESL in an efficient way. One of the important lessons of them is a need to combat ESL simultaneously in the areas of education and labour. Although currently no such complex programmes are in place, it can be expected that the official inauguration of the national strategy against ESL opens up new paths and new funds for intervention. An inventory of some successful model projects of the near-past may be of use toward this end.

**Training Embedded in Employment (TEE Programme)
Programme for the employment and training of unemployed people of Roma origins in public education institutions (2004-2009)**

The TEE Programme developed for improving the labour market situation of Roma provides integration opportunities for social groups coping with disadvantages that often distance them from the realms of education and the labour market. The Programme seeks to open a path toward integration in two ways: it provides for the socialisation of the involved groups in the domain of labour through *employment*; it assists lasting integration into the labour market by securing *training* opportunities embedded in employment; it promotes the chances of the participants to apply for more stable labour market positions after the end of the training period as compared to their former situation in the given occupation or elsewhere.

The goal of the Programme is to ensure a training scheme for the participating 42 schools and the selected group of young Roma who concluded the 8th grade of primary education years before; beyond the several years of actual employment, their inclusion in a learning process is highly significant in itself. By keeping training and education in the focus, the majority of the participants attain a secondary school degree or a certificate demonstrating the acquisition of qualification as recorded in the National Qualifications Register (Országos Képzési Jegyzék, OKJ).

In methodological terms, the Programme concentrates on making education attractive and useful for poorly educated young Roma adults who left school years before and who consider school to be a hostile terrain. The ways of instruction and training are based on the deliberate replacement of earlier obstacles with sources of new motivation.

Transit employment programme

The transit employment programme as a complex training project is assisting poorly educated youth with gloomy employment prospects to acquire a range of knowledge and skills that allow for successfully applying for a certificate of professional qualifications recorded by the National Qualifications Register

(OKJ). With a focus on raising employability, the project is organically integrated into the labour market: it is run outside of the school system and is closely connected with the development of key competences. The training phase is preceded by career orientation, remedial education or knowledge updating, and advice and interventions designed to improve motivation. The core training programme is often accompanied by the provision of personally tailored services that aim at assisting the clients in improving their capacities for coping with the typical psycho-social problems that are related to the experience of educational failure, marginalisation and low employability. Following the training phase, the clients are placed in employment. A follow-up phase is an integral part of the project: the employment experiences of clients who have completed the training are tracked and they enjoy protection and care in case of need.

Despite its success and outstanding results, the project has been closed due to the lack of funding and state-level interest. Nevertheless, by comprising the social, economic and labour market aspects of (re)integrating people with low employability, its complex approach has beneficially influenced the designing and running of an array of employment and training programmes. The practical results are equally important: among the project participants, many of whom would have had little chance of finding employment by means of traditional employment policy, adult training, etc., have been able to re-enter the primary labour market. During the lifetime of the project, the dropout rate was kept very low, examination results were good, and the proportion of successful exams among the project participants was high (and, indeed, exceeded expectations).

Dobbantó (Springboard) Programme Adaptation of the US First Things First Programme)

The Springboard Programme was developed to make a halt to the often creeping process of becoming a dropout. It responds to the the complexity of the phenomenon by acknowledging that dropping out or leaving education ahead of time is usually the result of the accumulated experience of educational failure, downgrading and discrimination. The Springboard philosophy is based on a person-centred pedagogic paradigm and aims to transform the entire learning environment, which can be associated with memories of failure in the minds of students. In the course of the Programme, a pedagogical package was developed to prepare young people outside of training and/or failing in the educational system to be ready to enter vocational training at the 9th-grade level. The design outlined a developmental scheme based on individual schedules that aimed to assist educational reintegration within a period of one year. Another component of the Programme was a teacher-training module that was designed to provide preparation and complex support to the staff of the participating vocational schools in order to enable the institutions to manage students' individual learning schemes within the prevailing conditions of mass education and training.

As a result of participating in the Springboard Programme, adolescents who had formerly turned away from education and had been reviled by their schools for their disruptive and combative behaviour experienced a remarkable change: they became re-socialised within a year at school, demonstrated readiness to continue in education and earned their teachers' support in their new career orientation.

CONCLUSIONS

Along with the long path from the Lisbon Strategy 2000 to the conceptualisation of the European Strategy 2020 (and one of its core components, the ‘Youth on the Move’ initiative), combating early school leaving (ESL) as an important constituent of addressing structural tensions in the economy and society has gone through a vital process of reinterpretation. Concurrently, the policies and measures for tackling the resultant tensions have been enriched. In a formal sense, Hungary subscribed to the European-level goal of reducing ESL in the 18-24-year-old population below 10 per cent by 2020. In line with the accepted obligations for monitoring and reporting, the yearly national statistics report on the actual ratio of early school leavers. The statistics are produced according to Eurostat norms and methodologies and, as such, properly serve the ongoing OMC negotiations on the European level. What is more, due to recent rapid growth in placements in higher education and also to the high rates of women on parental and childcare leave (and who do not count as early leavers), the Hungarian data – along with similar indicators in other post-socialist countries – paint a relatively favourable picture if compared with most of the Western member states; such a good positioning, then, implies a relaxing of external pressure demanding interventions and reforms in education. At the same time, a closer scrutiny of the data reveals that the relatively favourable ESL ratios for the 18-24-year-old population hide the deep constraints of schooling and employment in the preceding cohorts, especially among the 14-17-year-old generation. In a way, one can say that early school leaving (ESL) as meant by European measures presents a generational shift leaving relatively unaffected the young adult cohort of those in the age bracket of 18-24 years, while the manifold conflicts and tensions surrounding the phenomenon present serious risks for adolescents in the preceding age bracket of 14-17 years whose educational needs should be met by secondary schooling. However, tackling the problems of secondary-level dropouts and of those leaving education after concluding the 8th grade does not belong to the inventory of OMC negotiations in education – hence, these problems and the emerging policy responses remain strictly in the realm of domestic policy-making. What is more, associations between the factors and processes behind early school leaving in the two distinct cohorts are not established: no data collections have yet been initiated to monitor the paths of adolescent school-leavers when reaching the age of early adulthood, and further, little has been revealed so far about the longer-term life cycle and the career outlook of those dropping out of school and failing to become employed at or before the time of crossing the 16-year age limit of compulsory education.

The differences between European-level and domestic approaches to ESL raise important implications on policy-making and the shaping of educational practices. An important shortcoming is the lack of unifying concepts and understandings that could provide an umbrella for coordinated interventions and measures. Instead, policies focusing on one or another aspect of ESL appear under different headings and initiate actions and interventions on behalf of different players on different grounds. In this way the involved complexity of many policies (ranging from supporting early child development through familial interventions to assisting entrance to the labour market via refined training and targeted education programmes) withers away and the actual decrease of dropping out or of reducing youth unemployment becomes a haphazard outcome, and often appears as an unplanned side effect of the employment measures. The lack of coordination and the misguided ordering of measures and interventions with the supposed aim of tackling ESL not only reduces efficiency but also wastes human capacities and material resources.

These losses are especially disturbing if we consider the strong ethnic aspect of the phenomenon. As pointed out above, there is a rather broad consensus among policy-makers, practitioners and teachers that early school leaving (in its current domestic translation: school dropout and long-term youth unemployment) is mostly a 'Roma problem' and, as such, policies and interventions for mitigating it should be part of a comprehensive strategy of Roma inclusion. However, no steps have been taken so far for developing actions in the spirit of inclusion; neither have there been any attempts at reorganising the current early child development programmes, educational assistance schemes, vocational training and the adjunct scholarship programmes in the unifying framework of inclusion.

The weakness of policies and measures for mitigating school dropout and increasing the employability of youth as the two key manifestations of engaging in reducing ESL has been countervailed to a certain extent by the flourishing of innovative projects mainly initiated in education and vocational training. An outstanding feature of these projects has been their comprehensive nature: in addition to focusing on curriculum development and on experimenting with new methods of instruction, they included at their core the idea to tailor service delivery in a personalised way and to embrace the human environment (from parents and families to school staff and to workmates) of their clients. In these projects the handling of students' learning capacities and their ability to adjust to the educational environment were refined in an ongoing manner. As a result, these initiatives were usually highly efficient in reducing the dropout rates and in demonstrating results in the domain of employability. Unfortunately, the positive impression made by their outstanding performance quickly faded as the majority of these projects proved to become one-time experiments that disappeared without continuation. As a rule, the financial and regulatory conditions governing such initiatives change with the start of a new cycle of applications and there is usually no way to adjust them to guarantee their continuation. Nevertheless, the accumulated experience persists for a while, and in the lucky event of interest and openness on the part of the educational administration, some of the lessons are taken into consideration in the subsequent rounds of macro-level policy design.

In sum, it can be stated that, despite the lack of a comprehensive policy and measures for tackling early school leaving, important steps have been taken to target some of the most pressing manifestations in school dropout and low employability. However, the initiatives have remained isolated and have not become integral parts either of education and training or of labour market integration. Amid these conditions, mainstream educational and unemployment policies usually have been designed with practically no reference to ESL, and thus the decrease or the increase of the numbers of affected youth became dependent on components of the regulations that at first sight have little to do with the phenomenon. The examples of such fragmentation range from reorganising vocational training according to intensified industrial and entrepreneurial needs or the lowering of the age limit of compulsory education in response to public pressure and the prevailing conflicts resulting from ethno-social segregation. While testing these and similar measures against their impact on early school leaving has revealed controversial results, the efforts of experts and practitioners to draw attention to the findings as points of departure for corrective measures have failed so far. In part the failures follow from the fragmented nature of policy-making, which renders it easy for the administration to refuse to apply measures and indicators drawn from isolated domains and, thus, from outside of the mainstream.

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