APPLE
eArly warning Platform to Prevent youth
from dropping out of schooL Education

Summary Report for APPLE

Early Warning Platform to Prevent youth from dropping out of School Education

Contents

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1 Introduction

In the framework of Erasmus+ project APPLE (eArly warning Platform to Prevent youth from dropping out of schooL Education), a capacity building needs analysis has been carried out in six different countries; Greece, Romania, Portugal, Spain, North Macedonia and UK. The aim of the needs analysis is to identify and research the reasons young people drop out of school. The results from the six national reports are being summarized in the present paper, which is going to become the base for the development of the capacity building seminars for educators. The purpose of the seminars is to provide educators with the necessary tools to identify drop out risk factors in students.

One of the European Council's priorities, is reducing the levels of Early School drop out, below 10%. There has been a slight inconsistency regarding the definition of the term "early school drop out" among the European members. According to the International Standard Classification of Education 2011 (ISCED-2011), education levels are defined as follows:

- ► Level 0-2: preschool, primary and 1st stage of secondary education.
- ► Level 3-4: 2nd stage of secondary education and post-secondary non-higher education.
- ► Level 5-8: 1st and 2nd cycle of higher education and doctorate.

Based on the Economical Active Population Survey, early school drop outs are considered people aged 18-24, who have not successfully completed the second stage of secondary education and have not received any formal or informal training within the past four weeks of participating in the survey.

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One out of ten young people in the EU have completed at most a lower secondary education and are not in further education and training

Early leavers from education and training (% of population aged 18–24)
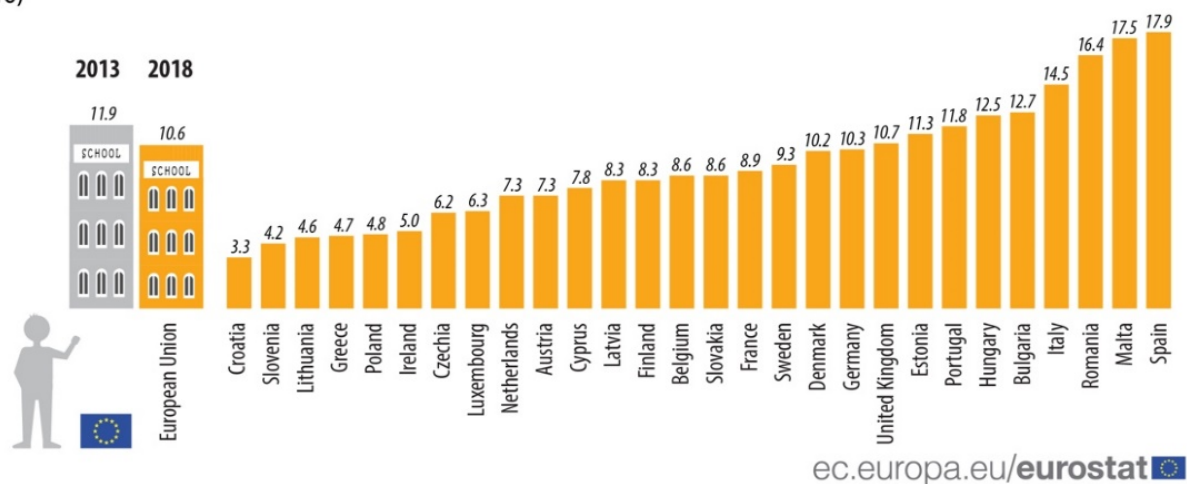(2018)

Figure 1. The average early school leaving rate for 2018 in EU countries compared to the average of 2013
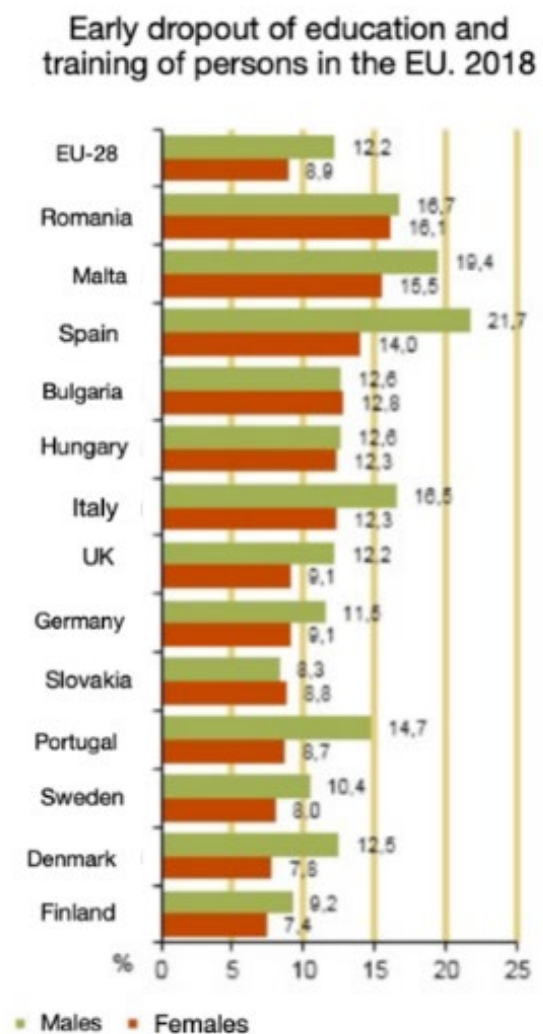
Figure 1 depicts the national drop out rate in comparison to the EU average rate of 2018 and 2013 (Eurostats, 2019). Greece was significantly lower than the EU average while Portugal, Romania and Spain were amongst the highest. UK was approximately identical to the EU average. No data were collected from North Macedonia. Dropping out has been linked to social exclusion, unemployment, poor physical and mental health and poverty (Early school leaving in Europe, 2011).

Some factors that have been identified throughout Europe as high risk factors for dropping out, are poor socio-economic status, learning difficulties, school climate and relationship between educators and students (Europa, 2020). North Macedonia, Romania and Greece have identified higher drop out rates in areas with high concentration of Roma, Muslim minority and migrant population, which indicates the existence of socio-economic and cultural higher risk. Socio-economic risk factors have also been observed in Portugal, as high rates of drop out students

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were evident in families that were struggling to support education financially (Estêvão & Alves, 2013). UK seems also to record higher drop out rates in poorer families. In North Macedonia, apart from Roma population, the second higher factor that was observed was learning difficulties.

The school climate, school violence and the teaching quality have been found to play a major role in dropping out of lower secondary education in Greece, Romania and Portugal (Maximiano, 2017). High rates of bullying and bad relationships among students, as well as between students and educators appear to hinder considerably the completion of basic education, especially when co-existing with other risk factors. In Romania there is a significantly higher drop our rate in rural areas, compared with urban centres. This has been attributed to the poorer quality of educational establishments, lack of teaching personnel and digital equipment. Conversely, in Greece higher rates of drop outs are observed in big urban centres, compared to rural areas with low minority populations. This has most likely been attributed to overpopulation of the big cities centres like Athens that constitute 1/3 of the country's population (IPE, 2007).

Large discrepancies have also been found throughout Europe regarding the gender of early school leavers. Men have been found to be at higher risk of dropping out compared to females, as seen in the graph below.

Early dropout of education and training of persons in the EU. 2018

	Males	Females
EU-28	12.2	8.9
Romania	16.7	16.1
Malta	19.4	15.5
Spain	21.7	14.0
Bulgaria	12.6	12.8
Hungary	12.6	12.3
Italy	16.5	12.3
UK	12.2	9.1
Germany	11.8	9.1
Slovakia	8.3	8.8
Portugal	14.7	8.7
Sweden	10.4	8.0
Denmark	12.5	7.6
Finland	9.2	7.4

% 0 5 10 15 20 25

■ Males ■ Females

(Eurostat, 2020)

As it is evident, Portugal, UK and Spain show significant discrepancies in terms of gender dropouts. In 2018, Spain has noted the highest rates of male dropouts of all Europe (21.7% compared to EU average of 12,2%). The large difference between male (21.7%) and female (14.0%) dropouts, indicates a high gender risk factor that is also evident in many EU countries.

In the case of the UK, there have been little quantitative data regarding early school leavers. This is due to the fact that education is mandatory up to the age of 18. Parents and families of early school leavers, before the age of 16, may be fined or even incarcerated. An increase of 28% has been observed in such fines, between the years 2018 and 2019. The main reason for dropping out of school in these cases is financial stability. Students in UK, typically drop out of school in pursuit of technical jobs that require no academic training, and allow them to contribute financially to their household, early. Due to the serious repercussions of leaving school prematurely, educational institutes are reluctant to release demographical data of dropout population.

Much of the above facts are verified in the desk and empirical research that was carried out in the six aforementioned countries. The results of the findings are summarized in the following sections of the report. The aim of the research is to develop an online seminar, based on said findings for the purpose of providing educators with the necessary skills to identify risk factors in their students.

2 Methodology

In order to assess the needs of educators a combination of desk and field research was carried out in each project partner country. Analysis on literature review identified several existing tools, methodologies and practices that are used to combat the phenomenon of early school leave. Each country drew data from their national and local policies, official databases, articles and legislation.

Most countries reviewed official data published by their government. More specifically, in Greece the Institute of Educational Policy (IEP), the National Statistical Authority (Education Statistics) and the European Community Statistical Office (EUROSTAT) measure most data regarding school dropout. The Spanish literature review was based on data obtained by the Spanish Government and Valencian Community. In the case of North Macedonia, most official data are almost exclusively describing early school leaving of Roma population and people with disabilities.

The empirical research was carried out in the form of interviews with fine educators and five education stakeholders. In addition, pre-identified questionnaires were also given to participants in order to obtain data on the perceived characteristics of individuals in risk of dropping out of school. Therefore, both qualitative and quantitative data were obtained. Due to the emergency pandemic measurements, most interviews were carried out through skype or telephone. The interviews were recorded, in order to facilitate transcription and analysis of the collected data, based on the guidelines of the Intellectual Output. Verbal or written consent to the recording was collected prior to the interviews.

The first set of interviews on educators in North Macedonia was carried out with five educators from two secondary schools from the area of Skopje. One school's student body constitutes of 90% of Roma population, while the other is a special needs school. For the second set of interviews, five education stakeholders from the Ministry of Education and Science were recruited.

In Greece, five female secondary school educators were interviewed, from both urban and rural areas. The five stakeholders that were additionally interviewed came all from educational backgrounds and work at the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs.

The first set of Portuguese interviewees are made up of three secondary school educators of various subjects (Mathematics, Portuguese and French). The corresponding seven stakeholders constituted of educational project managers and coordinators, psychologists and pedagogical director, from six different institutional entities.

In Romania, the five educators that were interviewed work in secondary public schools within the area of Timisoara and the come from a variety of different fields, including Math, Sport Science and school counselling. They all have at least five years of experience in their respective schools. The five education stakeholders that took part in the second set of interviews included a social worker, an NGO education coordinator, a school inspector, the president of a local foundation working with young people, and a psychologist.

The Spanish educators that were interviewed were selected from different areas of the Valencian Community. They were carefully chosen in order to include both experienced educators with vast amount of empirical knowledge and recent graduates who possess a fresh and innovative perspective. The educator stakeholders belonged to a variety of institutions and showed satisfactory diversity in regards to age and gender. Two of them were headmasters of public high schools, with adequate knowledge on the matter of school administration, while the other three belonged to the Youth Council and The Cultural Association Go Europe institutes, with many educational and inclusive programs for younger people.

The UK interviews were carried out with five secondary school teachers. The five stakeholders that took part in the research were youth workers, speech therapist working with students and a representative of academia.

3 Key findings of the desk research

3.1 Existing practices and tools for the prevention of early school leaving

Many of the national practices, policies and legislation for preventing early school dropping out are established, run and coordinated by the countries' Governments. Occasionally, the collaboration of other Youth and Educational Institutes as well as NGOs, is requested by local authorities.

In some of the partner countries, a number of policies have been established to prevent dropping out of school, by providing financial aid. In Romania, the government is providing large funding to low-performance public schools for remedial classes, vocational training, extracurricular activities and interior/class renovation. Part of the aforementioned funding is directed towards cultural mediation and counselling for Roma students. Additionally, the government aims to encourage transition to higher education by providing secondary high schools with better teaching conditions, by revising and updating 8th grade curriculum and exam material and developing digital learning for supporting educators. The government also provides scholarships, transportation to school, as well as essential provisions to students and their families in need.

North Macedonia is also providing scholarships to Roma students and students with special needs, in order to encourage them to finish secondary education. Free transportation to and from school is provided to all students, in case the school is located more than 2.6 km away from the student's residence. Free transportation is also provided to companions of special needs students. Free textbooks are provided to all students, at the beginning of school year, under the condition that they are returned at the end of the academic year. In Portugal, a number of scholarships are also provided to Roma students, through the "Choices Programme", which was awarded as a 'good practise' in 2012 at the congress "Reducing Early School Leaving: efficient and effective policies in Europe". In the UK, free transportation, free meals and financial aid is also provided to disadvantaged families, especially in Wales, Scotland and North Ireland.

Greece, North Macedonia and Portugal, have taken measures to reduce dropout rates due to language barriers. In North Macedonia, it is required by law that students of ethnic minorities that their mother tongue is not Macedonian but it derives from Cyrillic alphabet, are educated in the

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tongue of their respective community. Greece has established generalized bilingual education for more than 70 years, in areas with high Turkish population, near the north-eastern borders with Turkey. Portugal has established a diagnostic test for proficiency in Portuguese, for the purpose of reducing dropout rates of immigrants. Based on the results, students are integrated in classes of the corresponding level.

Romania, Portugal, North Macedonia and Greece have established extra classes and tutoring for students with low academic performance. Greek high schools and secondary high schools offer choice of attending additional remedial programs, after school hours. These programs offer revision, further explanation and even personal tutoring to students who are in need, for free. These programs are optional and can be attended by both low and high performance students. North Macedonia offers tutoring and mentoring assistance to around 84 schools with high Roma population. Romania has established summer bridge programs, teaching centers, and tutoring programs in University campuses. A 'School after School' program was also implemented by the organization "Save the Children" so that specially trained educators can assist students from vulnerable families to complete school assignments. It is estimated that 92% of students who attend this program have been benefited. Portugal has also implemented extra classes through the "Fenix" program, which allows for a more individualized teaching, adjusted to the different learning paces. This program intends to close the gap between low and high performance students, as well as to promote excellence to high performance students. An additional surrogate class is also implemented called "TurmaMais Project". Students with low academic success are being integrated in a special class that aims to raise their performance. Students from different classes can be integrated in TurmaMais, who share more common characteristics, thus reducing heterogeneity. Students are moved back to their original classes once their performance is on equal level with their peers. The project was 40%-80% successful. The Fenix and TurmaMais Programs strengthen the individual monitoring mechanisms of students, and make it easier to follow students who are at risk of leaving school due to learning difficulties, several problems of integration into the school community, lack of motivation, high rate of absenteeism, low self-esteem, low expectations regarding learning and their future life, as well as a mismatch between school culture and family culture.

Greece, North Macedonia, Spain and Portugal have taken extra measures towards social inclusion of socially vulnerable population. Greece has established Educational Priority Zones for migrants and Roma students, who do not hold the required level of attainment in Greek and additional

intervention by the state is needed. Moreover, Cross-Cultural Schools are also established in Greece, aiming at educational and social inclusion of vulnerable groups of students, by respecting students' cultural identity and avoiding negative discrimination. Schools in North Macedonia that do not have adequate capacity to facilitate social inclusion due to diversity, implement Regional Support for Inclusive Education", which is also implemented in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, Macedonia and Kosovo. In the project's framework a tool for training teachers in inclusive education through various practices has been prepared. North Macedonia has also taken steps to form an inclusive team of pedagogues, psychologists and special educators for students with special needs, as well as to build access ramps. In Portugal, the "TEIP Program" is being implemented, which provides students of economic and socially disadvantaged territories, marked by poverty, social exclusion, violence and indiscipline, with a four-part dropout reducing intervention. The four main pillars of the said program are: 1) Improvement of Teaching and Learning; 2) Prevention of absenteeism and early school drop-out; 3) Organization and management; 4) School - Family - Community Relationship. Success rate of TEIP Program has been estimated around 62%. In Spain, - Workshops of the "SERES Foundation" are being implemented in the more socially and economically troubled areas of the Valencian Community. These workshops aim to raise social awareness and inform students and their families about scholarships and social services.

Spain has implemented a number of educational workshops over the last years, which aim to provide students with a variety of skills like work planning and organization skills, time management and social skills that will help them complete the secondary education successfully. Workshops for the reduction of de-motivation, passivity in the face of academic tasks, history of failure, lack of knowledge of effective study techniques; family environment, lack of control, and absence of rules, are found to be effective (CNED, 2014). Finally, the programme "Student Assistants" aims to promote shared responsibility and involvement in the improvement of the community's emotional climate, in schools with diverse background, ethnicity, languages and cultures inside the classrooms. This is achieved by the promotion of collaboration, reduction of bullying and conflicts, and the creation of channels of communication and mutual knowledge between educators and students.

Portugal has established a unique system of reporting absenteeism from school that exceeds two weeks. In such cases, a multidisciplinary team of local authority, social services, local organizations, and several agents from the education sector is formed, and intervenes by assessing the severity

of the student's risk of dropping out and directing them to the appropriate, health, social or educational establishment.

UK has tackled the issue of dropping out of school by increasing employability and offering vocational and empirical training. One of the targets of the educational system is to pair local businesses with educational institutes like high schools and colleges. Such pairings and partnerships offer students of vulnerable families that cannot support education financially, the opportunity to participate in paid internships or placements, through which they can obtain technical skills making them more competitive in the job market. This way, students who are at risk of dropping out of mainstream education, may choose to follow a vocational path and develop a set of technical skillsets.

3.2 Needs of educators

A reoccurring factor in some countries regarding the needs of educators, is the insufficiency of initial training. North Macedonia reports that teaching practicum in a school is not always well-integrated and candidates are not always coached by experienced educators. New educators often report little assurance about the efficiency of teaching competences they have learnt when they graduate from 3rd level education. (OECD, 2019). New educators have little confidence in their ability to motivate students, transfer knowledge to the students, and implement new teaching methods and different approaches. A similar situation is also reported in Romania. Academic education offers little practical training for educators in modern techniques and inclusive pedagogy. The certification exam tends to asses theoretical rather than empirical knowledge and offers little measurement of on-the-job competence. According to the TALIS Project (2018) in Portugal, educators have little confidence in teaching multicultural/multilingual environments (39%) or environments that include special needs students, even though their initial training included "teaching mixed contents". Romanian educators that took part in TALIS Project have also reported high need for additional training in terms of teaching multicultural/multilingual and special needs environment.

The necessity of capacity building for special needs training has been emphasized in Greece, Romania, North Macedonia and Portugal. A study in Greece showed that inclusive education was perceived as a challenge for Greek educators as it would increase the volume of their work as well as their already existing work pressure. The existing curricula would need to be adapted to

special needs students, the class sizes would need to be reduced, in-class support would need psychologists, speech-therapists and special educators to be integrated, and remedial and parallel classes would need to be integrated (Zoniou-Sideri & Vlachou, 2006). North Macedonia has stressed the necessity of capacity building seminars for inclusive training (Roma population, special needs students, and social vulnerable families) according to the teaching profile developed by The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2012). Apart from capacity building, North Macedonia has mentioned technological and architectural renovation among the improvements of special needs education (UNICEF, 2014). Additionally, capacity building seminars for strengthening knowledge and ability to use the new and advancing assisting technology is mandatory, especially for senior educators. Both North Macedonia and Portugal mention the need to train educators in new and alternative teaching methods and approaches for special needs students (Casanova, 2015). Romanian educators have reported special needs as the professional development topic that has the highest need for further training (35% compared to 22% in OECD).

Romania and Greece have reported a serious lack of teaching personnel, resulting in overworked educators and insufficient delivery of teaching service. An average of 45% of headmasters in Romania have reported shortage in qualified personnel to teach special needs students, especially in rural areas. Shortage in primary school and lower secondary school educators in ICT, sciences, foreign language teaching and the teaching of arts have also been reported. In addition, special needs educators positions are commonly filled by non-qualified personnel especially in rural and distant areas. In Greece, during and after the recession period, serious cases of understaffed schools have been reported due to underfunding. Cancelled classes, overload of teaching content, lack of evaluation and large-sized classrooms are common occurrences in Greece, due to underfunding. Furthermore, 18% of teaching personnel work under limited no-renewable contracts. Therefore, a number of teaching positions are covered by substitute teachers, who cannot offer continuity and sustainability of knowledge for students and downgrade therefore the whole educational process (OECD, 2018).

Portugal has mentioned the need for a national structured system of absenteeism reporting for observation, analysis and monitoring of cases in risk. A lack of such system, tools and strategies has also been mentioned in Spain. There is a serious need of a universal guide on how to deal with high absenteeism, and how to reignite academic motivation in students, as well as develop soft skills for students in risk of dropping out. In Greece, 9 out of 10 educators that took part in a

survey in 2017 agree that they have never attended a seminar on high absenteeism and early school leaving.

Greek educators have expressed a need to be better equipped so that they would be able to communicate more efficiently with the families of students, who are in risk of dropping out. A similar need was evident in Spain, as well. Educators encountered difficulties when communicating with troubled family environments and felt unprepared and lacking the necessary tools to do so. Spanish educators also expressed the desire to have a systematic guide for understanding the impact of the family involvement in the educational process. Educators in the UK have also reported that are short of help when coming to deal with out-of-school factors like family problems and substance abuse, and that they are only limited to educational curriculum. Greece, Spain and Portugal have all reported the need for cooperation with external social services and institutes, as well as the recruitment of professionals like social workers in the school staff, so as to deal with the more serious cases. Portugal has also mentioned the need to inform educators of socioeconomic support mechanisms for socially and economically vulnerable students and their families, so that teachers would be able to direct those in need to the appropriate external service and institute.

In Spain, the need for a National and European intervention was noted for the prevention of dropping out in the first year of scholarships, in order to strengthen the process of integration and enhance the feeling of belonging to a school community, especially for Roma and special needs students. Portugal reported the need of a measurement and evaluation tool for monitoring high-risk factors, as educators seem to fail to understand the reason for dropping out (Duarte, 2009). In Greece, a significant number of children who drop out of school were reported to be from rural areas and do so in order to pursue agricultural professions. Finally, Greek educators reported being unfairly lenient to underperforming students and unable to properly apply the school policy of class repetition.

3.3 Needs of stakeholders

The needs of the stakeholders appeared to differ in each of the partner countries. In North Macedonia, the establishment of policies for prevention of school dropouts is implemented primarily by the Ministry of Education and Science. According to the Strategy for Roma Inclusion, a National Action Plan for Education proposes measures to facilitate Roma participation in

education but is lacks a monitoring system for measuring dropout rate. There is no National Action Plan for students with disabilities. Additionally, more than half of the country's primary and secondary schools offer double-shift instruction, greatly hindering instructional time and after-school study. A need for national school evaluation framework has also been noted, based on which the objectives and performance of schools will be reflected.

In Portugal, according to the Ministry's reviews, there is a need to promote a network of collaboration between schools, based on common interests and collaborative training workshops. According to stakeholders' opinion, additional funding is essential in order to facilitate continuous training of the educators. In high-risk cases of socially disadvantaged students and families, there is a need to develop actions to promote children's rights and provide information on social interventions. There is also a high need to construct personalized action plans for the purpose of intensifying family interventions and involvement. The need for family involvement was also noted in Spain. A proposition was made to include guidance service tutors and scheduled visits by social agents, to the intervention mechanism.

A number of Greek studies under the 3rd Community Support Framework (CSF) co-funded by the Greek government and the EU (2000-2006), have shown a number of limitations regarding relevant research. Interviews with 5 NGOs showed that most organizations have limited or fragmented actions that correspond to lack of knowledge on the phenomenon, lack of access to information and lack of disseminated surveys. Findings also showed lack of reliable quantitative data in relation to the phenomenon of school dropouts in Greece. Most NGOs have not conducted research in relation to school dropouts. Another issue raised by the studies is the lack of adequate cooperation between national educational agencies and other individual, private and social agencies. Most NGOs stated that any attempt at collaboration with agencies of corresponding Ministries, have produced inefficient and fragmented results. Therefore, their actions are limited to students and family counseling in matters of healthcare and career orientation, and organizing Greek teaching modules for socially vulnerable groups.

In 2017, the Romania government's spending for education was reported at 2.8% of its GDP. It should be noted that the equivalent EU average is estimated at 4.4%. Therefore, Romanian schools are experiencing a serious lack of funding. This results in overcrowded classrooms, poor sanitary conditions in schools, and lack of modern and innovative establishments. Furthermore, the system of complementary funding of local authorities is more favorable towards students of

richer municipalities, which in turn widens the gap between rural and urban schooling quality (World Bank, 2018). This quality bipolarization is further reinforced by the system of clustering students to schools of similar socioeconomic background. Thus, poorer students attend schools of lower quality, and vice versa (World Bank, 2018). School transportation service is also insufficient to rural areas. An effort is being made to develop an early warning mechanism that will aid the data collection process, as well as the coordination of educational institutes and other external agencies. A need for such mechanism was also expressed in Spain.

Greece, Portugal and the UK have all expressed the need for a strong association between educational institutes and social service professionals. In Greece, a study has shown the importance of social intervention, prevention treatment and family mediation, in the reduction of dropout rates (Galani & Michou, 2013). In Portugal, the "Plan to combat school dropout" (2013-2014) proposed the promotion of the socio-educational skills of the population in order to implement Social School Action and support services for families in need. The importance of youth workers is highlighted in the UK, for their contribution to reducing dropout rates, when dealing with troubled home backgrounds, absence of appropriate role models outside school, and substance abuse.

Finally, literature review in Romania, North Macedonia and Portugal have shown that there is a need for improvement of online and digital facilities. In North Macedonia, schools lack the facilities for distant learning and the ability to follow the new trends in teaching digitalization. Similarly, the number of highly digitally equipped and connected schools in Romania is lower than the EU average (European Commission, 2019b).

4 Key findings of the empirical research

4.1 Findings of the interviews with educators

For the purpose of empirical research, five educators were interviewed in each of the six countries, as described in the methodology section. Each question is analysed bellow;

4.1.1 Difficulties faced by the educators

"Do you face any difficulties in your work with youth at risk of early school leaving? Would you like to give us some examples?" Educators from Greece, North Macedonia, Portugal and Spain agree that the family's lack of motivation and cooperation with school, is one of the biggest difficulties they face when dealing with students at risk of dropping out. Portugal mentions that TEIP schools with students from troubled backgrounds and dysfunctional families, "perceive both teachers and their classmates as an enemy". Greek educators mention that the greatest obstacle when dealing with such cases is the disruptive behaviour and the aggression these students show towards the educator. The UK educators, on the other hand, have a way of dealing with such violent outbreaks by directing them to external social agencies, like youth workers. Poor academic achievement and failure on numerous subjects is a difficulty mentioned by the UK, North Macedonian and Spanish educators, as they have no existing tool or policy to deal with it.

In North Macedonia, 60% of the interviewees answered that poor socio-economic conditions is the leading source of early school leaving. Spanish educators agreed with that fact and mentioned that students of poorer backgrounds cannot afford to buy the school essentials (books, notebooks...) even if they wish to attend school. Romania has mentioned that the leading difficulty that educators face is the lack of support from the Ministry, in dealing with cases of dropouts. Similar findings emerged in the Portuguese research, as educators mentioned a lack of viable solutions when such a case is identified, which cultivates a sense of powerlessness to the teachers.

Greece and North Macedonia, mention that a large number of poorer or refugee students drop out of school to migrate to other countries. Portuguese educators mentioned the lack

of flexibility of school curriculum as a serious problem, as it offers little space for adjustments to the needs of each student and class, which makes the learning experience boring and demotivating. In Romania, the lack of appropriate training of educators when dealing with difficult situations was identified as a serious obstacle. Academic training offers few pedagogical modules (usually one in the spawn of two years), to Math or Science educators, which is clearly not enough.

Spanish educators mention a shortage of special needs support teachers, due to high numbers of students in need. This shortage forces educators to invest a lot of effort and time towards special needs students without proper support, slowing down the overall teaching progress. Finally, Spain has reported that the phenomenon of early school leaving lacks visibility and therefore not enough funding is invested in dealing with it.

4.1.2 Methods used to prevent early school leaving

"Do you use any methodologies that can/could contribute to the prevention of early school leaving?" The vast majority of the participants reported that there is no systematic methodology or policy when dealing with students at risk of dropping out, and in most cases follow a personalized approach. It is worth mentioning that 50% of the UK participants could not identify any method of prevention of ESL.

In Greece and North Macedonia, 100% of the participants mentioned that individual discussions with the students through the use of appropriate communication skills, boosting self-esteem and providing good examples, is the first and foremost plan of intervention. Similar is the initial approach in Romania, but with a heavy emphasis on devoting limited time and resources. Greece, North Macedonia, UK and Portugal, mention a practice of a mentor/tutor system, which involves either educators, school psychologists or even classmates, in order to achieve up to a degree the students' motivation. UK also offers a system of one-on-one interview with career counsellors.

All countries reported that in such cases, an individualised adaptation to the teaching curriculum is made, based on the educators' judgements. Greek schools may organize non-academic workshops (theatre, music, sports…) in order to inspire low-performing students and to facilitate their engagement at school. . They also attempt to engage students in

Erasmus programs and organize visits by experts/specialists and life coaches. North Macedonia provides tutoring assistance and scholarships, with the help of the Ministry. TEIP schools in Portugal, adopt a policy of not giving homework, holding only one test per semester, and avoiding classes that are too long. This way, students with unfavourable conditions at home, are not required to put additional effort outside school. In Spain, schools hold workshops for informing families on the importance of education, facilitating the students' motivation and providing training to educators. UK schools reduce teaching hours, so that students who cannot attend full-time education can cope, and reduce GCSE subjects (9th grade exams). They also plan career days, visits to universities and lessons about alternative options after leaving school.

Romanian participants have mentioned that attempting to involve the parents to the educational process has been the number one priority, but this has proved very difficult, especially in the cases of Roma population. Such cases have been approached through the community mediator, which has been proved successful at least up to an extent successful.

4.1.3 Existing practices and tools that contribute to the prevention of the phenomenon

"Are you aware of any existing practices or tools for the prevention of early school leaving? "
In Greece, the UK and Portugal, no official tools and practices were identified on a national level. In all three countries the importance of good communication and relationship between school, students and families is highlighted. Greece and the UK mention the role of social workers in the process of preventing early school leaving, but dispute their effectiveness in more serious cases, and especially Roma population in Greece. Portugal mentions the involvement of CPCJ (Child and Youth Protection Commission, which is an organ that intervenes when the school signalizes a child at risk) as a threat in motivating families to encourage attendance, but even that does not appear to be a solution in most of the cases. Class restructuring is proposed instead, which may involve reducing the number of students or transferring the student in question to a class appropriate to their academic skills.

In Romania, even though there is an official policy for the phenomenon, it is not implemented on a national level. Financial support has offered minimum results in reducing ESL rates and the Romanian participants reach the conclusion that only the school's and educators' willingness to get involved with each case individually, may provide some success. In North Macedonia, the Law regarding Compulsory Attendance of Secondary Education has been implemented successfully, and the mentoring/tutoring system offered by the Ministry offers a viable solution, especially in low-achieving and special needs students. Financial benefits from NGOs and other institutions given to help socially disadvantaged and Roma population has also been reported as successful. The offering of free textbooks, free transport and scholarships, were also some other measures that have contributed positively. All of the above, however, offer plenty of room for improvement and further development, according to the views of all of the participants from North Macedonia.

Spanish educators mentioned the existence of an absenteeism monitoring system, according to which four days of unjustified absence result in a meeting between the school principal and the parents. Based on the meeting's outcome, social services may be involved. Furthermore, grade 5 and 6 of Spanish primary schools, offer a less theoretical and more practical-focused curriculum, in order to maintain the students' motivation and attendance of secondary education.

4.1.4 Training needs and necessary skills

"Do you feel sufficiently trained for working with young people who are at risk of early school leaving? " All of the Greek and the UK participants replied that they have never attended such seminars in the past. Three of the Greek participants were not interested in participating in such seminars, because "knowledge on the phenomenon is empirical rather than theoretical" as they said. None of the UK participants felt like attending similar trainings, because as they said, this was not scheduled as a part of their original professional curriculum. . Only two North Macedonian educators mentioned that they had attended similar trainings in the past, while the rest said that they did not   feel ready to deal with such cases. Even though Portuguese and Romanian participants agreed on the necessity of trainings, they argued that most trainings offer theoretical knowledge and do

not reflect the reality of school environments. Therefore they feel reluctant to take part in them.

"What skills do you find necessary for an educator to possess in order to identify young people who are at risk of early school leaving? " Participants from all countries agreed to the importance of empathy, good communication skills and the ability to adapt and implement individualized teaching plans to students in risk of ESL. Observation and being able to form trustful relationships with both students and family, was also a common skill reported by Greece, North Macedonia and Portugal. Greek participants mentioned the importance of devotion to duty. They stated that such cases, often require a lot of effort, without bringing about the expected results. The reason for that is that no matter the individualized support offered by the educator, the student's dedication to school is hindered by their dysfunctional social background.

Portuguese participants mention the need of psychological content in such trainings, as the psychology of affection and being able to approach students with empathy, is something that has been reported to be missing from schools. They also report the importance of being able to establish firm and fair rules from early stages of the educational school process. Spanish interviews have identified the educator's ability to develop the students' soft skills, while UK participants agreed with the Portuguese regarding the contribution of mental health counselling professionals in the school reality. However they do not share the same view concerning the necessity of educators' training on drop-out prevention.

4.1.5 Training recommendations

*"Would you be willing to participate in relevant trainings, in order to acquire new skills on innovate pedagogical methodologies that could contribute to the prevention of such phenomena? If yes, what would you like this training to include? "*The majority of the participants from all countries were willing to participate in trainings regarding ESL, with the exception of UK participants, who reported that such training is incapable of providing adequate skills that other professionals are more equipped to handle. Some of the recommendations are listed below:

- ► Greece and North Macedonia proposed seminars that included exchange of good practises between countries, as well as development of communication and motivational skills.
- ► Greece and North Macedonia also highlighted the importance of promoting inclusive education in a multi-cultural environment, especially when Roma students are involved.
- ► North Macedonia, Portugal, Romania and Spain recommended practical examples of communication with families and how they can be motivated to participate in their children's education.
- ► Portugal and Spain mentioned that any training should be adapted to the school reality and offer empirical rather than theoretic knowledge.
- ► Portugal and the UK mentioned that training for combating ESL should include psychology-related content, which would involve seminars about counselling and therapy.
- ► Romania and Spain agree that educators do not receive any official training on the matter, therefore any relevant seminar should be mandatory.
- ► Finally, Spanish participants recommended seminars that include training in self-esteem cultivation, soft-skills development, and facilitation of social consciousness and sensibility.

4.2 Findings of the interviews with stakeholders

For the purpose of empirical research, five stakeholders were interviewed in each of the six countries, as described in the methodology section. Each question is analysed bellow;

"Do you work with educators who are in contact with young people who are at risk of early school leaving?" Would you like to give us some examples?" Four out of five participants from Greece and North Macedonia have worked indirectly with students who were at risk of dropping out. Two of the North Macedonian participants have experience in working with Roma population. Participants from Portugal, Romania and Spain have all either direct or indirect contact with students in risk of dropping out, and a little more than half (4/7) of the participants from the UK have worked directly or indirectly with the target population.

"Are you aware of any existing practices or tools for the prevention of the phenomenon? " Greek stakeholders mentioned the existence of "Vocational Guidance and Counselling Centres" and the

"institutions of Prevention Centres", that can offer psychological support, stress relief, and inclusive issues advocating. The concept of School Mediation was also mentioned, as well as the participation in extracurricular activities, in the framework of Erasmus projects or collaboration projects with other schools. Some recommendations that were made included, the suggestions for the provision of school social workers and other mental health professionals in schools, poverty relief measures (e.g. meal provision),the establishment of Roma mediators, assigned educators to students at risk of ESL by the ministry, and the training of educators on the subject of ESL, on a national level. Participants from North Macedonia also mentioned the importance of Roma mediators, and a kind of financial relief (e.g. scholarships) to Roma students, and especially Roma students with special needs.

Portuguese stakeholders mentioned the importance of raising awareness of issues like bullying and violence while dating, as risk factors of dropping out. An effort is being made by local authorities to organize such awareness raising events, especially in complicated neighbourhoods with a high rate of ESL. Another factor that was highlighted was the importance of cooperation among the different entities (school, CPCJ, municipalities, city council), as well as the establishment of mutual ESL prevention protocols followed by both schools and families, when dealing with such cases. Romanian stakeholders showed little confidence in the way and frequency that existing tools are being implemented by the government and the ministry.

Participants from Spain mentioned the Absenteeism Programme of the Valencian Community, through which cases of high absenteeism are monitored, the offer of scholarships (on a national and local level) to less economically fortunate families, and the involvement of social workers and social mediators in the school system. The UK stakeholders highlighted the effectiveness of focused individualized support by the teachers, in order to deal with students at risk of dropping out. Additionally, students who face mental health issues, and more specifically anxiety disorders, are offered adjusted timetable (to avoid crowded hours), access to quiet rooms for studying and lunch breaks, as well as multiagency support for them and their families.

"*Are you aware of any practices used by the educators to prevent and combat early school leaving?*" Greek participants once again mentioned the poverty release programs and the external activities and adjustments to the teaching curricula made by the Ministry. North Macedonian responses were mostly about conducting of additional classes for low-achievement students, individual support, counselling and motivation for students at risk, awareness raising workshops and

meetings regarding discrimination, mentoring and tutoring for Roma population, as well as raising awareness with families regarding the importance of education. Portuguese stakeholders mentioned that many schools offer adjusted curriculum using a more practical approach, since not all students are interested in theoretical knowledge and academic education. Romanian participants did not report any official practices on a national level. They reported that the approach of educators on the issue of school dropping out, was mainly achieved   through individual support and communication with the students at risk and their families.

Spanish stakeholders mentioned school workshops for families and their importance   for their children's education, the effectiveness of practical classes for students with learning difficulties, the practice of individual tutors, individualized training by the YMCA for students and families facing social seclusion, as well as the practice of motivating students through school competitions and school visits. Out of the seven UK participants, only two were able to report a number of school practices for combating ESL. These practices include; one-on-one counselling support, reducing the number of students in classrooms, the use of non-judgmental but tolerant attitudes towards parents and families, and support from social agencies in cases of bullying and other types of violence.

"Are there any results of the practices used?" Only one out of five stakeholders in Greece described the above measures as very effective. The remaining stakeholders described existing practises as outdated, and mention that in order for a single teacher to be able to combat ESL through an individualistic approach towards the student at risk, the whole school should be able to provide support, as a unit. In Greece, education and the phenomenon of ESL seem to have taken a blow, due to the recent years' economic crisis. All stakeholders in North Macedonia, on the other hand, have agreed that the above measures may bring significant results, without disputing the room for improvement.

Portuguese stakeholders stated that even though adjustments in curriculum offer some solution, there is a need for sports inclusion, as there is currently little opportunity in this field. Only one of the UK stakeholders replied to this question by stating that the success of any institutional initiative may be measured by better exam results and increased enrolment rate in alternative education.

"*Does your organisation provide any training(s) to educators who work with youth at risk of early school leaving?*" Greek participants did not have a clear picture of tools and trainings for prevention of ESL, because the Ministry focuses on compensatory measures for individuals who have already dropped out of school. However, some recommendations were made about systematic annual trainings of the educators on ESL, regarding new approaches and good practises from other countries, the necessity of additional funding to schools and how it should be invested towards combating ESL, as well as the importance to focus on the prevention of the phenomenon (e.g. socioeconomic vulnerability, family relationships and collaboration with the school etc.). North Macedonian stakeholders mentioned that some school principals offer some training on the subject to their educators, but no official training is provided on a national level by the Ministry.

In Romania, some of the participants offer remedial educational programs to students at risk of ESL or are in charge of monitoring high risk cases. The County School Inspectorate offers a few funded ESF related projects, whose actions include, among others, training educators on the phenomenon.

"*Would you be willing to support educators for the prevention and tackling of early school leaving?*" All Greek participants expressed their willingness to support educators in combating ESL. Some recommendations that were made referred to the provision of sufficient training on the matter, the implementation of a national strategy when dealing with high risk cases, the raising of awareness amongst parents, strengthening the role of parents' associations, emphasizing the importance of school counselling, facilitating collaboration between the Ministry and the teaching staff. Also they stressed the usefulness of holding seminars and info days for local stakeholders and educators of all levels, of better monitoring and mapping of the ESL phenomenon, rendering any relevant training to educators mandatory, and introducing a sufficient monitoring and evaluation system for students at risk of dropping out. Similar recommendations were also made by the North Macedonian stakeholders including; building bridges of communication between school and families, improving inter-sectoral work between the Ministry of Labor and Social Services, establishing monitoring and evaluation working groups for ESL, and developing a national training program for educators in cooperation with the Ministry of Education.

The Spanish stakeholders suggested the following measures: Developing workshops for the building of specific tools which help students improve their soft skills, and general

communication capacity, developing workshops that focus on practical solutions like integration of socially vulnerable groups of students, and dissemination of such workshops, so as to have an impact on a wider scale, rather than just locally. Romanian stakeholders agreed that for such a complex issue as the ESL, a multi-agency cooperation is needed. Some recommendations that they proposed were the mandatory ESL training for educators, the involvement of parent associations and the role that relevant civil society organizations may have in decision making, financial investment in data collection on ESL, and the establishment of a body of experts in the school environment, such as the school counselors or the specialized support teachers. The UK stakeholders expressed their willingness to assist educators in combating ESL, but offered no further clarification.

Portuguese stakeholders offered some recommendations about the trainings concerning the role and importance of parental involvement in education, the importance of having a number of multicultural schools for low socio-economic status students and the necessity to adjust their content and approaches according to their needs, the necessity to train educators on conflict management, collaborative work and the ability to approach and communicate with parents and deal with students with behavioral problems dysfunctional family and social surroundings, and finally to raise awareness of educators in order to handle the cases of students with very low self-esteem and those who face family problems.

4.3 Characteristics of young people at risk of early school leaving

All the educators and the stakeholders of each country that participated in the research completed a questionnaire regarding the characteristics of young people at risk of early school leaving. The results of the analysis from the six countries are shown below:

Regarding the common characteristics of the students at risk of ESL:

> ► The vast majority of the participants in all countries were unaware of the exact figures of dropout rates, in their corresponding country.
> ► The age that was reported to be at a higher risk for dropping out of school was between 13 and 17.
> ► The participants from Greece, Portugal, Spain and the UK agreed that male students are more likely to drop out of school. The participants from North Macedonia

reported that there are higher rates of girls dropping out of school than boys . Some of the UK participants backed up this statement by mentioning that increasing rates of teenage pregnancy may pose a serious risk factor.

▶ The participants from all countries placed social, cultural and ethnic minorities, like Roma, Albanian, refugees and Muslim populations, within the most vulnerable groups.

▶ The participants from all countries agreed that students with mental health issues, special needs, special educational needs, traumatic experiences and some form of addiction are also more vulnerable in situations that lead in dropping out of school.

▶ The participants from all the countries also reported that students living in rural areas, also have a slightly higher risk of dropping out of school.

▶ Only the participants from Portugal reported that students of LGBTQI+ community and single-parent families have also a higher risk of dropping out of school.

Regarding the background of the students at risk of ESL:

▶ The majority of the participants from Greece, North Macedonia, Portugal and Romania, have reported that the most important factor regarding the involvement of the family in ESL is the lack of encouragement followed by dysfunctional relationships within the family, less individual attention for children, absent parent and traumatic experiences within the family.

▶ Poverty is another factor that was reported to influence students' decision to drop out of school, by the Spanish, the North Macedonian, the Romanian and the UK participants.

▶ Ethnic and religious minority background students were reported to have a higher chance of dropping out, according to the Portuguese, the Greek, the North Macedonian and the Spanish participants.

Regarding the school qualities that affect students at risk of ESL:

▶ The vast majority of the participants from all countries reported that low academic achievement is the factor that mostly affects students in dropping out of school.

- ▶ Other reasons that scored high in all the participating countries, were irregular/low attendance, lack of interest in school, weak reading and math skills, being retained in one or more grades and weak cognitive skills.
- ▶ The Portuguese participants mentioned the frequency of school transfers as an additional factor that affects ESL.
- ▶ The quality of teacher performance was also reported by the North Macedonian, the Portuguese and the Romanian participants as an important factor that affects dropping out rates.
- ▶ Finally, the participants from all countries mentioned that administrative/instructional leadership of schools have a major impact in the ESL rates of students.

5 Conclusion

Both the desk and empirical research, indicate that educators across all six of the partner countries have little knowledge on ESL and even fewer tools, so as to be helped to recognize and prevent students, who are at risk of dropping out of school. There is little research data on the phenomenon of early school leaving and the central governments of each country do not take enough steps towards combating the phenomenon. This becomes evident by the levels of ESL of the six countries which are higher than the average European rates.

The majority of professionals in education and the stakeholders that participated in the research have come to the conclusion that a systematic approach needs to be followed by the government of each country and should be implemented on a national level. Part of the aforementioned approach includes the training of educators in recognizing and preventing students at risk of dropping out.

Education professionals would benefit more from this training if it was mandatory as part of their formal academic training and supported by the Ministry of Education of each country. In addition, according to the results of the interviews , the training would be more helpful if it included sections with good practice examples and methodology tools that help professionals in their everyday school practices, such as the following:

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- ► Presentation and evaluation of good practices from different countries.
- ► New and innovative teaching methods and approaches.
- ► Student-teacher individualized counselling and student motivation techniques.
- ► In depth profiling of populations that face a higher risk of dropping out of school, based on the characteristics that were mentioned in the previous section of the report.
- ► Efficient and productive ways to build communication bridges with parents and families, especially with the ones from different cultural backgrounds like Roma populations, and help them get them involved in the educational process of their children.
- ► Equipping educators with necessary information and skills, so as to enable them to direct very complicated cases to the appropriate social service agencies when needed.
- ► Building collaborations and partnerships with external agencies (Youth Agencies, NGOs, Educational Institutes) and professionals (child psychologists, social workers, career counselors), in order to be able to get access to support from multiple agencies, when in need.
- ► Establishing an efficient system of monitoring and evaluation of students with low/irregular attendance and low academic success, that should be used on a national level.
- ► Providing educators with the necessary skills, so as to offer adequate support to students with special needs and special educational needs, In a number of cases it is important to help educators learn how they can better integrate these children in mainstream classrooms , especially , when they are not accompanied by a personal special need assistant.

In conclusion, APPLE project has given the opportunity to a great range of European professionals working in education to reconsider all the variables that lead to early school leaving especially at the difficult and so fast changing times that we leave. Having achieved this, it will be much easier for them to adopt in their work the training tool that is being created according to the needs that were expressed by the six different European countries, following certain European standards and guidelines. This in turn is expected to result in good work in terms of quality and impact of educational outcomes.

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