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# BETWEEN SCHOOL AND WORK

## Vocational education and the policy against early school leaving in Poland

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Hanna Tomaszewska-Pękala\*, Paulina Marchlik\* & Anna Wrona\*

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**Abstract:** The article<sup>1</sup> analyses selected measures implemented by sectors of education and social policy in Poland, aimed at tackling the early school leaving (ESL) phenomenon. The data presented is based on an analysis of policy documents, IDIs and FGDs with educational experts, representatives of ministries, local authorities, school staff, regional employment centres and chambers of craft within the RESL.eu project. The starting point for the discussion is the hypothesis that there is a relation between leaving the system of education early, youth unemployment and NEETs rate. While the existence of this relationship is equivocal, as shown by the analysis of existing data, the undertaken policy measures somewhat implicitly assume its presence. Early school leavers are seen as the potential unemployed or at least as people who may have certain difficulties in entering the labour market. This is in contrast with the results of qualitative research, which show that the most common reason for abandoning the school education, according to school principals and teachers, is taking up a job accompanied by the inability to reconcile work and study. Thus, further efforts to develop more flexible alternatives to school-based forms of vocational training and education should be reinforced.

**Keywords:** early school leaving, ESL, educational policy, social policy, NEETs, youth unemployment

### ENTRE L'ÉCOLE ET LE TRAVAIL: LA FORMATION PROFESSIONNELLE ET LA POLITIQUE DE LUTTE CONTRE LE DÉCROCHAGE SCOLAIRE EN POLOGNE

**Résumé:** Dans l'article on présente l'analyse de certaines solutions mises en œuvre par les secteurs d'éducation et de politique sociale en Pologne, dans le but de réagir contre le phénomène du

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\* Faculty of Education, University of Warsaw (Warsaw/Poland).

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départ prématuré de l'école. Les données présentées sont basées sur l'analyse des documents concernant la politique, les entrevues d'individus et de groupes menées auprès de représentants des ministères, pouvoirs locaux, personnel scolaire, agences locales pour l'emploi et chambres de métiers et d'artisanat dans le cadre du projet RESL.eu. Le point du départ pour la discussion s'appuie sur l'hypothèse qu'il existe un lien entre le départ prématuré du système éducatif, le chômage et le taux de l'indicateur NEET (*Not in Education, Employment or Training*: ni étudiant, ni employé, ni stagiaire). Même si, comme prouve l'analyse des données, l'existence de ce lien reste ambiguë, des mesures politiques adoptées supposent implicitement cette relation. Les personnes ayant prématurément abandonné leur éducation sont perçues comme des chômeurs potentiels, ou au moins comme ceux, qui pourraient avoir des problèmes pour entrer sur le marché du travail. Ceci contraste nettement avec les résultats des recherches qualitatives qui démontrent que, selon les directeurs des écoles et des enseignants, la raison la plus fréquente du départ prématuré de l'école est le début de l'activité professionnelle et l'incapacité de concilier le travail et les études. Il importe donc de renforcer les démarches visant le développement des formes plus flexibles voire alternatives de formation professionnelle et d'éducation.

**Mots-clés:** départ prématuré de l'école, ESL, politique éducative, politique sociale, NEET, chômage des jeunes

#### **ENTRE ESCOLA E TRABALHO: A FORMAÇÃO PROFISSIONAL E A POLÍTICA CONTRA O ABANDONO ESCOLAR PRECOCE NA POLÓNIA**

**Resumo:** Este artigo tenta descrever várias medidas para combater o abandono escolar precoce (ESL) introduzidas na área da educação e política social na Polónia. Os dados apresentados no artigo são baseados na análise de documentos de orientação política, entrevistas individuais e em grupo com especialistas na área da educação, representantes de ministérios, autoridades locais, pessoal educativo, centros de emprego locais e câmaras de artesanato realizados no projeto RESL.eu. A nossa análise partiu da hipótese da existência de uma relação entre o abandono escolar precoce, desemprego e taxa de NEET (jovens que não trabalham, não estudam e não seguem formação). Embora a existência desta relação não seja clara, como mostra a análise de dados existentes, as medidas políticas tomadas assumem a existência desta relação de forma implícita. Os jovens que abandonam precocemente a escola estão conotados como futuros desempregados ou pelo menos como pessoas que terão problemas em entrar no mercado de trabalho. Esta ideia contrasta com os resultados qualitativos da investigação, que mostram que, de acordo com os diretores escolares e professores, a causa mais comum de abandono escolar precoce está relacionada com obtenção de empregos que impossibilitam os jovens de conciliar trabalho e estudo. Deste modo, devem ser adotadas medidas para desenvolver alternativas ao treino vocacional e educativo dado nas escolas que permitam uma maior flexibilidade.

**Palavras-chave:** abandono escolar precoce, política educativa, política social, NEET, desemprego jovem

## 1. Introduction

Today, politics poses in front of education more and more tasks related to solving important social and economic issues such as bullying, addictions, youth unemployment, etc. This phenomenon called educationalisation (Bridges, 2008) involves the appropriation of education by politicians to achieve the objectives which are not always consistent with the logic of the functioning of the education systems. The Europe 2020 strategy is a project of an economic nature, and economic growth is to be ensured through effective investments, e.g., in education. It assumes that reduction of ESL rates may indirectly contribute to raising the level of education of societies, which is a measure of social and economic development. Thus, education systems face no small challenge: on the one hand, education of citizens in accordance with the labour market needs (such as specific professions, skills) and, on the other, providing equal educational opportunities and leading to a situation in which every year more people obtain higher education (Marchlik & Tomaszewska-Pękala, 2013c).

Assuming that there is a link between ESL, youth unemployment and NEETs, the ESL phenomenon should be considered as both an educational and a social policy issue. In this article, we focus primarily on discussing the actions that are taken at the interface between education, vocational training of youth and their entering the labour market. Particular attention will be devoted to the situation of basic vocational school (BVS) students who are prepared to take immediate employment after graduating from upper secondary school and, at the same time, are theoretically (for reasons described in detail later in the text) more at risk of ESL than their peers in other types of schools. What kind of support in reconciling school and work can they expect? What other alternative ways of obtaining education and professional competence are offered by the existing system of education and social policy?

## 2. Discussion on early school leaving in Poland and Europe

### *2.1. Definitions of early leaving from education and training*

Reducing the rates of ESL is one of the five headline targets for the European Union (EU) in 2020. Let us look at the concept of early leaving from education and training and how it is defined in European and Polish documents and academic literature. Since this paper presents selected findings obtained in the RESL.eu project, we will also present the definition established for the purpose of the project.

It seems that there is not one common definition of ESL. Oomen and Plant (2014) pertinently notice that the concept of ESL is not fixed among different states and it is often used interchangeably with other terms, such as *school dropouts*, *interrupted learners*, *ELETs* (early leavers from education and training) and *NEETs* (not in education, employment or training). All these phenomena have slightly different definitions, which, however, have something in common: they all focus on the attainment of a certain level of education by the population. Previously, in the EU documents, early leavers from education and training were referred to as early school leavers, but recently the term has been changed, to include also those young people that have left training. However, the definition has remained the same (see Official Journal of the European Union, 2011; European Commission, 2013; European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, & Cedefop, 2014).

What does leaving school «early» mean? According to the Eurostat definition, it means leaving school without obtaining at least lower secondary education certificate. In the EU, ELET rate is based on the EU Labour Force Survey and concerns those people aged 18-24 with at most lower secondary education<sup>2</sup> and who were not in education or training during the last four weeks preceding the survey. In our article, we will use the terms *early school leaving* (ESL) and *early leaving from education or training* (ELET) interchangeably.

The definition worked out in the RESL.eu project by all nine partner countries assumes that ESL is «leaving education un(der)qualified (unqualified or underqualified)» without relating to the compulsory school age, as it is different in different countries, but relating to the attainment of a minimum qualification level of an ISCED level 3 (2011 ISCED scale), which is comparable across countries (Araújo, Rocha, Macedo, Magalhães, & Oliveira, 2013).

In the Polish context, leaving school early would mean leaving education or training at any point before the end of a full cycle of compulsory education or before the age of 18. Full-time schooling is compulsory in Poland until the age of 16. Thus, a full cycle of full-time compulsory school education includes ten years of school education: a pre-school preparatory year, a 6-year primary school and a 3-year lower secondary school. However, education is compulsory until the age of 18, and people aged 16-18 may either continue education at an upper secondary school or receive part-time education at the employers' premises. Although upper secondary schools are not compulsory, a vast majority of young people decide to attend full-time upper secondary education rather than choose vocational training with the employers (Fundacja Rozwoju Systemu Edukacji [FRSE]/Eurydice, 2014).

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<sup>2</sup> Lower secondary education means ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education) 2011 level 0-2 for data from 2014 onwards and to ISCED 1997 level 0-3C short for data up to 2013.

## **2.2. ESL as an academic and political issue in Poland**

The terms *early school leaving* or *early leaving from education or training* do not appear in Polish academic literature. In their works, to refer to persons who have not completed a full cycle of compulsory education, Polish scholars traditionally use such concepts as *school dropout* (in Polish, *odpad szkolny*) and *sieve* (in Polish, *odsiew*) (Kwiecinski, 1972, 2002; Fatyga, Tyszkiewicz, & Zielinski, 2001; Putkiewicz & Zahorska, 2001), or employ the concept of *dropout* as a synonym for *early school leaving* (Mikiewicz, 2011). The traditionally used Polish term *odpad szkolny* has highly pejorative connotations and is synonymous with such words as: *waste*, *reject*, *trash*. The concept of dropout has also been referred to as *school abandonment* and is associated with the assumption of giving up school attendance (Kwiecinski, 2002). Dropout has also been called *school mortality*, which indicates the irreversibility of the process and its negative dimension (Kwiecinski, 2002).

ESL can be analysed at many levels: individual (micro), school-level (meso) and systemic (macro). At the micro level, from the point of view of an individual, leaving school prematurely is treated as a kind of school failure, but also a personal disaster of a student (Kwiecinski, 2002). However, at the meso level, from the point of view of the school, it is understood as an educational loss, together with such phenomena as: *sieve*, which means eliminating a student from the class, but allowing him to continue education with a one-year delay (for an individual this is grade repetition, in Polish, *drugorocznosc*), migration between schools (flow, reorientation) or moving to a school which has a lower formal status, a simpler curriculum, lower prestige, etc. (Kwiecinski, 2002). At the macro level, from the point of view of the society and the educational system, leaving school early is perceived as educational inefficiency of the system and a social loss – the society loses an active citizen, engaged in political, cultural and economic life, a potential employee who could flexibly adapt to the changing conditions in the labour market. Students who fall out of the system are described with the word «defenceless»: Kwiecinski (2002) remarks that students abandon school because they feel marginalised due to coincidence of life and are thus marginalised as far as their life chances (social, cultural and personal) are concerned, which may lead to social exclusion, poverty and helplessness transferred to next generations (Marchlik & Tomaszewska-Pękala, 2013b).

The phenomenon of leaving school or training early is not recognised as a problem by the Polish policymakers. An analysis of policy documents, reports, national statistics, academic literature, has shown that until the issue of reducing ESL rate was mentioned in the Europe 2020 strategy as one of the key objectives of the EU education policy it practically did not exist in Poland. Although Poland has one of the lowest ELET rates in the European Union (about 5%) and is mentioned among the best performing countries (GHK, 2005), it appears

that this positive result is not caused by deliberate action, as there are no specific policies and «no single, comprehensive strategy to tackle the problem of early leaving from education and training as defined at European level» (European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, & Cedefop, 2014: 55), and the problem is «addressed indirectly through other policies and programmes concerning education and young people» (GHK, 2011: 67).

Hence, the stakeholders of the Polish education system suggest that low rates of ESL may be a result of many processes directly related to the education system, as well as to deep social, cultural and demographic change since 1989, such as: long cycle of compulsory education, prevalence of upper secondary education and compulsory education until the age of 18 (Dale, 2010; GHK, 2005, 2011).

### 3. ESL, NEETs and youth unemployment

According to the various theoretical and empirical studies (Micklewright, Pearson, & Smith, 1990), ESL can be related to unemployment in a few ways: (1) the higher the current youth unemployment rates, the lower the ESL rates, (2) the higher the unemployment rates for young adults completing secondary and tertiary education, the higher the ESL rates, and (3) the higher the probability of parents' unemployment, the higher the risk of early school leaving. Contemporary studies confirm the existing relationship between youth unemployment rates and the scale of ESL in various European countries (Petrongolo & San Segundo, 2002; Clark, 2011; De Witte et al., 2013), including the post-socialist Romania (Gyönös, 2011). Conversely, high unemployment of adults may rather lead to the «discouraged student» effect and increase the frequency of ESL (De Witte et al., 2013).

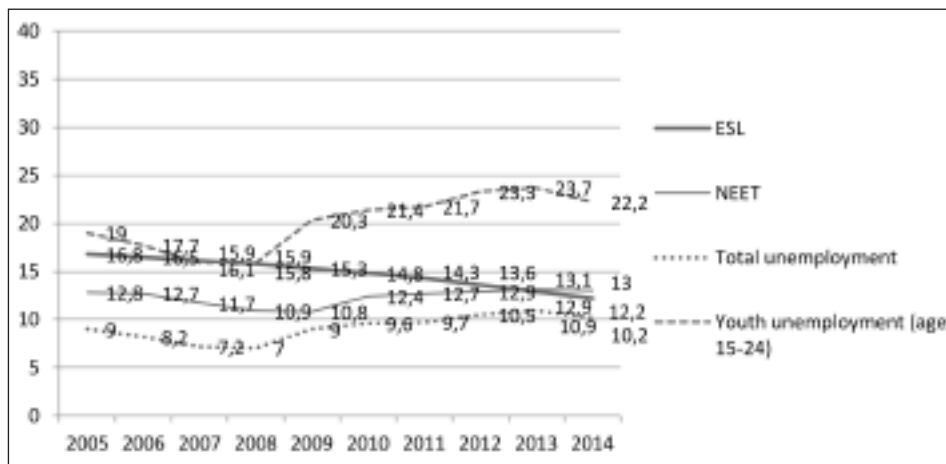
However, the data for the whole European Union (28 countries) from the last decade do not correspond with those results – the ESL rate has been slowly but steadily decreasing 16.8% in 2005 to 13% in 2014, both in period of economic prosperity before 2008 and after the outbreak of the economic crisis and rapid increase of youth unemployment.

The trends and changes in ESL and unemployment were quite different in Poland than in the whole EU28 (Figure 2), but they lead to the same conclusion – that the ESL rates are not very much affected by the labour market condition. Although the unemployment in the population of 24-year-olds and younger remained high in the last 10 years, it was fluctuating significantly over the time without visible influence on the ESL rates, which remained stable in the previous decade, never reaching 6%. Moreover, the lowest recorded rate of ESL (5% in 2007) coincided with the period of the rapid decrease of youth unemployment from over 36% in 2005 to 17.2%, and then stabilised at the level closer to 6% as the economic crisis erupted and

the unemployment grew again. The changes of the ESL rate were so slight that it could be considered stable, but, if there was any correlation with the youth unemployment, it could be considered positive, contrary to the theoretical assumptions of Micklewright et al. (1990).

FIGURE 1

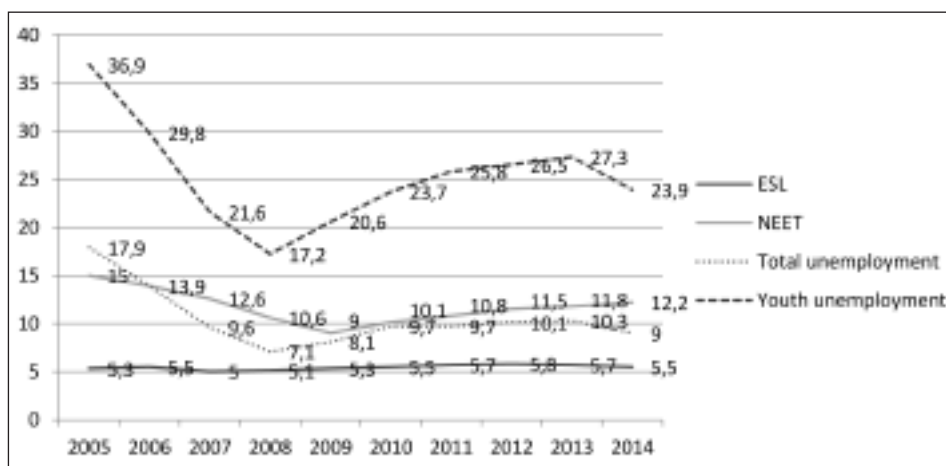
**ESL, NEET, total unemployment and youth unemployment rates in the European Union (EU28), 2005-2014 (%)**



Source: Eurostat.

FIGURE 2

**ESL, NEET, total unemployment and youth unemployment rates in Poland, 2005-2014 (%)**

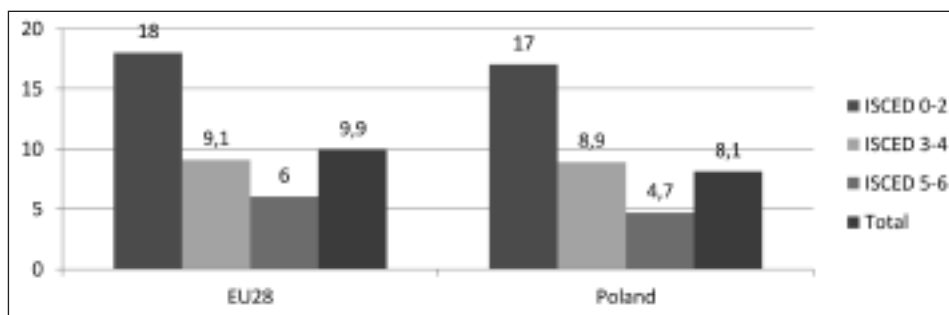


Source: Eurostat.

The low rates of ESL may possibly be explained – in line with thesis 2 – by the labour market structure and high benefits from completing secondary and especially tertiary education. People who have not attained secondary school are far more at risk of unemployment (17% in 2014) than individuals with secondary (8.9%) or tertiary education (4.7%); so the labour market promotes continuing schooling. However, similar patterns can be observed in the whole European Union (Figure 3). What is interesting, the unemployment rates are quite similar for the citizens who completed their education with basic vocational (14.1% in 2013) and general secondary (12.4%) school (GUS, 2014b: 255).

FIGURE 3

**The unemployment rates by the highest attained education level in Poland and EU, 2014 (%)**



Source: Eurostat.

In 2009 only 40% of Polish early school leavers were employed, which was below the EU average 48% (GHK, 2011: 186-187). These data correspond with growth in the rate of NEETs (Figure 2), which Poland has been facing during the crisis, and it is the rates of NEETs, over twice as high as the rates of ELET, which seem to be the major problem for the Polish youth policy. According to the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions research, the high number of NEETs should be attributed to the «structural problems in the transitions from the education system to the labour market» (EFILWC, 2012: 39). This raises again the issues of the capacities of the Polish labour market to absorb young workers and abilities of the education system to prepare well trained labourers.



## 4. Education and social policy towards ESL in Poland

### 4.1. *Changes in the education system in Poland*

In recent decades, Poland has experienced many changes – political transformation, accession to the European Union, and also the Polish educational system has undergone a number of radical reforms.

In the socialist times, education was characterised by a strong political and ideological influence. The school was a tool for maintaining the desired social structure, and an extensive segment of vocational schools was supposed to create and maintain a large group of industrial working class. The education system was highly centralised and non-state education practically did not exist (Dolata, 2005).

Since 1999, major education reforms started to be implemented in Poland. The structural change was accompanied by a curricular reform, in which a concept of core curricula was developed. It aimed to provide schools with extensive autonomy and responsibility. Also, a system of tests and examinations at the end of primary and lower secondary schools was introduced (OECD, 2011). Secondary education was divided into lower and upper secondary schools, which introduced a new school threshold and initiated system differentiation processes at the level of lower secondary school. It seems that this is the result of pressure of external processes of differentiation and stratification of society, and research shows that lower secondary schools contribute to an increase in social segregation in public education (Dolata, 2005; Sadura, 2014).

#### 4.1.1. *Changes in vocational education in Poland*

There has also been a change in the structure of upper secondary education. Before the political transformation which took place in 1989, most students (over 50%) chose basic vocational schools, and general secondary schools were chosen by only a fifth (21%) of primary school graduates (GUS, 1991, as cited in Mikiewicz, 2011). While in the 1985-1986 school year more than 50% of all students attended basic vocational schools, in 2003-2004 it was already less than 20% (Dolata, 2005), and in the 2012-2013 school year it was only 19.3%. The present situation is completely different from the one before 1989 – the proportions have reversed. About a fifth of lower secondary school graduates enter BVs and almost a half (45%) choose general education schools, while the remaining 35% attend technical schools (GUS, 2013).

As a result, there is negative selection in recruitment for basic vocational schools – they

are attended by students who have the poorest educational results, have the lowest SES and the lowest educational aspirations (Boni & Szafraniec, 2011; Sadura, 2014). One general upper secondary school teacher noticed: «(...) still many people believe that vocational school is the worse one, that only incapable children go there».

Vocational schools do not have a good reputation in Poland, they are called «the schools of last resort». Despite recent attempts by the Ministry of Education and promotional activities to restore the prestige of vocational schools, the number of students in these schools continued to decline till the last school year (GUS, 2014a). Table 1 shows the percentages of first grade BVS students in Poland since 1995.

TABLE 1  
**Percentage of first grade students in basic vocational schools in the years 1995-2014**

| School year | First grade students in BVS |
|-------------|-----------------------------|
| 1995-1996   | 33.6%                       |
| 2000-2001   | 22.5% (-11.1%)              |
| 2007-2008   | 16.2% (-6.3%)               |
| 2008-2009   | 16.1% (-0.1%)               |
| 2009-2010   | 15.7% (-0.4%)               |
| 2010-2011   | 15.3% (-0.4%)               |
| 2011-2012   | 15.1% (-0.2%)               |
| 2012-2013   | 14.9% (-0.2%)               |
| 2013-2014   | 15.8% (+0.9%)               |

**Source:** Own calculations based on GUS (2014a).

In the 2013-2014 school year there was an increase in the percentage of first grade students of BVSs for the first time in many years, but of course it is too early to say whether these changes are a result of political actions taken or a result of other socio-demographic processes.

Still the BVSs are the least popular choice among the graduates of lower secondary schools. Therefore, it seems to be particularly important to look at the existing system from the point of view of educational options and support offered to those students, especially because, as the results of existing studies clearly show, BVS students and graduates are potentially more at risk of dropping out (Mikiewicz, 2011), becoming unemployed and therefore socially excluded than students and graduates of other types of upper secondary schools (Boni & Szafraniec, 2011; Sadura, 2014).

As one of the principals of a vocational school complex in Warsaw<sup>3</sup> (consisting of a BVS and a technical upper secondary school) pointed out, ESL happens much more frequently in the case of BVS students rather than among their peers from the technical school:

But we don't have real dropout in the technical school. Situations that somebody has enrolled and has not taken up learning, or left school and disappeared completely do not happen in the technical school. But in the basic vocational school, the dropout rate is high.

At the same time, school principals and teachers say that one of the main reasons why students leave school is the students' need to take up work, often in connection with the difficult financial situation of the family. As teachers from one technical upper secondary school say,

T2: But a lot of students work. They are already working at school. From third grade on already a lot of people are working.

T1: But not necessarily in jobs connected with their vocation, they work to make some money.

School staff also draw attention to the individual risk factors that may increase the likelihood of the student leaving school early. These may include previous school failures, lack of motivation to learn, lack of educational aspirations, wrong choice of school or educational profile, emotional and health disorders, disease, pregnancy or other serious change of life situation, which results in the need to become independent or to undertake work. But, interestingly, the various family factors are most often mentioned and very strongly emphasised. The vocational school principal speaks directly:

The main reason for this is the family dysfunction. I'm talking about the basic vocational school. It is well known that usually the school is to blame for, but I'm speaking from the school's perspective and see that these are family circumstances which are responsible [in the first place].

From the point of view of the analysis of social and educational policies, however, the most important seem to be the macro/systemic factors of ESL. They appear in the statements of school staff primarily as a criticism of the existing system of education and its changes over the last few years. The teachers and principals mentioned, among others, the malfunction or even

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<sup>3</sup> Individual and group interviews in schools and state institutions (including two ministries – Ministry of National Education and Ministry of Labour and Social Policy – and educational institutions, such as Educational Research Institute, Centre for Education Development) were conducted in one research area (Warsaw), while interviews with representatives of local authorities, regional employment centres, chambers of craft and regional education offices were conducted in two research areas (Warsaw and Lublin). Altogether 39 persons participated in both IDIs and FGDs, including school staff from four Warsaw upper secondary schools ( $N = 21$ ), experts and stakeholders ( $N = 18$ ).

destruction of vocational education, which results in «overselection» of general upper secondary schools by the students. In addition to the education system, a noticeable factor conditioning the difficulties at school is also in the demographic decline, which leads to the schools striving for every single student, accepting all students regardless of their abilities or outcomes and results from the previous educational stages. This results in a general reduction in the level of education, especially in those schools which group students with lower abilities.

#### ***4.2. Analysis of education and social policy towards ESL***

The analysis of policy documents and interviews undertaken with educational experts, including the representatives of the Ministry of National Education (in Polish, *Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej* – MEN) confirms that the task of reducing ESL is not a priority for educational policy, partially reflecting the low rate of ESL and, on the other hand, a specific rationale of policy making and implementation, which is clearly illustrated by the statement of a MEN expert:

We could teach the EU to put less emphasis on those groups that are already outside the system and vulnerable groups which are almost lost (thankfully, in Poland such a group is one of the smallest in Europe). Better and faster results can be achieved by investing in those who are still at school and do everything so they do not suddenly stop. What saves us is not a high level of services for the ones at risk, but the fact that we have a common system of education for all children, general education. (...) We should invest in the group of over 90% of students who are in schools, because if we lose sight of them and they stop learning, we might not recover.

This does not mean that within the education sector there are not any initiatives taken which would contribute to lowering the ESL rate. However, they have an indirect nature and are aimed at preventing educational inequalities in a wider context (e.g., promoting preschool education, extending the general education cycle) rather than focusing on this single phenomenon.

In Poland, measures directed at groups at risk of dropping out of the education system are implemented in the social assistance sector, mainly through the Voluntary Labour Corps (VLC; in Polish, *Ochotnicze Hufce Pracy* – OHP) within the Youth Guarantee programme, which will be described later in the text.

Below we present a tabulated summary of selected solutions taken in the education and social policy sector which are considered to tackle ESL and other related issues. Following the GHK (2011) report, we discuss four basic types of activities – system-specific, prevention, intervention and reintegration.

TABLE 2

**Types of measures addressing ESL in Poland implemented by educational and social policy sectors**

| Type of measure<br>Sector responsible | System-specific measures   | Preventive policies and measures   | Preventive targeted approaches   | Reintegration measures  |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|--|---|
| <b>Education</b>                      | Policy making (e.g., coordination of measures aimed at ESL, monitoring the ESL and absenteeism)                        | Structural measures (e.g., curricular reform, provision and quality of pre-school education, teacher training, guidance and counselling, etc.) | Targeted approaches (extra tuition, financial support, transition support, youth sociotherapy and youth educational centres, etc.)                     | Second chance schools<br>Validation of non-formal and informal learning<br>Practical learning opportunities (vocational, work-based)  |
| <b>Social policy</b>                  | Policy making (e.g., coordination of measures aimed at ESL, monitoring the level of ESL, youth unemployment and NEETs) | Professional career guidance and counselling   | Programmes directed at groups at risk (VLC)<br>Financial support (e.g., internship voucher, settlement vouchers, training vouchers)                    | Activation of the young unemployed (e.g., job placement, career counselling, retraining or professional development)<br>Supporting entrepreneurship – facilitating new businesses and self-employment of young people |
| <b>Target group</b>                   | All society  | All young people   | Youth at risk, e.g., students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, under-achievers, students from disadvantaged families or minority groups | Early school leavers, NEETs, the young unemployed   |

The state system actions directed at tackling ESL undoubtedly should include the policy making and, in consequence, coordination of various measures as well as monitoring of ESL and related issues like absenteeism, grade retention, NEETs, youth unemployment. But, as mentioned before, ESL is not seen as an important policy issue or challenge for education; the measures reducing ESL within this sector are scattered and only indirectly and unintentionally reduce its rate.

The analysis of reports, strategic documents and scientific literature leads to a conclusion that, in Poland, one of the main problems is also the lack of absenteeism or ESL monitoring at the level of compulsory education – the data on the subject are fragmentary and uncertain: they are estimates rather than perfect measures (Marchlik & Tomaszewska-Pękala,

2013a). There is no systemic solution in this regard yet, and the only information that is collected on this topic comes from the Labour Force Survey and is based solely on the declarations of adults according to the definition and methodology of Eurostat. However, the lack of monitoring of ESL is balanced to some extent by the system of monitoring compulsory school attendance.

Social policy, within Youth Guarantee, is directly related to the issue of young people (15-17 years old) leaving school early, not fulfilling compulsory schooling or education. It is estimated that there are around 8 thousand such people in Poland (approx. 0.7% of the population). Another age cohort, persons aged 18-24, falling into the NEETs category, is a more numerous group of about 500 thousand (16.7%). Actions addressed at the first of these groups are carried out by only one organisation – the VLC. However, the coordination of actions directed at both groups is the responsibility of two ministries – the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the Ministry of Infrastructure and Development (MPiPS & MIR, 2014).

Within the second category – preventive policies and measures – curricular reform in the field of vocational education, career counselling and the quality of vocational education and training offered in (and out of) schools are those measures which can directly affect the BVS students' decision of staying at school or abandoning it.

In the 2009-2010 school year, a reform of the curriculum of general education has been carried out at all levels of education, together with a reform of vocational and continuing training, which aim towards a stronger link between vocational education and the labour market. This link may be achieved through more flexible forms of training and validating professional qualifications, as well as increasing the availability of vocational training through the introduction of schools into the lifelong education system and a new form of education – a qualification course (Federowicz & Sitek, 2011). These curricular reforms, at least in their assumptions, may have a positive effect on the prevention and reduction of the problem of ESL in Poland.

Provisions of law oblige lower and upper secondary schools to implement career guidance in a planned, systemic way. Planning consists in creating an intraschool vocational guidance system and its structure, scope and form should be tailored specifically for a particular facility (MEN, 2013). In carrying out this task, apart from employing a career counsellor or training one of the school employees to perform the job of a career counsellor, schools may also use career guidance conducted by external entities. The report on the state of vocational education in Poland (Gozlińska & Kruszewski, 2013) shows that 18% of schools do not provide access to career guidance, 33% employ a specialist in this area (e.g., a career counsellor, school pedagogical counsellor, vocational training teacher), only 8% of these schools hired a professional career counsellor (Czepiel, 2013), and 49% cooperate with external institutions,

mainly psychological-pedagogical counselling centres, less often the VLC, labour market institutions or NGOs.

Leaving the planning and implementation of career guidance to the discretion of the schools themselves without assigning additional funds for this purpose contributes to the fact the students have low awareness of the existence of this form of support (Gozlinska & Kruszewski, 2013). Furthermore, the assessment of the importance of counselling and career guidance classes by the students themselves was, according to some studies, very negative or they were evaluated as having no impact on the students' decisions about further career/education (Czepiel, 2013).

Experts participating in the group interview also did not have a good opinion about the functioning of the counselling system in schools, noting that the schools do not have an organised and well planned career counselling. Such tasks are performed by «accidentally» trained teachers (ASM – Centrum Badan i Analiz Rynku Pracy Sp. z.o.o., 2012). The reasons for the poor state of career counselling can be sought in the very limited funding, which is a consequence of the lack of awareness of its importance among politicians, policy makers, legislators, government officials and teachers (Czepiel, 2013).

Vocational education and training takes place directly in schools providing vocational tuition (BVSs and upper secondary technical schools) or in practical training centres (in Polish, *centra kształcenia praktycznego – CKP*), in continuing education centres (in Polish, *centra kształcenia ustawicznego – CKU*), centres for education and professional development (in Polish, *osrodki dokształcania i doskonalenia zawodowego – ODDZ*) or directly at the employers'. Only the last form provides professional training in real working environment. In vocational schools<sup>4</sup>, vocational training is most often carried out in school forms (57%), of which, in accordance with official regulations, the proportion of practical classes is at least 60% of all the hours devoted to vocational training. At the same time, just over half (57%) of BVS students have practical training at the employers' at some stage of education (Gozlinska & Kruszewski, 2013)<sup>5</sup>, but it does not have a form of apprenticeships, because those are reserved only for the students of technical upper secondary schools (Wolinska et al., 2011). Research results seem to indicate that schools prefer more convenient solutions for them, i.e., the organization of practical classes at the school or the practical training centre; they decide to cooperate with employers in this regard when they do not have adequate teaching resources (*ibidem*). To establish contacts with employers, schools sometimes use the experi-

<sup>4</sup> Data include both BVS and technical upper secondary schools.

<sup>5</sup> A given student can carry out part of the practical training at school and part at the employer, hence the number of responses does not add up to 100%.

ence of the VLC or chambers of trade, although, according to our interviewees, this cooperation works in varied ways. As a result, one might find vocational school students who have never had contact with the profession in real working conditions.

Formally, there exists a different path, i.e., the possibility of signing a contract directly with the employer and undergoing vocational training within the vocational training of juveniles. The contract can be signed with the help of the school, chamber of crafts or the VLC. As our research has shown, schools are sometimes reluctant to accept such a solution, because of financial and organizational issues. As one chamber of crafts representative said:

Schools do not always want to admit such pupils who have signed a contract for vocational training with the employer. Well, if the school is run by a craft organisation, (...) the whole study plan is agreed with them. But if it is not, this school is not very eager to teach in this mode.

This form, however, still requires the student to complete the general education in school or a continuing education centre for adults. In addition, in Poland employing a juvenile employee is subject to separate laws and has a number of restrictions concerning hours and conditions of work (*Ustawa Kodeks pracy, Dział IX*). The employer can get funding for employee training costs in the form of reimbursement, provided that the student passes the vocational examination (*Ustawa o systemie oswiaty, Art. 70b*). To sum up, employing a juvenile employee in Poland appears to be a very complicated and time consuming procedure.

Until recently, the lack of validation of non-formal and informal learning was a weakness of the Polish education system. The introduction of the new qualification of occupations with corresponding competences, as well as a system of uniform external examinations for verifying the qualifications gained in school and out of school education, should improve the situation in this regard. Not only does the system of external examinations test the graduates' skills and confirm qualifications, but it is also part of quality control in vocational education (Federowicz & Sitek, 2011). The idea of qualification courses was generally praised by experts who participated in our research as a change in the right direction, because it gives a more flexible way of gaining qualifications, but this form is relatively new and it is difficult to evaluate its effectiveness. In contrast, external examinations system has been the subject of criticism. Research participants pointed out its low prestige both among students and potential employers who do not take its results into account when employing a graduate of a vocational school.

Another group of preventive activities, directed not at the entire population of students but at the risk groups or students with special needs, is known as targeted approaches. In the education sector, many activities are taken to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g., financial support, benefits) or students with learning difficulties (e.g., compen-



sation classes), but the measures aimed namely at ELET are implemented only within the social policy sector under the Youth Guarantee programme. The organisation responsible for their implementation is Voluntary Labour Corps, which is a state organisation supervised by the labour minister. The primary objective of the VLC is to counteract marginalisation and social exclusion of young people and to create adequate conditions for their proper social and vocational development.

In accordance with the provisions, regarding the measures directed at early school leavers aged 15-17, the VLC will focus on providing support leading to the youth taking up studying or training, acquiring vocational qualifications through attending professional qualification courses, and gaining elementary social competence. The activities planned in the first place include a diagnosis of knowledge, skills and potential of the participant, and subsequently, choosing appropriate forms of support. Among the proposed activities there are: counselling, psychological-pedagogical support, training (compensatory workshops in school subjects, entrepreneurship courses, language courses, computer courses), professional qualification courses, job search courses (MPiPS & MIR, 2014).

Although the results of our research show that the VLC is doing well in social services, it should be pointed out that, as far as ESL measures are concerned, there is a situation in which one institution has a monopoly for them, which might result in a number of negative consequences in the longer term.

Finally, the last type of responses to the problem of ESL are reintegration measures. In our country, there is a long tradition of second chance schools for adults or, in exceptional cases, for persons aged 16. As the GHK report indicates:

In Poland, the improved quality of Polish second chance schools has helped to bring the number of drop-outs down, in particular the new flexible delivery opportunities (weekend and evening study opportunities) and availability of psychological support for students. This has had a particularly positive impact on the number of teenage mothers who have been able to continue their studies instead of having to drop out due to the inflexibility of the education system and lack of support. (GHK, 2011: 34)

In principle, centres for continuing education are meant for adults and only in exceptional cases may accept people aged 16-18. School staff participating in our research mentioned that these centres are a common choice among students who are not able to meet the demands of full-time formal schooling.

The above analysis shows that some amendments should be introduced, especially in the measures directed at vocational education and training. Below we present recommendations for policymakers addressing some of the measures to tackle ESL.

TABLE 3

**Recommendations for policymakers concerning the measures to tackle ESL**

| Measure  | Recommendations  |
|--|--|
| Creating a policy for tackling ESL (e.g., coordination and monitoring of the phenomenon) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coherent interministerial plan to reduce ESL and NEETs and monitoring of these phenomena</li> <li>• Reducing the VLC monopoly for work with ESLers</li> </ul>   |
| Career counselling   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allocating sufficient funds for career guidance in each school</li> <li>• Participation in counselling of the whole school community</li> <li>• Interesting and innovative forms of counselling, combining in-school and out-of-school forms</li> <li>• Realising the potential of external actors</li> <li>• Individual career guidance at school</li> </ul> |
| Practical apprenticeships and vocational training of juveniles                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Obligatory practical training with employers for BVS students</li> <li>• More flexible solutions</li> <li>• Closer cooperation with employers</li> </ul>  |
| Vocational qualification courses   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The need to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of this form of education</li> <li>• Further development and popularization</li> </ul>   |
| System of external vocational examinations   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing the prestige and changing the form so that they have a real significance for the labour market</li> <li>• Making potential employers and the students aware of this form</li> </ul>  |
| Second chance schools for adults (Continuing education centres)                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Should become an option available for all students 16-18 who want to work and learn at the same time</li> </ul>   |

## 5. Conclusion

An analysis of educational and social policy shows that alternative, flexible forms of training are highly necessary for students who want to work and study at the very same, especially those from BVSs. Today, however, they are only a small part of the educational offer, which is clearly dominated by formal school education. Thus, students taking the effort to reconcile school and work are not sufficiently supported in and out of school. A poorly functioning system of educational and vocational guidance makes young people (even those who complete upper secondary school and even higher education) have problems entering the labour market. They lack both the basic skills in this area and knowledge related to further training or gaining new skills.

As far as creating a policy against ESL, there is a need for diverse cross-sector strategies and actions. The fact that there is no monitoring of the ESL phenomenon in its various aspects, the monopoly of one institution working with students at risk of leaving school early and those

who have already dropped out, lack of support in the transition from school to work, lack of an early warning system may also be worrying. It seems that politicians and policymakers succumbed to the «magic of numbers», assuming that if ELET level in Poland is so low, and students abandoning education are at the margin of the population of young people, nothing more needs to be done in this regard. The complex and ambiguous relationship between the level of ESL, NEETs, and youth unemployment indicates that there is no guarantee that the current ESL rate will continue its downward trend.

**Contact:** Faculty of Education, University of Warsaw, ul. Mokotowska 16/20, 00-561 Warszawa, Poland  
Email: b.tomaszevska@uw.edu.pl

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