

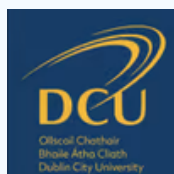


Research brief

IDENTIFYING WAYS TO PREVENT EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING AND UNDERACHIEVEMENT IN EUROPE



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INTRODUCTION

This brief explains the findings from the EU project SCIREARLY which aims to identify effective ways to reduce early school leaving (ESL) and underachievement. The project synthesises the latest scientific evidence and examines and replicates successful learning environments in 10 countries across Europe to provide tools and recommendations for policy and practice.

CONTEXT

- ESL and its associated underachievement pose a threat to children's opportunities and life-chances and the social mobility of nations.
- The causes of ESL are complex and wide-ranging and particular groups of children are at risk including those from socio-economically deprived backgrounds, those with special educational needs, Roma, migrants, and refugees.
- Education Policies across Europe varies in its form and function and its effectiveness in reducing ESL.

FINDINGS

1

Successful learning environments recognise that educational support needs to be focused simultaneously on learning and wellbeing to enable children to thrive and succeed, and that schools should collaborate with parents and communities to remove barriers to learning. Schools as Learning Communities has been identified as an effective model, aligning with current EU recommendations to reduce underachievement and ESL.

2

Relational practice is at the heart of many successful approaches, encouraging strong relationships between students and adults, between peers, and between schools and their wider community.

3

Leaders in successful schools foster a supportive and inclusive culture and promote a whole school and holistic approach.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Schools that have been successful in reducing ESL and underachievement are characterised by having a dual focus on students' learning and on supporting their wellbeing simultaneously. Usually, these schools have developed a whole school approach to reducing ESL that is consistent and systematic across all dimensions of school life, which may affect educational achievement. Our case studies of successful learning environments located in **Ireland, the UK, Malta, Finland, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece, Denmark, and Belgium** covered a number of important commonalities:

1- Engaging and inclusive classroom practices

Pedagogies and classroom structures and strategies were not solely used for the transmission of knowledge in successful learning environments. Instead, a variety of methods were used that maximised peer dialogic interaction, parental involvement, and teacher autonomy and make learning challenging and engaging. These methods included, for example, team-teaching, family education and outdoor learning. Practices that are child-centered and foster inclusion can increase engagement and enhance a sense of belonging in school.

'That's what I love to see: the mix of cultures. Maybe a Roma mother comes who doesn't read at home and then she comes and shares the book with her daughter and says her piece. It's great, and they keep coming back'

(Teacher, Spain)

2- Positive relationships between school staff and students

The teacher-child relationship stood out as a strong facilitator of children's wellbeing, particularly in culturally diverse settings and for vulnerable children. Positive relationships can encourage school engagement and motivation, feelings of emotional safety, and a sense of belonging. Creating opportunities for dialogue such as in school clubs or by using pedagogies such as translanguaging or dialogic teaching and learning can create trust and help students to feel valued and included.

'Maria (the teacher) has taught us to learn to respect and help each other... with Maria I have learnt so many things this year'

(Roma student, Spain)

3- Positive peer relationships

Positive peer interactions were found to be instrumental to children's wellbeing and engagement with school. Dialogic learning that can encourage productive interactions for learning and human development has been shown to strengthen social and academic outcomes¹. Successful learning environments integrate actions such as Interactive Groups, Dialogic Literary Gatherings, Dialogic Model of Conflict Prevention and Resolution (defined as Successful Educational Actions), or Forest Schools to encourage all children to interact in meaningful and respectful ways.

'We have lots of really helpful projects that help the children to build empathy, to build friendships, and to support each other. So, what we try to support in the school is building the whole person. And when you can help the children in all of these emotional areas, learning is a much easier task for them'

(Teacher, Ireland)

4- Supportive leadership

Effective school leadership has been identified as one of the key factors in creating and maintaining positive and successful learning environments. Effective school leadership fosters a supportive and inclusive culture within the institution, which in turn cultivates motivated teachers and engaged students. Benevolent leadership emerged in one case study as one such leadership style.

'We have to make sure that children are ready to learn, children have to feel safe and secure and happy and confident before their brains are ready to take anything in'

(School leader, UK)



5- Availability of guidance, counselling and wellbeing support

These services play a vital role in helping students make informed choices and navigate transitions in their educational journeys and empowering learners to make decisions to continue and succeed in higher education, enhancing their college aspirations and efficacy². The availability of support teams and services in school can also help maintain students' health and wellbeing and remove barriers to learning.

'... the school has guidance counsellors as well... the fact that they're there is really comforting. You have somebody to turn to if you're stressed about education, college, what to do with your future, or your mental health'

(Student, Ireland)

6- Community engagement with schools and education

Cross-sectoral collaboration and cooperation with a wide range of stakeholders (social services, youth services, care workers, psychologists, health workers, speech and language therapists, guidance specialists, local authorities, NGOs, business, unions, volunteers, diverse community members, etc.) help schools to support families and children with issues that schools cannot tackle alone, such as health or the effects of poverty. Involving families, carers, and community members in children's education has proven to enhance academic outcomes, and their participation in decision-making can support equitable educational practices in schools.

'One of the main things we worked on was encouraging families to come to the school and building a relationship between the school and the families of the children. We found this to be very essential and thanks to that, absenteeism decreased, the relationship between parents and the school improved, we found more collaboration, and the mentality of parents towards their children's education also changed significantly'

(School leader, Malta)

FACILITATORS OF PRACTICE FOUND IN SUCCESSFUL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS:

- Shared values across the school that are negotiated and agreed among the entire community
- Respectful, supportive, and enabling leadership that creates an inclusive, motivating, and caring culture for staff, students, and others
- The use of different kinds of spaces for learning, both physical (e.g., outdoor learning) and conceptual (e.g., extra-curricular clubs, extended learning time)
- The participation of children in dialogue and decision-making about their own learning
- Smaller class sizes encouraging closer relationships and more individualised support
- Opportunities for home-school collaboration and engaging families in school, particularly in children's learning activities (educative participation) and decision-making spaces
- Adopting Successful Educational Actions and inclusive evidence-based pedagogical approaches
- Providing guidance and support for students, including at times of transition (e.g., moving school) through the employment of dedicated staff and/or working with external stakeholders
- Supporting teacher wellbeing and skills development through dialogic teacher training
- Keeping the general costs of education (e.g., uniforms, trips, travel, clubs, and equipment) as low as possible
- Respect for diverse cultures and languages and incorporating them into students' learning
- Support for families as well as students, for instance through family education programmes
- Engaging in local and national prevention and intervention programmes that bring resources, training, and support and promote sharing of good practice between schools
- High expectations and aspirations for students and celebrating individual student successes



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY

In order to reduce ESL and promote achievement:

1

Schools should be supported to promote both the learning and the wellbeing of their students simultaneously - Some suggestions for how this could be done include:

- Incentivising actions and initiatives that enhance wellbeing along with achievement scores
- Providing research-informed and high-quality training for teachers (e.g., dialogic teacher training)
- Ensuring every school has access to a trained mental health practitioner or school counsellor
- Employing smaller class sizes: human resources set to maximize learning opportunities
- Implementing a strategy to raise school attendance at all ages including continuous contact with families built upon egalitarian dialogue and trust-based relationships that prevent ESL
- Equipping schools to provide a quick and effective response to meet a range of needs from special needs to the wellbeing needs of all children, such as Forest Schools
- Adopting Schools as Learning Communities or implementing Successful Educational Actions to create optimal conditions for it

2

Schools should be encouraged to engage their communities and collaborate with local stakeholders. Some suggestions for how this could be done include:

- Placing educational settings at the heart of joined-up service delivery strategies
- Including school leaders, family and community members when designing and coordinating services for vulnerable children and families
- Fostering partnerships with local businesses and organisations to provide resources and support for educational initiatives

3

More opportunities should be provided for schools to learn from each other and share best practices. Some suggestions for how this could be done include:

- Ensuring schools have access to high-quality evidence about effective inclusive practices
- Enabling schools to collaborate and providing forums for learning to be shared

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOLS

In order to reduce ESL and underachievement schools should:

1

Prioritise the development of positive and supportive relationships with parents and carers, between school staff and students, and between peers.

Some suggestions for how this could be done include:

- Extending the learning time: developing an extra-curricular learning offer including school clubs that are free to all children and support them to improve achievement and wellbeing
- Including parents as volunteers or in family education programmes
- Ensuring family support is available to families in need and empowering them to advocate for their needs and priorities
- Implementing student participation initiatives
- Poverty impact reduction – identifying how children are stigmatised due to poverty and developing strategies to remove these barriers to learning and school engagement
- Cultivating a culture that promotes positive relationships between children and teachers and between children themselves

2

Implement inclusive classroom pedagogies that are dialogic, culturally sensitive, and child-centred. Some suggestions for how this could be done include:

- Team-teaching to provide real-time support to struggling students, ensuring they do not fall behind their peers
- Utilising learning opportunities outside the classroom, connecting and valuing students' funds of knowledge and cultural intelligence
- Using translanguaging approaches in schools – or approaches to learning that encourage the use of many languages in class including children's home language
- Integrating cultures, values, traditions, and histories of ethnic minorities in learning materials and activities
- Implementing Successful Educational Actions frequently and rigorously

3

Work with stakeholders to ensure a full range of support is available to students and families that need it in order to promote social, emotional and physical health and remove barriers to learning. Some suggestions for how this could be done include:

- Setting up robust systems for identifying children at risk and providing research-informed intervention
- Establishing positive relationships with local service providers and charities
- Co-locating support staff within schools
- Creating networks of support through volunteering in Successful Educational Actions

4

Ensure staff are aware of the challenges faced by some students and are supported to implement research-informed pedagogies and ways of working. Some suggestions for how this could be done include:

- Providing high-quality and research-informed staff training about inclusive and culturally sensitive practices
- Establishing communities of practice with other successful schools
- Using the SCIREARLY toolkit (available soon at <https://scirearly.eu/>).

CONCLUSION

The SCIREARLY project has demonstrated that a comprehensive approach to education, which prioritises both academic achievement and student wellbeing, is crucial in reducing early school leaving and underachievement. The successful learning environments identified in our research across ten European countries share common characteristics such as inclusive classroom practices, positive relationships, supportive leadership, availability of guidance and wellbeing support, and active community engagement. By implementing these practices and fostering collaboration among various stakeholders, schools can create nurturing environments that support all students. The forthcoming toolkit, based on these findings, will offer practical resources and strategies to educators and policymakers, contributing to more effective and inclusive educational practices across Europe.

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