



Teacher education is a deeply pedagogical process rooted in values, ethics, and the social purpose of schooling. Globally, it sits at the core of educational quality and fairness, as research in comparative and international education demonstrates: the training of teachers directly influences students' learning chances, social inclusion, and the democratic aims of schools. Teachers are not simply transmitters of curricula, but active professionals whose convictions, reflective skills, and ability to manage the complexities of classroom life give shape and substance to the educational experience itself.

The pedagogical dimension of teacher education frames teaching as a relational, context-aware, and ethically grounded profession rather than just a set of procedural skills. From a research perspective, this demands robust research methodologies that can critically examine the complex realities of schools and inform evidence-based policies. Equally important is the connection between theory and practice, which helps to bridge the persistent gap between universities and schools.

The contributions gathered in this volume reflect the richness and diversity of experiences showcased during the ATEE Spring Conference 2024, held at the University of Bergamo from May 29 to June 1, 2024. The volume presents 70 selected papers out of more than 300 presented by researchers representing over 40 countries.

This broad spectrum of studies highlights promising directions that can inspire renewed inquiry and concrete proposals aimed at improving contemporary educational systems.

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ATEE Spring Conference 2024

## ATEE Spring Conference 2024

### Teacher education research in Europe: trends, challenges, practices and perspectives

May 29<sup>th</sup> – June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024  
S. Agostino, Bergamo



Edited by Nicole Bianquin and Francesco Magni





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# BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

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trends, challenges, practices and perspectives

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**S. Agostino, 2 - Bergamo, Italy**

**Edited by Nicole Bianquin and Francesco Magni**



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# Preventing early school leaving. Perspectives of intervention research between school and territory

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## Abstract

This paper presents an exploratory study on the definition of early school leaving (ESL) in Italy. The study involved a desk study utilising keywords in major search engines, complemented by documentation from the Ministry of Education. A thematic analysis of the definitions identified five macro-categories: the definition and characterisation of the issue, risk factors and causes of ESL, economic and social consequences, ESL indicators, and fragmentation of the school system. The study aims to further investigate the strategies implemented in Italy to prevent ESL, with a particular focus on projects developed through collaboration between schools, local authorities, and third-sector organisations.

**Keywords:** drop out; school; youths; early school leavers.

## 1. Introduction

Early school leaving (ESL) represent a complex and multifactorial challenge (MIUR, 2014, 2018; AGIA, 2022). Recent scientific literature underscores the importance of adopting systemic and multidimensional models to deepen the understanding of this issue. These models move beyond quantitative indicators used to measure the prevalence of ESL, focusing on the diverse dynamics and interactions among several factors that influence the broader education and training system (Pandolfi, 2017; Colombo, 2015; Ross & Leatwood, 2013). In the Italian context, the Constitution enshrined principle of equitable and inclusive education and training system in Article 34. Over time, government have been progressively developed policies to enhance access to education and promoting inclusivity and equity (Eurydice, 2020).

However, significant challenges remain in fully realizing the constitutional mandate (Eurydice, 2020). A parallel scenario exists regarding the issue of ESL in other countries, though the scope and characteristics vary across context (European Commission, 2022). Since the early 2000s, Europe has convened round tables (Eurydice, 2014) to develop effective strategies for addressing this phenomenon. Notable initiatives aimed to reducing ESL include the Lisbon Strategy 2020 and the Europe 2030 project, both of which prioritize the development of equitable and inclusive education and training systems. In alignment with the objectives set forth in the Italian Constitution and European policies, Italy has established a regulatory framework, beginning with Legislative Decree 275/1999 (School Autonomy), and later reinforced by Law 107/2015 (Buona Scuola) to address the problem. Additionally, to address regional disparities and support efforts to combat ESL, the Italian government has recently introduced the PNRR fund.

In this context, an exploratory study was conducted to examine how ESL is conceptualized in both scientific and grey literature, as well as in the documents and report issues by the Ministry of Education from 2000 to the present.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological system model provides the theoretical framework for the analysis of school dropout. This model conceptualizes school dropout as the result of dynamic and reciprocal interactions between the student and various contextual factors, including family and school environments, as well as broader historical and cultural influence. Such an approach facilitates a nuanced understanding of the interplay among diverse variables that shaped school dropout trajectories.

Bronfenbrenner's model delineates five structural levels of the environment: the microsystem, encompassing direct interaction between the individual and their immediate contexts; the mesosystem, representing the interconnections between two or more microsystem in which the individual actively participates; the exosystem, comprising environmental settings that indirectly influence the individual; the macrosystem, defined by cultural and subcultural frameworks; and the chronosystem, which refers to temporal changes and continuities in the individual's environment.

Addressing the issue of school dropout requires a comprehensive approach that extends beyond the characteristics of at-risk individuals encompass the environments in which they are situated. From a systemic perspective, risk factors are cumulative, and tailored intervention strategies may be implemented at each structural level (Colombo, 2010; Cunti, 2017). For instance, at the macrosystem level, the prevention of school dropout is supported by the implementation of targeted educational and social policies. At the mesosystem level, intervention may focus on improving teaching practices and school infrastructure. At the mesosystem level, the emphasis lies on supporting individual at risk and fostering their immediate social relationships.

Another pivotal concept for analysing school dropout is equity. Equity is defined using the socio-economic-cultural status index (ESCS) developed by INVALSI, which reflects student's socio-economic-cultural backgrounds. Research consistently indicates that the educational system struggles to mitigate the challenges faced by students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, with educational disparities tending to exacerbate over the course schooling (Barone, 2017; INVALSI, 2024). While redistributive income policies in adulthood can alleviate some inequalities, the most effective strategy

involves implementing early interventions aimed at improving familial and educational environments during childhood (OECD, 2022).

### 3. The documentary study

The exploratory design of this study necessitated the use of desk research and the formulation of specific criteria for selecting relevant projects and theoretical contributions for analysis. The selection of information sources was guided by chronological criterion, beginning in the year 2000, which marked the introduction of school autonomy in Italy, and extending to 2024. This temporal focus aligns with a significant European milestone: the 2000 year is also saw the launch of the Lisbon Strategy, which outlined objectives for addressing early school leaving across European countries. In addition, to the chronological criterion, a keyword-based approach was employed, using terms such as early school leavers and synonymous or antonyms associated with educational failure. The search encompassed multiple academic disciplines- including education, economics, sociology, psychology, and statistics- reflecting the interdisciplinary relevant of the topic.

The initial documentary search yielded twenty-four definitions that satisfied the established criteria, from a total of forty sources. Sixteen definitions were excluded because they were secondary sources, merely citing definitions of ESL from the twenty-four primary sources identified in the desk research. The selected definitions were systematically organized into a table containing the author, publication year, research field and corresponding definition. This structured format facilitated a detailed comparative analysis, highlighting both similarities and differences with the same research field and across various disciplines.

This methodological approach provider deeper insights into evolution of the concept of school dropout, moving beyond a mere chronological account. The table of definitions ([see Appendix A](#)) also offered a comprehensive framework for comparing contributions across disciplines, thereby enhancing the understanding of how perspectives on school dropout have developed over time.

#### **3.1 Thematic analysis of early school leaving: definitions, risk factors, social and economic implications, and educational system challenges**

The twenty-four definitions were analysed from multiple perspectives. Initially, the changes, nuances, and developments of the phenomenon over time were examined. It was observed that socio-economic disadvantage is a recurrent theme in the definitions, suggesting that early school leaving (ESL) is not merely an educational issue but a broader, multifaceted phenomenon. For example, the definition of NEETs (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) extends the problem to the preliminary stages of workforce participation.

A significant contribution to the discourse, introduced in 2012, was Vertecchi's concept of the "dispersion inapparent" later defined by Ricci (2019) as "hidden" or "implicit" dropout. This form of dropout pertains to students who obtain a secondary school qualification but lack the essential skills to make informed decisions and engage responsibly within a social context (INVALSI, 2019).

Following consultations with experts in relevant fields, a thematic analysis was employed to identify key themes that could adequately explain the content of the various definitions. The analysis underscored the necessity for a multidimensional and integrated understanding of ESL, which consider the various contributing factors, diverse manifestations, and far-reaching consequences within the complex educational and socio-economic environment.

The analysis yielded five main categories: definition and characterization of the problem, risk factors, economic and social implications, indicators of school dropout, and fragmentation of the educational system.

##### *1. Definition and characterization of the problem.*

The analysis revealed that ESL is a multifactorial problem, encompassing not only early school leaving but also marginalization and the failure to acquire basic competencies (MIUR, 2000; Save the Children, 2011; AGIA, 2022). For instance, Save the Children (2011) identified at least six categories within the general term "dropout":

- Push-outs: student who are implicitly or explicitly encouraged to leave school due to dissatisfaction;
- Disaffected students: those who cannot connect with the school and sub consequently stop attending;
- Capable dropouts: socially disengaged and academically proficient students;
- Dropouts for external reasons: those who leave due to external factors;
- Capable dropouts (second variation): academically capable students who struggle to adapt to school demands and become marginalized;
- Stop-outs: students who temporarily leave school but later return;
- In-school dropouts: students who attend school but lack motivation and are at risk of dropping out.

This categorization aligns with the Italian Authority for Children and Adolescents (AGIA, 2022), which defines school dropout as the "failure to regularly, fully, or adequately use educational and training services by young people of school age." This definition encompasses individuals who, for several reasons, fail to participate in education during compulsory schooling, do not complete their educational path, or complete it late (e.g., repeating grades). In addition to these categories, Vertecchi (2012) introduced the concept of "dispersion inapparent," or hidden dropout, later refined by Ricci (2019) as "implicit dropout." This refers to students who, despite obtaining a secondary school diploma, lack the necessary competencies for informed decision-making and responsible behaviours in social contexts (INVALSI, 2019).

## 2. Risk Factors.

The analysis of risk factors highlights the critical role of socio-economic elements in understanding ESL. While no direct causal link has been established, a strong correlation exists between vulnerable individuals and early school leaving. The literature (Barone, 2017; INVALSI, 2019) identifies three categorised of factors that facilitate ESL:

- Ascribed factors: such as origin status, cultural capital, and social class, which continuously affect access to higher educational opportunities;
- Educational system-related factors: including school characteristics, teacher motivation, evaluation procedures, and teacher training;
- Motivational factors: such as time management, personal motivation, and a history of interpersonal difficulties (INVALSI, 2019).

These factors suggest that ESL arises from a complex interplay of individual, familial, and contextual elements.

## 3. Economic and social implications

ESL is recognized as an issue with significant economic and social consequences. It hampers productivity and competitiveness within the economic system, contributing to poverty and social exclusion (European Commission, 2017). Additionally, it exacerbates youth unemployment rates and the shortage of skilled labour, negatively impacting economic growth (Pandolfi, 2017). From a sociological perspective, ESL perpetuates social inequalities, highlighting the failure of the educational system to offer equitable opportunities for all young people, with enduring effects on employment prospects and social welfare (Pandolfi, 2017).

## 4. Indicators of school dropout

The analysis identified several key indicators used to measure school dropout, which are essential for assessing the effectiveness of educational systems and monitoring trends over time. Two particularly indicators are:

- Explicit school dropout: defined as the percentage of youth aged 18 to 24 who have completed no more than compulsory education and have not been involved in further education in the four weeks preceding the survey (AGIA, 2022);

- Implicit school dropout: measured through standardized assessments conducted by INVALSI since 2019, focusing on competencies in areas such as text comprehension, mathematics, and language skills.

There is no universal agreement on the indicators for measuring ESL, as educational systems vary across countries. Some European countries use national indices alongside Eurostat and OECD indicators, while the differences in educational structures influence the development of policies to address ESL, which vary across nations (Eurydice, 2014).

#### 5. *Fragmentation of the educational system*

The final category addresses the fragmentation within the educational system, particularly in the context of economic challenges. Institutional difficulties in maintaining cohesion and providing adequate support to students are highlighted. The deceleration of educational pathways is viewed as an inefficient use of resources, including time, cognitive capacity, and human capital. Educational fragmentation (Priore, 2017) can also result in discontinuity, preventing students from experiencing consistent, continuous learning.

### 4. Conclusion

The thematic analysis underscores that early school leaving (ESL) represents a multifaceted and complex issue that cannot be understood through a singular lens. Instead, it is shaped by a confluence of individual, familial and contextual factors, which interact in complex ways. ESL extended beyond traditional metrics of explicit dropout rates to encompass implicit forms of disengagement, which are equally critical for understanding the broader implications of the issue.

Building on these findings, the study proceeds with an in-depth examination of a specific region, employing a framework that incorporates documented educational alliances. The analysis will draw on data from INVALSI to pinpoint areas characterized by elevated levels of implicit school dropout. Additional insights will be gained from ISTAT data to explore the region's demographic and social characteristics. Furthermore, municipal council resolutions and administrative documents obtained from local government records will serve to analyse collaborative educational efforts involving schools, third-sector organizations, and local authorities. This investigation aims to identify both the strengths and limitations of these alliances, thereby contributing to the formulation of guidelines that could inform strategies in other regions with comparable profiles.

The risk factors associated with ESL are diverse and include inherent determinants- such as socio-economics-status- and systemic deficiencies within the education system. This systemic problem includes inadequate school infrastructure, low teacher motivation and ineffective assessment methodologies. Together, these factors create an environment conducive to early school leaving. The social and economic ramifications of ESL are profound, impacting individual life trajectories and broader societal welfare. These consequences include stunted economic development, elevated youth unemployment rates and heightened social exclusion. These outcomes highlight the need to address ESL not merely as an educational challenge but a pressing societal concern.

Moreover, the fragmentation within the education system constitutes a significant impediment to supporting at-risk students. The lack of cohesion and continuity in educational pathways exacerbates existing inequalities, underscoring the need for targeted interventions. Such interventions should prioritize fostering systemic integration, reducing fragmentation, and providing enhanced support mechanisms for students facing adversity to promote inclusivity and educational achievement.

Considering these findings, a comprehensive and multidimensional approach is essential to effectively addressing the issue of early school leaving. This approach should actively involve stakeholders across various levels, including policymakers, educators, community organisations and focus on both preventive measures and targeted intervention strategies.

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