Reducing Early
School Leaving
in Europe

RESL.eu aims to provide **insights** into the **mechanisms** and **processes** influencing a young person's decision to leave school early and to disseminate these insights and good practices to various audiences.

Key objectives are

- to design common EU **definitions** and **concepts on early school leaving** (ESL) and conduct **comparative policy analyses**;

- to collect **data** on young people, families, school staff in schools to understand the needs, strategies, and factors leading to early school leaving across European countries;

- to identify **characteristics** of young people at risk of ESL as well as **protective factors** (e.g., social support mechanisms, resiliency and agency of students) which may encourage potential early school leavers to gain qualifications via alternative learning arenas, and

- to examine **ESL prevention and intervention in schools** and **ESL remediation** through alternative learning arenas with a view to informing EU policy on early school leaving

Taking on an Holistic Multi-professional Approach to Early School Leaving

The process of early school leaving is explained in academic literature as being due to a variety of factors on different levels. Scholars look at elements on the **micro**-level of the individual students, on the **meso**-level of the social group or institution (e.g. the school, the family, the neighbourhood) and on the **macro**-level of the broader society (e.g. the educational system and the labour market). All these factors are shown to play **intersecting** roles in this process. When looking for a solution, a single measure usually only focuses on a single element and thus cannot solve what is inherently a social issue.

In line with most ESL researchers, we focus on the **cognitive, behavioural and emotional components** of students' school engagement, requiring a multidimensional approach on the individual level. Therefore, in addition to students' academic progression and attendance, their **feelings, aspirations and perceptions** are also taken into account. One of the main challenges faced by schools is to ensure that these more subtle indicators of engagement are not overlooked and that effective strategies and competences are developed to detect and act upon the multidimensional factors that influence ESL.

Explanatory models become even more complex when ESL is defined not only as an individual process but when it also takes into account one's surrounding **social context and opportunity structures**. Many young people enter secondary education from a less favourable socioeconomic position and have already experienced many obstacles in and outside their school life. While schools are not expected to compensate for all these difficulties, the establishment of cross-sector collaborations could address some of these external issues.

The first RESL.eu students' survey took place in 2014 in **7 countries** (Belgium, United Kingdom, Sweden, Portugal, Netherlands, Poland and Spain) and included over **19,000 students** (minimum 2,000 in each country).

Objectives of the survey were to

- to **identify risk and protective factors** for students at risk of early school leaving;

- to monitor and explore the **early trajectories** and perceptions of students at-risk of becoming early school leavers; and

- to understand the **socio-demographic profiles** of at-risk students

Based on the survey, several risk factors for students at risk of early school leaving were examined in detail. The relationship between key socio-demographic factors, like gender, educational track, family status and migration background, were related to school engagement, perceived support from parents, peers and teachers, and occupational and educational aspirations. It is important to consider these relationships as previous literature has indicated that lacking support from teachers, family and friends is an important risk factor for disengagement in school, which, in turn, can lead to early school leaving. Levels of perceived support correlated highly with school engagement and the findings of the survey indicate that the key role of certain variables is significant among participants from all the countries and across all groups.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of young people within different groups across our survey data that are in the lowest quartile of school engagement, and are consequently more at risk for early school leaving. Despite significant between-country differences, some trends are discernible. In most countries, **low school engagement** was more likely to be reported amongst male participants. Moreover, students living together with both biological parents appeared to be less likely to report low levels of engagement at school. Finally, lower levels of school engagement were found for students enrolled in vocational tracks, compared to those enrolled in general tracks.

**Figure 1
Key socio-demographic variables of students with 'low' school engagement**
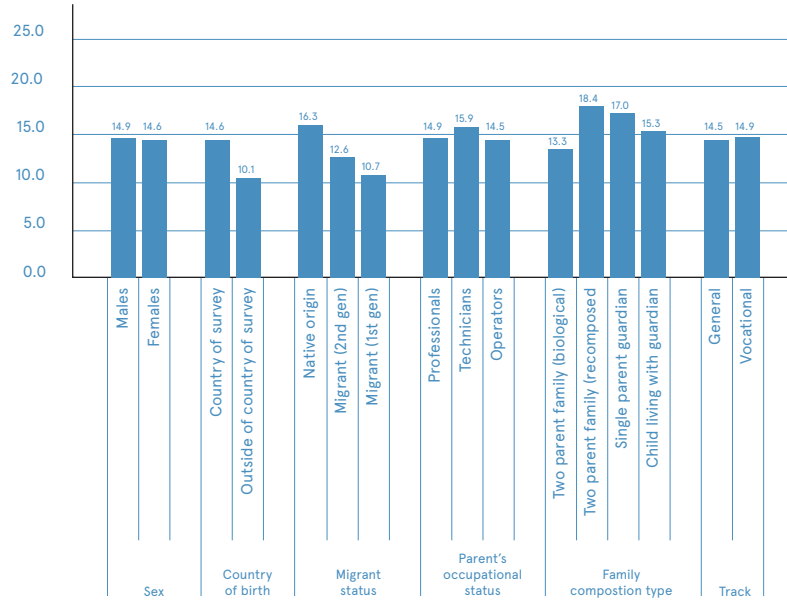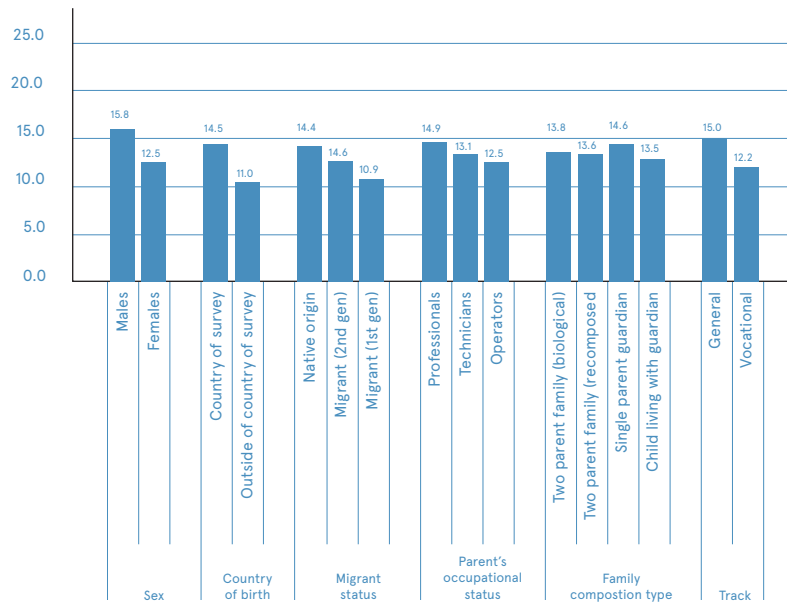

**Figure 2
Key socio-demographic variables of students with 'low' teacher support**

Preliminary analysis of our survey data further suggests the importance of the **support received from parents, peers and – most particularly – teachers** for young peoples' school engagement. Figure 2 shows that more male participants report having a low level of perceived teacher support, compared to female participants. Furthermore, students in vocational education indicate to feel less supported by their teachers, compared to students in general education. Differences in the profiles of students indicating perceptions of lower support from teachers were found across countries. For example, in the Dutch sample, foreign-born students were overrepresented in the low teacher support group, whereas in the UK and Sweden native-born respondents are more likely to report low support from their teachers. These findings indicate the importance of doing comparative research and demand for further analyses.

Generally, as shown in Figure 3, young women were more likely to express **aspirations** towards higher levels of education than their male class mates. Other survey data also show higher status career aspirations among female students (particularly in Belgium, Spain and Portugal).

**Figure 3
Educational aspirations, by gender**
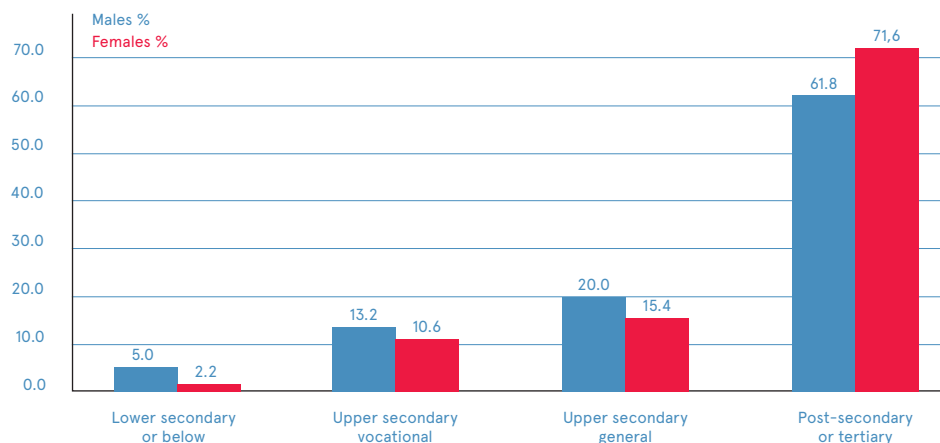
Yet, overall, the survey analysis presents a **complex picture** of how young people perceive and negotiate their educational trajectories and school lives, with several interrelating factors impacting upon their own experiences, levels of school engagement and decision-making, and substantial variation of these relationships across countries.

This survey on a range of socio-demographic, educational and attitudinal variables among students in schools (2014) will be followed up by a **second survey among the same participants two years later (2016)** in order to monitor their trajectory from school towards further training, higher education or labour market insertion.

More information in Project Paper 5 Students' Survey (A1): Preliminary analysis (www.resl-eu.org).

The idea that early school leaving can be seen as a process of gradual disengagement from school that can be altered **by timely prevention and intervention measures** is broadly supported by school staff and educational policy makers. The **early warning systems** in many schools employ a holistic approach towards the individual student by taking into account issues surrounding his/her cognitive, emotional and behavioural engagement. However, while some of these systems have proved effective in detecting and monitoring these dimensions, there appears to be a lack of measures that engage holistically with the observed issues. Our study has found that, at times, **schools' cooperation with external partners** proves beneficial in this respect.

> "Very helpful is the fact that, due to our cooperation with other institutions, the students have additional support. They sometimes need to consult specialists individually in the therapeutic centres, especially those kids having emotional problems. Without mental health it is impossible to achieve good educational results" (Pedagogical Counsellor, Sweden)

Our findings show that designing and implementing these early warning systems requires schools to have the capacity to interpret risk indicators and design suiting measures that respond to them. Because of this, it is incumbent on policy makers to develop policies for the **support and professionalization of teachers**, which is a crucial precondition for prevention and intervention measures. Another risk factor for the implementation and design of early warning systems is that they mostly focus on overt indicators of 'reduced' engagement, such as students' attainment, truancy or school misconduct. However, these indicators do not fully grasp more subtle emotional and personal issues that could influence the process of early school leaving. Students who do not display their high risk status via diminishing achievement or school misconduct therefore risk slipping under the radar.

More information in Project Paper 6 Cross-case Analyses of School-based Prevention and Intervention Measures (www.resl-eu.org)

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