

Is there anything specific about early school leaving in Southeast Europe?

A review of research and policy

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Introduction

- Studies on early school leaving (ESL) from the Southeast European (SEE) context have been missing from the international ESL research map
- The goal of this talk is to review research papers and strategic documents from this region
- General question: Is anything specific about ESL in this region in comparison to the wider European research and policy context?

Introduction

- More specific questions include:
 - How is ESL defined in research papers and policy documents from selected SEE countries?
 - What is the extent of ESL in the selected SEE countries?
 - How is ESL approached in research conducted in SEE countries (theoretically and methodologically)?
 - Which factors are identified as impacting ESL in these papers and documents, and what are seen as policy solutions?

Methodology

- Selected countries:
 - Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia
- Policy documents
 - the selection was informed by their official status (relevant authorities involved in their development) and time span covered (most recent)
 - include governmental developmental plans, strategies, progress report on meeting the Millennium Development Goals etc.
- Empirical literature
 - found by searching different bibliographical data bases, library catalogues and web sites
 - includes journal articles, a book and empirical research reports (e.g. conducted by UNICEF, UNDP or ministries)

Definitions of ESL

- Percentage of 18-24-year-olds (EUROSTAT) or 20-24-year-olds (OECD) with less than upper secondary education and not in education and training (GHK, 2005)
- Croatia: early school leavers - those who have not completed secondary education and no longer participate in a regular education programme (Matković, 2010)
- Slovenia: secondary school leavers - students who have not completed secondary education within five years of enrolment (Ule *et al.*, 2005)
- Serbia: ESL - terminating (*prekidanje*) education before completing secondary schooling (Cvejić *et al.*, 2010)

Definitions of ESL

- Bosnia and Herzegovina: no explicit definition of ESL is provided by the authors
 - authors focus both on the problem of non-enrolment and non-completion at primary and secondary school level (UNICEF, 2011)
- Montenegro: ESL is an unsuccessful attempt to acquire qualifications that should be obtained at the end of an educational programme
 - suggesting that this could pertain to both primary and secondary school non-completion (Rajković *et al.*, 2011)
- Reviewed policy documents tend to frame ESL in more general terms referring to ‘leaving school’
 - The EUROSTAT indicator for ESL, is not widespread in the examined studies.

Extent of ESL

- Identifying the extent of ESL in the selected SEE countries was a challenge because of the lack of systematic research in this area.
- Croatia: the EC (2009) document cites a 3.7% rate of ESL, which is the lowest percentage among the 33 countries presented.
- Slovenia: average rate of ESL indicated at 5.1% (EC, 2009)
 - According to this data, both Slovenia and Croatia meet the European benchmark of below 10% ESL.
 - Document warns that the data for Croatia and Slovenia lack reliability because of small sample size
 - but similar data are found according to the Croatian Bureau of Statistics and other administrative data for Croatia cited in Matković (2010), and Ferić, Milas and Rihtar (2010).

Extent of ESL

- The EC (2009) document does not provide ESL estimates for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro or Serbia.
- Serbia: non-completion rates in secondary schooling at 5%, suggesting low non-completion rates (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2012);
 - rate of leaving secondary schooling is still high in the vocational education sector: 23.5% of pupils leave 3-year vocational schools and 9.3% leave 4-year vocational schools (Stojiljković, 2012)
 - only 34% of Roma pupils complete compulsory schooling (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2012)

Extent of ESL

- Bosnia and Herzegovina: 73% of the population aged 16-18 attended secondary school in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while 57% of the total number of primary school graduates in one generation also graduate from secondary school (UNDP, 2007).
 - only 32.6% of Roma pupils complete compulsory schooling (Ministry of Finance and UN, 2010)
- We did not find ESL data in the Montenegrin documents

Empirical research on ESL in the case SEE countries - Theoretical approaches

- Only a few empirical studies work with a theoretical perspective,
 - whereas others either include a review of the literature on possible theoretical approaches or do not have an explicit guiding theoretical framework.
- Used theoretical frameworks:
 - Boudon's (1974) primary and secondary effects model and Breen and Goldthorpe's work (1997) on rational choice and relative risk aversion behaviour (in Matković, 2010)

Theoretical approaches

- Review of the literature on possible theoretical approaches
 - Groups of risk factors for ESL:
 - academic factors, deviant or problematic behaviour, and socio-demographic characteristics (in Ferić, Milas, and Rihtar, 2010):
 - Theories on the causes of ESL:
 - theory of general deviancy, theory of deviant affiliation, theory of poor family socialization, theory of social determinism, and theory of poor academic achievement (in Milas and Ferić, 2009):

Theoretical approaches

- Reports that mention no theoretical framework, but review the most frequent causes for ESL (UNICEF, 2011; Rajković et al., 2011):
 - low economic status of the family,
 - limited access to school,
 - special needs children or children suffering from a chronic illness,
 - children of returnees,
 - Roma and other minorities,
 - dysfunctional families.

Methodological approaches

- Predominantly quantitative research using primary or secondary data (e.g. Labour Force Survey micro data, EUROSTAT data)
- Less frequent: mixed methods studies (e.g. combining face-to-face interviews and questionnaires, or focus groups and questionnaires)
- Pronounced quantitative dimension can also be observed in many other international ESL studies (e.g. Cemalcilar and Goksen, 2012; Markussen, Froseth and Sanberg, 2011; Tragg, van der Velden, 2011; O'Connell and Freeney, 2011),
 - in opposition to research by authors such as Smyth and Hattam (2001) according to whom qualitative, “voiced” research is required to understand the process of dropping out from school.

Factors impacting ESL

- Dale (2010) summarises the reasons for ESL as follows:
 - individual (low self-esteem, confidence, special educational needs, health problems, low academic ability, pregnancy),
 - family (low levels of education, low family income, large family size, household stress, home-school culture conflict, household mobility, parenting practices),
 - schooling system (social profile of schools, class size, curriculum interest, teacher roles, comprehensive versus differentiated compulsory schooling, peer effects) and
 - employment and training (job opportunities).

Findings on factors impacting ESL

- Croatia:
 - low level of parental education and low household income level (Matković, 2010);
 - low socioeconomic status, low level of mother's education, low school grades, and retaking a school year due to poor academic achievement (Ferić, Milas and Rihtar, 2010);
 - low motivation, negative grades, a too difficult curriculum and truancy (Strugar, 2011).
- Serbia:
 - lack of interest in schooling and lack of financial resources for the younger population (15-19 years);
 - pressure from the family to leave school because of farm work, cultural practices (attitudes of the family that further education is not needed), and financial reasons in the older population (55+) (Cvejić et al., 2010).

Findings on factors impacting ESL

- Montenegro:
 - truancy, poor performance and undisciplined behaviour
 - boys, first grade students of secondary school and pupils in 3-year vocational schools are more likely to drop out (Rajković et al., 2011)
- Slovenia:
 - predominantly low socio-economic status of the families,
 - lack of parental incentive,
 - unsatisfactory relationships with parents, and
 - perception that the teachers' attitudes towards them are negative (Božič, 2002; Žnidarič, 2002)
- Exceptions regarding factors shaping ESL that were addressed in the strategic documents (e.g. girls and returnees in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Roma across SEE countries) were not addressed in the reviewed research studies.

Importance of ESL in SEE strategic documents

- Primarily related to the individual's risk of social exclusion:
 - exposure “to poverty and social exclusion”, resorting to “socially unacceptable behaviour” (Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, Republic of Croatia, 2005; Council of Ministers, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2008);
 - “generates social exclusion and higher social benefits because such individuals are less employable and able to take care of him/herself” (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2012);
 - “reduces any young person's prospects of finding employment” (Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia in Nećak Luk and Novak Lukanovič, 2009).

Groups identified as at-risk pupils

- Roma children identified as the main at-risk group in all countries
- special educational needs pupils (Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Slovenia),
- pupils from villages or remote areas (Croatia, Serbia),
- war returnees (people who left Bosnia and Herzegovina during the war and then returned to the country) (Bosnia and Herzegovina),
- migrants (Slovenia),
- girls from large, low socio-economic status families, who live more than 3 km from their school (Bosnia and Herzegovina).

Factors influencing ESL

- Policy documents from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina make no mention of factors which shape ESL.
- Emphasis more on economic and cultural deprivation, and not on the broader social and economic context, thus subscribing to a “deficit” model of understanding ESL:
 - socio-economic status, customs (e.g. early marriage) and parental roles (Montenegro)
 - language competences, cultural mismatch, poor academic performance and transport (Slovenia)
- Responsibility for ESL not reduced to the individual:
 - negative social and economic factors and lack of preparedness for school, but also poor school equipment and lack of teacher skills (Serbia)

Policy solutions recommended for ESL

- Prevention
 - access to pre-school education (Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia)
- Intervention
 - guidance and counselling (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia), supplementary classes (Croatia, 2005), scholarships (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia), monitoring (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia) and enhanced teacher-parent communication (Montenegro, 2011).
- Compensation
 - development of bridging programmes (Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina) and lifelong learning programmes (Croatia)
- No mention of more radical approaches to addressing ESL
 - structural changes in several policy areas, including poverty, labour market structures, and gender inequality

Conclusion

- Similarities between ESL in the examined SEE countries and the wider European context:
 - various criteria for operationalizing ESL
 - a quantitative approach to researching ESL
 - similar factors accounting for ESL identified
 - similar policy solutions proposed

Conclusion

- Specificities of examined SEE countries in a comparative perspective
 - Croatia and Slovenia stand out in terms of their low non-completion rates (below 10%)
 - the SEE countries share especially high non-completion rates for Roma pupils
 - the higher incidence of girls at risk of ESL in Bosnia and Herzegovina is a minority finding in the EU context

Conclusion

- There is a need for more empirically based insights about ESL in the region
 - especially from theoretically and methodologically sound research with a focus on qualitative methods
- Focus in research and policy should not be only on individual factors impacting ESL but also on broader social and structural factors (schooling system, poverty, traditional values...)

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