

The Early School Leaving in Europe: Approaching the Explanatory Factors

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Abstract

Background: Early school leaving is defined as the percentage of the population aged 18-24 with at most lower secondary education and not in further education or training. Reducing its incidence to 10% by 2020 has been one of the key benchmarks of European education policy cooperation. On one side the incidence of this phenomenon is different in each country on the other hand it focuses on specific social groups. ESL is associated with a wide range of economic and social disadvantages. This study takes a comparative sociological approach to analysing the early school leaving rate and its main causes in five European countries (Germany, Denmark, Finland, Belgium, Spain and the United Kingdom).

Aims: This study based on previous comparative analyses sets out to test the combined impact of investment in education, gender, ethnic and family background in explaining early school leaving in the different countries selected. Another objective is to quantify the phenomenon of early school leaving and present employment status and training of young school leavers. This empirical study therefore adopts a comparative multi-theoretical viewpoint to contribute new interpretative evidence on the uneven impact of school leavers in the various countries selected (Finland, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom). To carry out the comparative analysis we have made reference to the concept of “transitional life course regime” developed by Walther (2006) and exemplified by each of the selected countries.

Sample: Aggregate data from European Labour Survey and OCDE Data Base. The European Labour Force Survey (LFS), is conducted in the 27 Member States. It is a large household sample survey providing quarterly results on labour participation of people aged 15 and over as well as on people who are not in employment. In 2010, around 1.5 million people across the EU were part of the survey. With regard to the OECD, data from the PISA Report have been used

Method: The methodology is based on a descriptive and exploratory analysis compared from the exploitation of the aggregate data available from different data sources in Europe such as Eurostat and OCDE. Countries were selected that were considered representative of each defined transitional life course regime.

Results: The results show that in the model of life course regimes with little social spending on education such as Spain, the rate of school dropouts and youth unemployment is higher than in other countries with stronger welfare state such as Finland and Germany. Differences in early school leaving rates between immigrants and national are accused all countries except the United Kingdom and Germany, and is especially prominent in Spain. Therefore this analyse have underlined the importance of socio-economic conditions and family background on school leavers.

Conclusion: The study show significant variations between the European countries, depending on social spending on education. Another important conclusion is that, depending on the education policy put in place by States and the type of education model implemented, the impact of gender and particularly of nationality is very different. The results obtained from this comparative study would suggest that European welfare states need to strengthen their education policy, both in terms of investment in education and in terms of redesigning their education systems in order to put a stop to early school leaving

Keywords: Education, early school leavers, Europe

歐洲輟學之解釋性因素研究

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摘要

背景：早期輟學是指在18-24歲的人口中文化水平低於初中教育程度，亦沒有再受到進一步的教育或者培訓的人。到2020年，將早期輟學率降至10%已成為歐洲教育政策中的其中一個主要基準。一方面，這種現象的發生因國家而異，另一方面，它表現在特定的群體中。早期輟學與經濟狀況和社會弊病有關聯。本研究以一個比較社會學的方法分析早期輟學和其主要原因，以歐盟國家中的六個國家作為研究對象（德國，丹麥，芬蘭，比利時，西班牙和英國）。

目的：此研究基於以往的研究，進一步分析在不同國家教育、性別、種族和家庭背景對早期輟學的綜合影響因素。另外一個目的，以量化過早輟學現象為方法，分析當前就業和輟學年輕人的培訓情況。這種比較研究實證採用比較多樣化的理論觀點，以提供並解釋六個不同國家早期輟學的失衡影響（芬蘭，比利時，丹麥，德國，西班牙和英國）。為了完成這個對比研究，我們參見了瓦爾特（2006）的概念“終身教育過渡政策”。

研究對象：使用從歐洲勞動力調查組織和經濟合作與發展組織（OCDE）所提供的數據進行研究。歐洲勞動力調查組織（LFS），對其27個成員國進行調查，此調查是關於15歲（含）以上的家庭成員或個人的勞動參與度與失業人數的調查，並每個季度公佈其統計結果。在2010年，在整個歐洲有接近150萬人參與了此調查。而有關於從經濟合作與發展組織的數據，則採用PISA提供的資料。

方法：該研究方法是一個基於從比較和探索歐盟和經濟合作與發展組織提供的數據的描述性和探索性研究。選定之國家，皆根據“過渡政策”的概念。

研究結果：結果表明，在過渡政策的模式下，如西班牙這種有教育經費限制的國家，相比起如芬蘭，德國這類高社會福利的國家，早期輟學率和青年失業率都相對較高。除英國和德國以外，其他國家的移入公民和本國公民的早期輟學率具有極大差異度，特別是在西班牙。因此，這個研究強調了社會經濟條件和家庭環境在早期輟學中的重要性。

結論：結果說明歐洲國家的變化取決於對教育的支出。另一個重要結論是由於每個國家教育發展政策和實施的教育模式的不同，性別和國籍的差異，都將對其產生不同的影響。由此比較研究所得到的結果表明，歐洲的福利國家應該加強其教育政策，不僅在教育投資方面，也應在教育體系重新設置方面有所體現，以達到減少過早輟學的目的。

關鍵詞：教育、輟學者、歐洲

Introduction

Young people are the present and the future of Europe and a rich source of dynamism in our societies. However, the social and economic inclusion of young people presumes and requires a sequence of successful transitions. In a context in which the transitions to adult life have become more complex and de-standardised, education and labour markets are key vehicles of inclusion (Bynner, 2005; Stauber, 2009; Walther & Plug, 2006). Thus, the transition from school to the labour as well as the transition from unemployment or inactivity to employment are crucial in determining the future of young generations (European Commission, 2011a; 2011b; ILO, 2012; Faubert, 2012).

Education is a key determinant of adult life chances across Western Societies. The persistent issue of early school leaving¹ has received considerable research and policy attention in Europe. In 2009, the Council drew up the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in education and training ('ET 2020') (European Commission, 2009). Since then, the economic and political context has changed, creating new uncertainties and constraints in a global context (Mills & Blossfeld, 2009). Thus, the Europe

2020 strategy contains recommendations destined for the young persons. One is to reduce the EU average early school leaving rate to less than 10% by 2020. It impacts directly on the employability of young people and contributes to breaking the cycle of deprivation, social exclusion and poverty. Education and training play a crucial role in this strategy, in particular within the Integrated Guidelines, Member State National Reform Programmes and the Country-specific Recommendations (CSR) issued to guide Member State reforms. According to EU, there are many reasons why some young people give up education and training prematurely. Although the situation varies in different countries, early school leaving in Europe is strongly linked to social disadvantage and low education backgrounds. Vulnerable groups are especially affected such as young people who have been in care and those with special educational needs. Early school leaving is influenced by educational factors, individual circumstances and socio-economic conditions. To date, research studies have focused on the characteristics of early school leavers or the characteristics of their schools. However, there have been relatively few studies which explore the processes shaping early school leaving in comparative

context. This study explores the features of members of the cohort of young people in the comparative study who left school before completing the Leaving Certificate as well as the impact of education policy in the countries selected (Germany, Belgium, Finland, Denmark, Spain and the United Kingdom). A number of empirical studies have stressed the accumulated effects of institutional (public policy), family, social and personal factors behind educational failure and achievements (Feito, 2009; Ruíz, 2001; Moreno Mínguez, 2011; Marjoribanks, 2002; Marks et al., 2006; Feinstein & Peck, 2008). This study based on previous comparative analyses sets out to test the combined impact of education policy, gender, ethnic and family background in explaining school failure in the different countries selected.

Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:

- What individual factors (sex, family social background) explain the differences in early school leaving rates in these countries?
- What is the connection between youth unemployment and the number of school leavers in comparative terms?
- How does public policy on education expenditure affect early school leaving figures in comparative terms?

This empirical study therefore adopts a comparative multi-theoretical viewpoint that includes current structural theory to contribute new interpretative evidence on the uneven impact of school leavers in the various countries selected (Finland, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom). To carry out the comparative analysis we have made reference to the concept of “transitional welfare regime” defined by Walther

(2006) and Walther et al. (2009)² and exemplified by each of the selected countries. According to Walther Finland is included in the Nordic transitional model, Germany in the conservative, Spain in the Mediterranean and the United Kingdom in the liberal. The case of Belgium is halfway between the conservative and the Nordic model because of the characteristics of its educational model, education policy and early school leaving rate, and youth unemployment. In fact, a change to legislation in 2008 allows all students who have left school to obtain a fully-recognised certificate of secondary education through part-time vocational training. This has altered the post-2008 figures for young people under 24 without a certificate.

Framework: Transition Regime and Structural Factors

It is a well-known but yet insufficiently dealt with issue that many school and labour market shortcomings and problems originate in early childhood years. According to Wiltthagen (2011) when school to school transitions fail, such as in the case of early school-leaving, still a major problem in European countries, long-lasting consequences for people’s labour market careers are prone to occur. This, the identification of the explanatory factors of the school leavers is key to propose social and educational policies destined to reduce the rate of school leavers, fundamentally in the countries where the school failure is major as in case of the Southern European countries.

The current youth training and employment situation should be interpreted within a complex framework of interrelations in which individuals take decisions according to a series of structural factors

(economic situation, job market, social policy) and individual factors (gender, ethnic origin, social class and training) that affect motivation and education agency decision-making. Researchers such as Beck (2003) have termed this situation “institutionalised individualism”. Walther et al. (2009) introduced the model of life course regimes (transitional welfare regime). It is argued that this originates from attempts to understand the de-standardised lives of youths and transitions in the context of the institutional determinism of welfare regime. Walther (2006) refers to “young peoples’ biographical choices” contextualised within different cultural institutional structures.

Comparative sociology has highlighted the importance of welfare states in individuals’ life courses. The classic work of Esping-Andersen (1993; 1999) on welfare regime typologies has served as inspiration for youth sociologists to draw up an interpretative model for transitional regimes. This comparative tool is useful for analysing differing social policies, educational models and job markets, enabling differences in early school leaving figures to be explained from a macro-structural perspective.

Walther (2006) refers to the concept of “model of life course regimes” for grouping European Union countries together. Including this analytical view is relevant because it enables us to contextualise young peoples’ individual behaviour within various national and institutional frameworks. The term “regime” refers to the combined impact of economic, institutional and cultural structures that explain young peoples’ job training transitions in different countries. This concept is inspired by the classic works of Esping-Andersen (1993, 1999) and Gallie and Paugam (2000) on types of welfare state. Specifically

Gallie and Paugman (2000) analyse welfare models distinguishing between social democratic/universalist regimes (such as in Denmark and Sweden, where citizens’ rights are extremely well protected by generous social and educational policy), conservative/corporate (France, Germany and the Netherlands, countries that focus on employment but where cover depends on type of professional category), liberal (United Kingdom and Ireland where social cover and job protection is more limited) and Mediterranean/sub-protector (Spain, Italy, Portugal and Greece, where social cover in education is insufficient in comparative terms and is complementary to the welfare that each family household can provide for itself).

The comparative model presented in this study is based on Walther’s typology on transitional welfare regime. This model includes several aspects that are summarised in the following indicators: educational systems, educational policies and educational inequality. This classification enables us to identify the differences in school leaver rates in the various welfare regimes selected for this study.

Nordic Transitional Regime (Sweden, Denmark and Finland)

Characterised by having a comprehensive education system in which university and professional education programmes are clearly integrated and reflect the individual nature of young peoples’ lives, as they are flexible enough to guarantee that de-standardised life courses can be constructed. Investment in education is the highest in Europe, as a prototype of quality state education.

Continental Transitional Regime (Germany, France and The Netherlands)

Characterised by having an inclusive and selective education system, with standardised learning geared towards employment in what has been called “vocational training”. The overriding expectation among young people is to socialise within this framework to gain their desired social and occupational position by means of their academic qualifications. The outcome of this educational and employment policy is that two groups of young people are formed: those who steadily follow training and job routes and those who do not and are destined to be receivers of social subsidies.

Anglo-Saxon Transitional Regime (United Kingdom and Ireland)

Particular emphasis is placed on young peoples’ personal responsibility to pursue their own welfare by means of rapid and stable insertion into the job market. Education policy is characterised by providing attention for the most underprivileged and the education system is typically geared towards a diverse range of training and professional routes. Youth is seen as a stage in the life course at which a young person needs to achieve financial independence as soon as possible. The job market is typically very flexible with high turnover.

The southern European transitional model (Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece) is characterised by inadequate youth policy to encourage residential transitions, a rigid education system insofar as options for training routes are concerned (further and university education) plus a lack of proper routes for easing the transition from school and academic programmes into the job market. This imbalance

between education and work accentuates young peoples’ dependence on their families as a response to limited institutional funding. This imbalance also results in young people becoming discouraged and leads to a high early school leaving rate.

According to Verhofstadt and Goebel (2008) and Van Landeghem and Van Damme (2011) the Belgian transitional model occupies a position halfway between the Nordic and the continental models. We could say that this model has its own identity because of the country’s institutional nature. On the one hand the educational model is diverse, as it embraces the Flemish, the German-oriented model and the French-oriented model. Young peoples’ transitions are typically a mix of the individualisation of their life course, similar to other northern European countries, and of the semi-standardisation normally found in the continental transitional model. Investment in state education is on a par with other Nordic countries. Lastly, the school leaver rate is intermediate compared to other European countries, although there are differences across regions.

Thus, Smyth (2007a) has argued that cross-national variation in rates of early leaving reflects, at least in part, the structure of the educational system. Two sets of models appear to be associated with lower rates of early leaving: the Nordic model and the dual system model. The Nordic model (found in Norway, Sweden and Finland) is based on a comprehensive system with students taking the same pathway, at least until the end of compulsory schooling. This approach, coupled with a strong policy commitment to equity, results in smaller differences between social groups and schools in educational outcomes (Willms, 2006). The dual system model (evident in Germany, Austria and Denmark) on the other hand,

involves a rigid differentiation into academic and vocational tracks, the latter usually combining in-school education with on-the-job training. This model appears to provide a pathway for students who might otherwise drop out of school, albeit at the expense of more restricted career pathways in the longer run (Gangl, 2003). High rates of early school leaving in Southern Europe may be attributed to historical trends in educational attainment and the lack of clear trajectories from education.

Research from a psychological perspective has often focused on the influence of early childhood and family factors on young people's later educational careers. This research has frequently focused on identifying a set of 'risk' factors which contribute to the likelihood of school drop-out. Thus, the child's early home environment, including family stress, and the quality of care-giving are found to significantly influence school retention (Garnier et al., 1997; Jimerson et al., 2000).

Sociological research has expanded upon this research to look at the way in which educational outcomes are shaped by broader social structures, particularly social class. Earlier studies of social inequality focused on social class differences in the role of aspirations in educational attainment. This body of literature was grounded in the observation that class differences exist in levels of aspirations (Hyman, 1953; Ishida et al., 1995). Thus, such studies argued that working-class families accord less priority to a college education and are less ambitious than middle-class families. These class-based differences in educational and occupational aspirations were viewed as contributing to the reproduction of inequality. Further research, which became commonly known as the 'status attainment'

perspective, similarly argued that aspirations are a central part of maintaining social position from one generation to the next. These studies suggested that educational attainment is the outcome of the joint effects of family background and academic ability (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Casanova et al., 2005; Moreno Mínguez, 2011; Reay, 2006; White, 1982), which are brought about by the mutual reinforcing influences of expectations and aspirations for the future (Vincent & Ball, 2008; Irwin, 2009; 2011). According to Irwin (2009), socioeconomic background becomes key as a predictor of difference of youngsters' orientation to school work, and their expectations for their future education.

Thus, significant others, such as parents, teachers and peers, base their expectations on a student's family background and observable academic performance. Students then internalise the expectations crafted by these significant others. In the process, the expectations become the individual's own aspirations, which then compel achievement motivation (Stauber, 2007). Status attainment theory, however, has been criticised for failing to take account of the way in which educational outcomes are shaped by broader social structures rather than individual socialisation processes. Theories which focus on social structure can be broadly characterised as those which emphasise cultural factors, and those which adopt a rational action perspective.

In general, gender differences in patterns of early school leaving have received less attention in sociological research than social class differences. This is despite the fact that female retention rates now exceed male rates in most Western countries (OECD, 2008; OECD, 2011). Rational action theorists have sought to explain this shift in terms of the greater

labour market opportunities recently open to women (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Buchmann & Kriesi, 2009). Other commentators have related the gender gap in retention and achievement to a wide variety of factors, including broader social and labour market factors, the approach taken to student assessment, the feminisation of teaching, the pattern of classroom interaction, the ‘laddish’ culture among boys and the gender mix of the school (Smyth, 2007b; Irwin, 2009). Many studies of early school leaving have been quantitative in focus and could be considered to take an ‘external’ perspective on the lives of young people. More recently, a number of qualitative studies have considered school leaving from a student perspective. Smyth and Hattam (2002) argue that the recent emphasis on ‘student voice’ within educational research should be extended to early school leavers and the authors maintain that young people can clearly identify the complex reasons behind their decision. Such studies highlight the relative role of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors in young people’s decision to leave school. Many researchers highlight the centrality of disaffection with school, resulting from a mixture of social and institutional factors, including the influence of peers, relationships with teachers, curriculum content, and the classroom context (Kinder et al., 1996; Archer & Yamashita, 2003; Brown & Rodriguez, 2008). Thus, boredom with school and learning have been identified as the main reasons for young people not attending school and not wanting to continue in education.

According to Byrne and Smyth (2010) young people cannot be regarded as passive in the process; in particular, ‘acting out’ through misbehaviour can contribute to the process of disengagement, thus (ironically) reinforcing social differentiation in

outcomes (Willis, 1977; Brown & Rodriguez, 2008).

It is not always easy to determine whether certain sets of factors ‘cause’ school drop-out. The emergence of sociological studies has contributed to a more nuanced understanding of early leaving, with the interaction of family, individual and policy factors found to shape a gradual process of disengagement from school. Qualitative research has yielded further insights into how young people themselves withdraw from school and articulate their frustration with the educational system.

The analysis presented in this research study is contextualised in the background of structuralist sociological theory. This type of theory attempts to put forward an interpretative framework for structural and individual factors that explain the impact and the differences in early school leaving rates. Specifically, in this study we have included the comparative perspective on education policy in selected European welfare states in order to identify explanatory factors for the differences observed between countries.

Research Questions and Methodology

This study takes a comparative sociological approach³ to analysing the impact of early school leaving and its main causes in five European countries. Germany and Belgium (examples of continental transitional regime), Denmark and Finland (examples of Nordic transitional regime), Spain (example of southern European continental regime and the United Kingdom (example of Anglo-Saxon transitional regime), taking each of them as an example of a “transitional welfare regime” (Walther, 2006). To do this, a basically sociological theoretical stance has been adopted that considers structural factors such as gender, nationality, education policy and family background.

This study has been guided by research questions summarized in the following hypothesis:

1. Welfare regimes with lower public investment in education lead to a greater likelihood of early school leaving, as is the case in southern European countries.
2. Gender, family background and immigration are factors that explain the varying impact on the early school leaving rate across the selected countries depending on the context of welfare regime.
3. Lastly, in welfare state countries with weaker public investment in education, family background has a greater impact on school performance and consequently on school leaver figures. This would seem to confirm that educational inequality by reason of nationality and family origin is greater in countries with less welfare state involvement in public education, both in matters of impact of immigration and of family background on school leavers' final results.

The methodology is based on a descriptive and exploratory analysis compared from the exploitation of the aggregate data available from different data sources in Europe. Countries were selected that were considered representative of each defined transitional life course regime. Data are taken from the European Labour Force Survey (LFS), which is conducted in the 27 Member States. It is a large household sample survey providing quarterly results on labour participation of people aged 15 and over as well as on

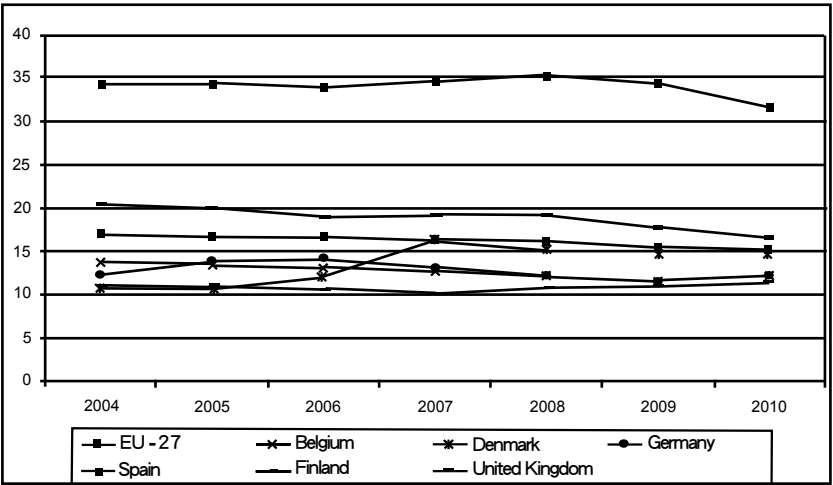
people who are not in employment. In 2010, around 1.5 million people across the EU were part of the survey. With regard to the OECD, data from the PISA Report have been used.

Early School Leaving in European Comparative Context

The EU average rate shows large differences between Member States (NESSE 2008b; NESSE, 2009). In 2010, despite some progress, the rate of ESL still averaged 15,1 % across the European Union, with considerable differences between countries. Against this backdrop, the Europe 2020 target to reduce the share of 18-24 year olds having left education and training prematurely to less than 10 % by 2020 becomes particularly critical. Although the current trends have decreased (Eurostat, 2012), this target will not be reached.

Finland and Germany stand at around 12% while Spain's rate is by far higher than other countries at 31.6% in 2010, followed by the United Kingdom (16.6%) and Denmark (14.7%). Looking at the relative performance of our countries, there are reasons for optimism (Figure 1), as all the countries studied, with the exception of Denmark and Finland, have reduced their rates since 2004. The figures seem to confirm that for countries such as Spain and the United Kingdom, the economic crisis has had a positive effect on early school leaving, since many young people, faced with poor prospects, have opted for either re-joining or staying in the education system.

Figure 1. Early leavers from formal education 2004-2010.

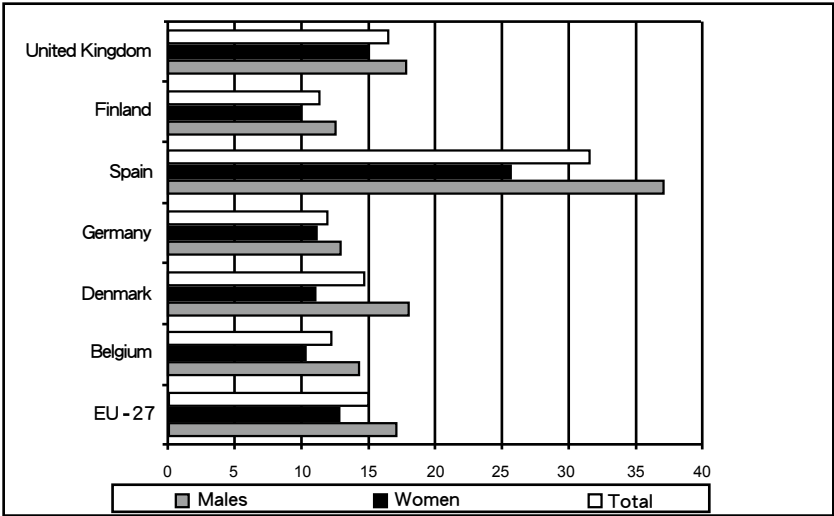


Source: Own Elaboration from European Labour Survey, 2004-2010.

Evidence shows that boys are more at risk (17.2%) of dropping out than girls (12.69%) in all the countries examined. These differences are particularly noticeable in Spain (25.7% of girls compared to 37.3% of boys) (Figure 2). From these figures it

can be deduced that girls generally place a higher value on training than boys, seeing it as a key part of employment training transitions (Moreno Mínguez, 2012).

Figure 2. Early leavers from formal education by sex, 2010.

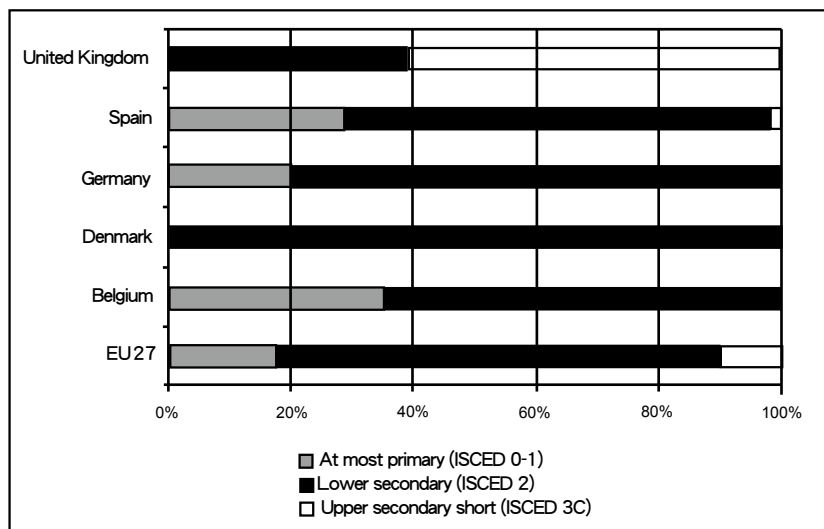


Source: Own Elaboration from European Labour Survey, 2010.

The profile of early school leavers varies considerably within the EU according to the highest education level achieved, to their status on the labour market and to their ethnic origin. Moreover, deconstruction of national averages often reveals significant regional differences. Over 73% of early school leavers in the EU complete only lower secondary education in 2009. In countries as Germany the 80% of school leavers have completed lower secondary education while in UK only 39%.

A very worrying fact is that 18% of early leavers in the EU have completed only primary education. This trend is specially strong in Belgium (36%) and Spain (29%). Denmark and UK are the more advance countries in this indicator. Some countries offer ISCED 3C short courses, including some vocational or pre-vocational training, such as in the UK, where the 61% of early school leavers have completed uppers secondary short courses.

Figure 3. Early leavers from education and training by highest educational level completed, 2009 (%)



Source: Own Elaboration from European Labour Survey, 2009.

These figures coincide with the ones shown in Table 1 for 2010, where the differences by sex and educational level are shown by type of studies completed. The percentage of women obtaining upper secondary education level is greater than men across all the selected countries, and the differences between Denmark and Spain are particularly significant for

very different reasons. In Denmark, one of the reasons is the progress made in setting gender policy and in Spain, women's attitude to education and training is a key factor. In the case of Spain, education is seen by girls as a fundamental tool for emancipation in an economic and cultural context based on family dependence (Moreno Mínguez, 2012; Reher, 1998).

Table 1

Early Leavers by Educational and Training, 2010

Countries	Early leavers from educational and training (%)*			At least upper secondary education level (%)**		
	Total	Men	Woman	Total	Men	Woman
EU 27	14,1	16,0	12,1	79,0	76,2	81,8
Belgium	11,9	13,8	14,5	84,4	85,0	83,6
Finland	10,3	11,6	9,0	84,2	82,8	85,6
Denmark	10,7	13,6	7,5	68,3	61,4	75,6
Germany	11,9	12,7	11,0	74,4	72,2	76,7
Spain	28,4	33,5	23,1	61,2	54,7	67,9
United Kingdom	14,9	15,8	14,0	80,4	78,9	82,0

Source: Own elaboration from Europe in figures, Eurostat Yearbook 2012.

Note. * Person aged 18-24 who have a highest level of education or training attained corresponding to lower secondary school and who have declared not having received any education or training in the four weeks preceding the survey.

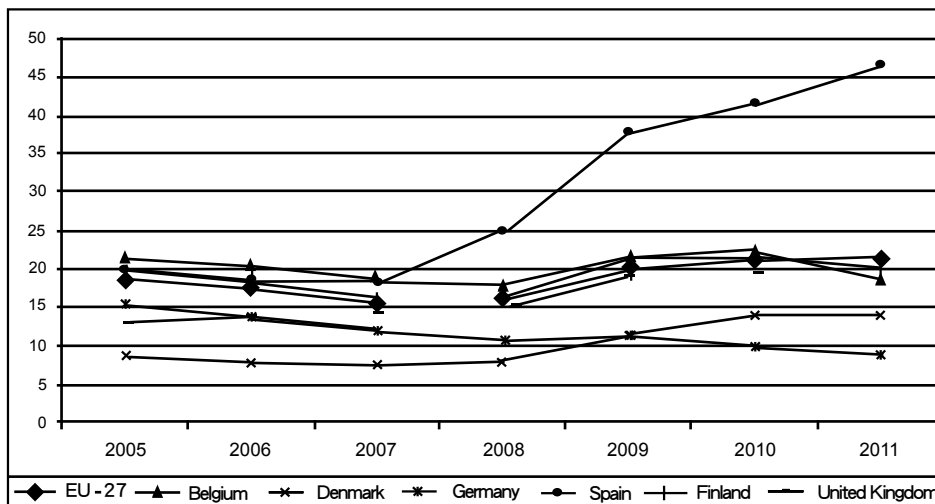
** The share of young people aged 20-24 having completed at least upper secondary education

The crisis is severely affecting prospects for young people (Damme & Karkkainen 2011). Youth unemployment has risen from 15.8 % in 2008 to 21.4 % in 2011, while the share of 15 to 24 year olds neither in education, employment or training⁴ has reduce from 4.1 en 2001 al 3.6% en 2011.

The educational level attained by school leavers is correlated with youth unemployment and in particular with unemployment in this group, as training capital is an essential element for employability. The Figure 4 shows overall unemployment rate for young people aged 15-24 as well as the school leavers' unemployment rate. From the table it can be seen that youth unemployment is very high in countries where the

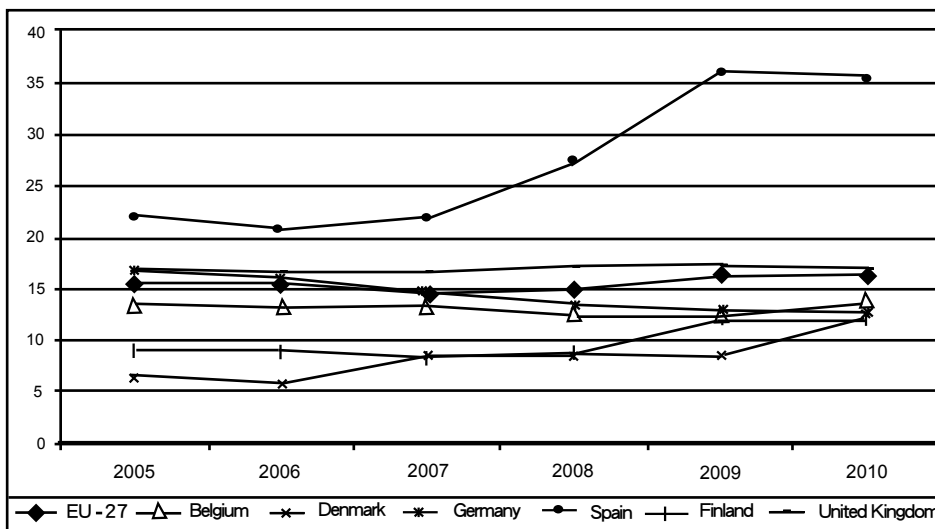
percentage of school leavers is also high, such as in Spain, where 46.4% of young people under the age of 25 were unemployed in 2011 and 35.5% of early school leavers in 2010 (Figure 5). In 2010, 16.2% of early school leavers were unemployed in UE-27. In terms of how unemployment data for early school leavers have developed, it can be seen that unemployment among this group is particularly high in Spain and the United Kingdom. Although these percentage have increased across all countries as a result of the economic crisis, it remains especially high in the case of Spanish school leavers. This situation has a negative impact on the risk of poverty and social exclusion for this group of young people (Bynner & Parsons, 2002).

Figure 4. Unemployment rate, annual average, less than 25 years (%), 2005-2011.



Source: Own Elaboration from European Labour Survey, 2005-2011.

Figure 5. Unemployment rate of early school less than 25 years Years (%), 2005-2010.



Source: Own Elaboration from European Labour Survey, 2005-2011.

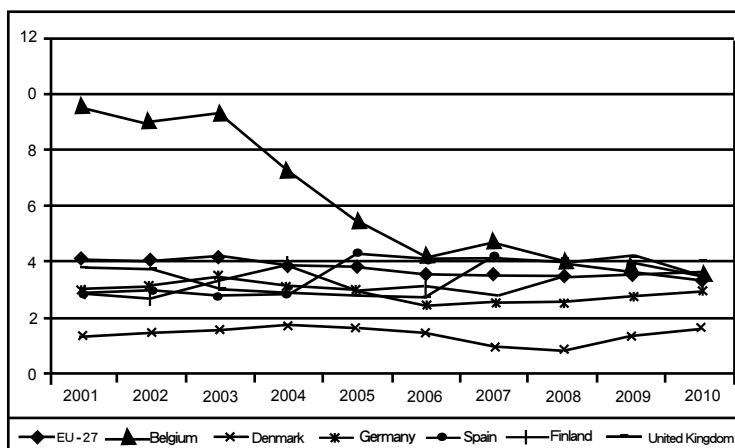
Early school leaving rates among young people who choose not to continue studying or working because they cannot find work or they do not want to work have led to the so-called NEET rates phenomenon. In this study we have elected to refer to NEETs as young people “not in education, employment or training” under the European Labour Force Survey category of “not wanting to work”. This indicator highlights the situation of a group of demotivated young people that result in short and long term wastage of human capital at heavy cost to governments. According to European Commission Early school leaving creates high individual, social and economic costs. Young people with only lower secondary education or less are more often affected by unemployment, are more likely to depend on social benefits and have a higher risk of social exclusion. It affects their lifetime earnings, well-being and health. They tend to participate less in democratic processes. Thus, early school leaving has long-term negative effects on social development and economic growth (Psacharopoulos, 2007). Innovation and growth rely on a skilled labour force: Reducing the average European rate of early school leaving by just 1 percentage point would provide the European economy each year with nearly half a million additional qualified potential young employees.

The economic and social costs are huge, both for the individuals concerned and for society (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2008). Eurofound research estimates

the total cost to be around €120 billion per year for the EU as a whole. According to Eurofound (2012) the NEET’s lack of participation in the labour market in the 21 countries considered costs €2 billion per week to their citizens. The yearly total of approximately €100 billion, which corresponds to 1% of their aggregated GDP, can be split into €94 billion of foregone earnings and €7 billion of excess transfers. At the country level, the most expensive total cost of NEET as share of GDP (%) is Spain (1.1) and the UK (0.9%). Conversely, the cost of NEETs Germany is quite limited (0.65% of GDP). NEETs are also less likely to have trust in institutions such as the government, to vote or to volunteer.

The Figure 6 shows a comparative analysis of the NEET % by country since 2001. In Denmark and Finland there has been a slight increase, although these countries have the lowest NEET percentage. Germany has maintained the same percentage. Countries such as Belgium have shown a significant drop, from 9.6% in 2001 to 3.4% in 2010. Spain and the United Kingdom in particular have seen a slight increase and the percentage of young people who do not study and who do not want to work is the highest out of all the countries featured in this study. One of the reasons for this could be that the economic crisis and the deteriorating job market have led to a lack of motivation in young people looking for jobs, especially school leavers (Bolívar, 2009).

Figure 6. Young people not in employment and not in any education and training (NEET rates), 2001-2010.



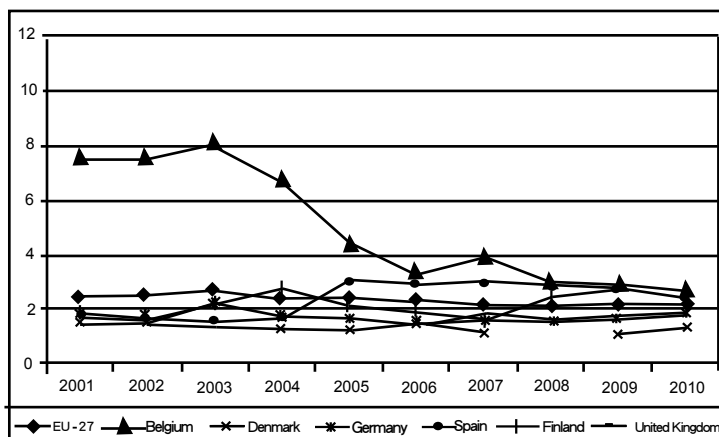
Source: Own Elaboration from European Labour Survey, 2005-2011

Note. The selected category has been "Persons from 15 to 24 years do not want to work".

As can be observed in the following Figure 7 and 8, there are differences between men and women. The data evidence a major percentage of women who neither study nor work. The percentage of women not studying and not wanting to work is higher in the United Kingdom (6.5%) and Spain (5.5%), owing to the restrictive gender policy operating in the liberal

and Mediterranean regimes. The country with the lowest percentage of women in this situation is Denmark, perhaps because of its advanced gender policy. Belgium is the country that has made the greatest effort to reduce the number of NEETs since 2001, including among women (Dumay & Dupriez, 2008).

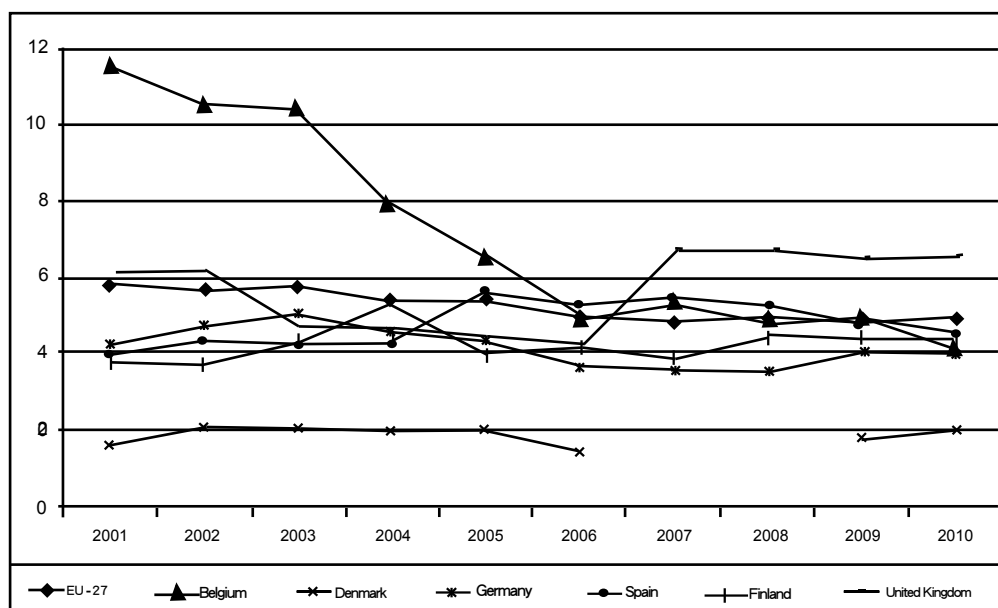
Figure 7. Young people not in employment and not in any education and training (NEET rates), 2001-2010, Males.



Source: Own Elaboration from European Labour Survey, 2005-2011

Note. The selected category has been "Persons from 15 to 24 years do not want to work".

Figure 8. Young people not in employment and not in any education and training (NEET rates), 2001-2010, Females.



Source: Own Elaboration from European Labour Survey, 2005-2011.

Note. The selected category has been "Persons from 15 to 24 years do not want to work".

Impact of education, socioeconomic background and migration

Numerous studies have underlined the importance of socio-economic conditions and family background on school performance. This has been dealt with in studies by Moreno Mínguez (2001; Feito, 1999; Kincheloe, 2004; Neves & Morais, 2005; Ruiz, 2001). However, there are not enough empirical studies relating family background with early school leaving rates. The following table sets out data on the impact of their family situation on pupils' personal performance. Two indicators have been used: the variance explained by this variable and the Gini coefficient. In respect of the first indicator,

the impact of this factor is evident in all the countries scrutinised, particularly in Belgium (19.3%) and Germany (17.9%), while in countries such as Finland it is relatively low in comparative terms (7.8%). In terms of the Gini coefficient, which measures real inequality in school performance according to the economic, social and cultural status of pupils' families, there is greater inequality between pupils in Spain (0.32) and Germany (0.30), with the lowest in Denmark (0.23). These data should be interpreted in the context of education policy put in place by the various welfare states and in the impact of early school leaving as a key factor in assessing inequality (see Table 2).

Table 2

Strength of the Relationship among Student Performance and Socio-economic Background and Gini Index

Countries	Strength of the relationship between student performance and the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS)		Gini Index
	% of explained variance in student performance	S.E.	
Belgium	19,3	(1,01)	0,27
Denmark	14,5	(1,02)	0,23
Finland	7,8	(0,82)	0,27
France	16,7	(1,97)	0,27
Germany	17,9	(1,29)	0,30
Spain	13,6	(1,30)	0,32
United Kingdom	13,7	(1,03)	0,34
OECD average	14,0	(0,22)	0,31

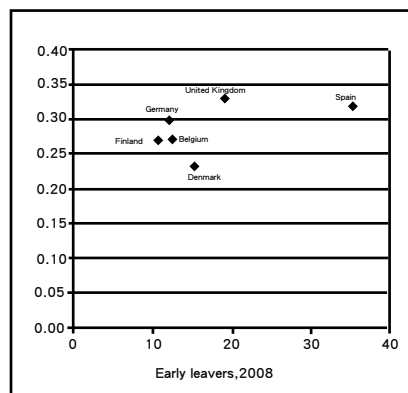
Source: PISA 2009 Results: Overcoming Social Background: Equity in Learning Opportunities and Outcomes (Volume 2) OECD 2011.

Note. Results based on students' self-reports, 2009.

The following Figure 9 shows the relation between the percentage of school leavers and the impact of family, cultural and economic inequality on school failure for the countries selected. According to these data, Spain and the United Kingdom are the countries with a greater correlation between the impact of early school leaving and inequality between pupils. On the contrary, Finland is the country with the lowest

association. In the case of Belgium, the relation between inequality and the percentage of school leavers is similar to countries such as Denmark, Germany and Finland, which could indicate that early school leaving in this country is linked to a greater extent with institutional factors. In any case, these results should be read with caution, as more empirical studies are needed to confirm the emerging hypotheses described in this paper.

Figure 9. Early leavers (%) and Gini Index, 2008.



Source: Own Elaboration from European Labour Survey, 2008 and PISA 2009 Results: Overcoming Social Background: Equity in Learning Opportunities and Outcomes (Volume 2) OECD 2011.

In terms of the impact of education policy and more specifically of social expenditure earmarked for education, we found a great deal of evidence confirming the relation between early school leaving and social expenditure on education. The following Table 3 shows that Spain and Germany are the

countries assigning the lowest percentage of GDP to education, while Finland, Denmark and Belgium are the countries spending the most in this area in 2009. The same can be said of expenditure per student. These indicators provide information about the relevancy of education in the selected countries.

Table 3

Investment in Education

Countries	Public spending on education % GDP, 2000	Public spending on education % GDP, 2009	Expenditure on public & private educational institutions per pupil*
Belgium	6	6,27	7658.5
Finland	5,89	6,81	70845.5
Denmark	8,28	8,72	9113.6
Germany	4,46	4,55*	7023.9*
Spain	4,28	5,01	6952.7
United Kingdom	4,46	5,67	7847.2
EU-27 Average	4,88	5,73	6399.8

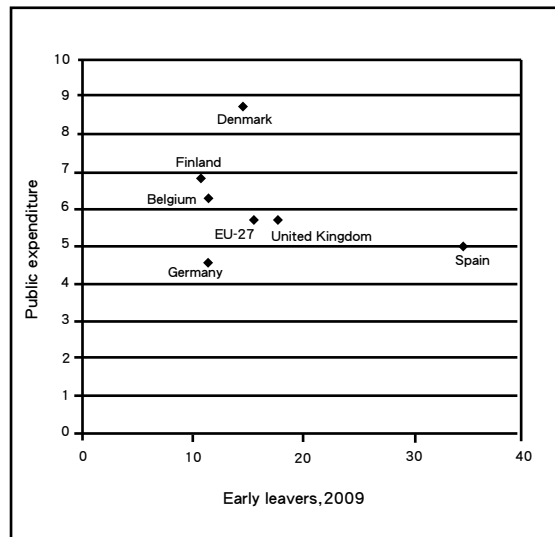
Source: Source: Own elaboration form Eurostat (UOE).

Notes. * The date of Germany is 2008

*(PPS for full-time-equivalents): IRF Prospective Payment System (PPS)

If we related expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP to the percentage of school leavers, it can be seen that countries spending less have a greater percentage of school leavers, with the exception of Germany; this shows that investment in education has a real impact on early school leaving in countries such as Spain, where the link between social expenditure and early school leaving is negative (Figure 11). In other words, Spain spends the least amount on education and has the highest recorded rate of school leavers. In contrast, Denmark spends the most on education and has an early school

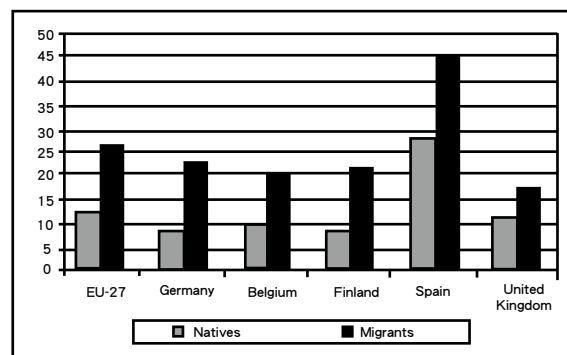
leaving rate of 13%, followed by Finland. Belgium occupies an intermediate position, as it spends a similar amount to northern European countries and the early school leaving rate is around 10%. Germany invests relatively little in education, even less than Spain, but Germany has the lowest early school leaving percentage of all the countries studied (see Figure 10). Reasons for this could include the way the education system is organised and, more specifically, the positive effects of vocational training system on motivating pupils to stay in the education system.

Figure 10. Early leavers and public expenditure on education.

Source: Own Elaboration from European Labour Survey, 2009 and PISA 2009 Results: Overcoming Social Background: Equity in Learning Opportunities and Outcomes (Volume 2) OECD 2011.

Lastly, we will deal with the impact of migrant status on early school leaving rates. According to data from the 2009 European Labour Force Survey, the percentage of school leavers is higher among the immigrant population in all the selected countries, double that of the native population, except in the United Kingdom, where the differences are smaller

(Figure 12). In Spain, early school leaving among young immigrants reaches 45% compared to 29% for the native population. In Germany, Belgium and Finland, the early school leaving rate is doubled in the young immigrant population. This indicates that immigration has a major impact on school failure rates.

Figure 12. Early leavers from educational by migrant status, 2009 (%).

Source: Own Elaboration, Eurostat, European Labour Survey, 2009.

Data from the OECD for 2007 would seem to confirm this interpretation (Table 4). The following table shows that the countries where the immigrant population is more successfully integrated are Germany, Belgium and Finland, with over 30% of young immigrants studying in higher education in the latter two countries. However, in Finland, differences between the immigrant and native population are high. In terms of qualifying this group in relation to work carried out, Germany is the most efficient (66%), followed by the United Kingdom (61%) and Finland (59%). Spain occupies

last place, with only 19% of young immigrants finding work to suit their qualifications after university. In all countries, there are significant differences between young natives and immigrants in relation to these indicators, with the exception of the United Kingdom. In this country, immigrants with higher education are more likely to find work better suited to their qualifications than young British natives. In Spain the percentage difference is relatively large. The reasons for this are diverse, but it is likely that the structure of the education system is one of the main reasons.

Table 4

Educational Attainment and Occupational Matches by Migrant Status, and Proportion of Population Born Abroad Among 20-29 Year-olds and 15-64 Year-olds (2003 and 2007)

Country	Proportion of 20-24 year-olds who are not in education and have not attained upper secondary education, by migrant status			Proportion of 25-29 year-olds who either have a tertiary education qualification or are currently enrolled in a tertiary education programme, by migrant status			Proportion of employed 25-29 year-old non-students with a tertiary education, working as technicians and associate professionals (ISCO 3) or as professionals (ISCO 2), by migrant			Proportion of population born abroad among	
	Country of birth			Country of birth			Country of birth			20-29 years old	15-64 years old
	Born abroad	Born in the country	Total	Born abroad	Born in the country	Total	Born abroad	Born in the country	Total		
Belgium	32	13	15	37	43	42	45	66	64	12	13
Finland	19	9	9	31	50	49	59	78	77	5	3
Germany	24	11	13	26	32	31	66	76	74	17	16
Spain	49	33	36	22	48	42	19	58	53	19	15
United Kingdom	14	19	18	39	40	40	61	58	59	16	13
OECD average	25	15	17	38	38	37	64	72	71	13	13

Source: OECD, LSO Network, special data collection, Monitoring Transition Systems Working Group.

Discussion of the Results

The results described in the data above show that a wide range of factors influence school failure rates. The research questions set out in this study is partly answered by the data provided.

The study was carried out by collecting

secondary data to validate how structural factors have a major impact on early school leaving rates. Starting from the model of life course regimes (Walther, 2006) operationalized from indicators of social expenditure on education and the structure of the education system (degree of flexibility and dualising), the study

shows that countries with a weaker state and a rigid educational model have a greater percentage of failed transitions and higher school failure rates, as seen in Spain, Belgium and the United Kingdom. In contrast, in countries with a higher expenditure on education and where the education system is more diverse and comprehensive at secondary level, the early school leaving rate is lower.

It was also found that in the southern European welfare states, represented by Spain, the high school failure rates are linked with high levels of unemployment in this group, which in turn has negative repercussions on youth unemployment figures: Spain has the highest rate of youth unemployment in Europe, while Germany and Finland have the lowest rates of youth unemployment but also of early school leaving. This seems to indicate that there is a direct link between early school leaving and youth unemployment, with the consequences that this has for young people.

According to previous studies, the variables of sex and nationality were also found to be determining factors (NESSE, 2008a). Once again, Spain is the country in which young immigrant pupils are more likely to be early school leavers, with substantial differences compared to the other countries selected for the study. It should be emphasised that these differences between natives and immigrants were observed in all the countries studied, with the exception of the United Kingdom. This could suggest that in these countries the education systems have not adapted properly to an increase influx of immigrant pupils into education, which would have negative repercussions on immigrant early school leaving rates and their ability to find jobs to suit their skills and training

By sex it was found that women are less likely than men to be early school leavers, especially in Denmark and Spain. In Spain this is due to women's training and education culture and in Denmark to generous gender policies. However, unemployment is higher among women who leave the education system early than among men, particularly in Spain and the United Kingdom. These figures could point to the difficulties experienced by unqualified women in joining the job market in these countries: many of these women would prefer to end their search for employment and form a family, as shown by the latest Youth Report in Spain.

In terms of the impact of family background, the results are especially significant, as they confirm the hypothesis that in welfare states where public expenditure on education is higher, the impact of family background on the reasons for school failure rates is lower: this is the case of Finland. The Gini coefficient figures show that the greatest educational inequality between pupils according to their families' socio-economic, cultural and social status was found in Spain and Germany, while the lowest inequality was seen in Finland. In respect of the variance explained by pupils' family situation for academic performance indicator, Belgium stands out for its high explained variance. This could suggest that Belgium's cultural and linguistic diversity is affecting school performance, depending on family cultural and economic status. In the Spanish and German cases, the combined effect of education policy, educational models and immigration could explain the effect of the family on educational performance and therefore on educational inequality.

One of the aims of current education policy is to increase school retention. This study indicates that the

specific features of early school leavers, the public policy on education and the structure of the European education systems must be considered if retention is to improve (Faubert & Blacklock, 2012).

The transition from school to work is often regarded as a "rite of passage" in which young people are introduced to the world of labour. These processes are contextualized in a period of economic crisis is severely affecting the job opportunities for young people, but especially for school leavers. This group represents young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, and leaving school early has significant consequences for their adult life-chances, thus reinforcing their initial disadvantage. Therefore, the results obtained from this comparative study would suggest that European welfare states need to strengthen their education policy, both in terms of investment in education and in terms of redesigning their education systems in order to put a stop to early school leaving. Enabling young people to integrate into social structures is a key factor for social cohesion and economic growth.

Conclusions

The results show significant variations between the European countries, depending on social spending on education. For example, Finland has opted for investing in education based on comprehensive and flexible educational models. This policy has minimised early school leaving and educational inequality, while at the other extreme, in Spain, where little investment is made in education the early school leaving rate and educational inequality by nationality and family background is also greater. Another important conclusion is that, depending on the education policy put in place by States and the type of

education model implemented, the impact of gender and particularly of nationality is very different. For example, the United Kingdom and Germany have achieved more effective training and employment integration for young immigrants than for example Spain where the training/employment mismatch for this group is very high. In fact, this research study has highlighted that social cohesion and economic growth in the European countries selected, as an example of education policy, depends largely on the degree of integration achieved with school leavers.

Notes

1. The European Union defines early school leavers as people aged 18-24 who have only lower secondary education or less and are no longer in education or training. At EU level Early school leavers are therefore those who have only achieved pre-primary, primary, lower secondary or a short upper secondary education of less than 2 years (ISCED 0, 1, 2 or 3c short5), and include those who have only a pre-vocational or vocational education which did not lead to an upper secondary certification. This is the working definition adopted for this document. While the term "early school leaving" includes all forms of leaving education and training before completing upper secondary education or equivalents in vocational education and training, the term "school drop-out" is used with a much more restricted meaning: it refers to discontinuing an ongoing course in general or vocational education and training (Hattam, 2008). Council conclusions on "Reference levels of

- European Average Performance in Education and Training (Benchmarks)", May 2003. The OECD defines early school leavers as 20-24 year olds with education below upper secondary level.
2. According to Walther (2006; 2009), referring to the analysis of welfare regimes the term 'regime' implies that life course regulations emerge from complex constellations between socio-economic structure, institutions (to which public policies belong) and cultural patterns. These constellations represent power structures which also influence individual processes of biographical orientation. Comparisons of transition welfare regimes refer to structures of welfare, education and training, youth policy, doing gender, and labour markets but also to interpretations of disadvantage and the dominant meanings of youth.
 3. Structural comparative sociological approach usually involves the study of particular social processes across nation-states. In this case we have used the compared sociology of welfare state.
 4. We considered NEET young people aged 18 to 24 who neither work nor study that "will not work".
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