INTERVENTION POLICIES PROPOSED BY THE EUROPEAN UNION TO COMBAT EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING AMONG MIGRANT PUPILS

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ABSTRACT

Currently, in Europe, many young people drop out of school or training before completing secondary education. According to findings from some international research, the average dropout rate is twice as high for immigrant pupils as for native students. In fact, on this front, what emerges from the analysis of the educational achievements of pupils of immigrant origin is that, in most European countries, the educational itinerary of these pupils is characterized by a significant incidence of dropouts, dropouts and delays. In this regard, over the past decades, European institutions have drafted several documents aimed at urging member states to promote, through schools and education, the effective school and social integration of the many pupils of immigrant origin living in member countries. Our examination intends to focus on those documents that offer a fairly comprehensive picture of the positions taken by the European Union not only with regard to the school failure of immigrant pupils, but also with respect to the equally fundamental need to create school paths of integration from early childhood; to promote organic and effective forms of interaction between school and family; and to design specific Courses for learning the national language aimed also at the parents of immigrant pupils.

KEYWORDS: European Union; schools; pupils with migrant backgrounds; school dropouts.

1 INTRODUCTION

Among the various problematic issues noted by both European political institutions and member countries, that of early school leaving (dropouts, delays, repetition, evasion, etc.) is undoubtedly one of the most widespread critical issues.

In order to counter this phenomenon and enhance the current level of pupils' knowledge, in June 2022, the European Commission published a *Proposal for a Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success* (European Commission, 2022).

Essentially, this proposal contains a set of concrete policy actions to combat school dropout and low student achievement in basic skills (reading, math, and science). The primary purpose is to offer responses to the needs of learners, teachers and trainers, schools and education systems. The Proposal also urges that more attention be paid to learners' well-being and educational achievement.

In addition to the problems already known, in recent years, there has also been the problem related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused, in many students, a significant decrease in concentration and learning abilities.

Currently, more than 3.2 million European students, aged 18 to 24, drop out of education and training early, and only 84.3 percent of young people aged 20 to 24 have completed upper secondary education.

In this regard, it is worth noting that although even before the pandemic, one in five students showed poor skills in reading, math or science (OECD, 2019), today, the results are more worrying and the effects of the pandemic will be visible for a long time to come.

The data show that the students most at risk of dropping out of school are those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, among them, students from immigrant backgrounds are undoubtedly the most disadvantaged.

In general, decreasing the percentage of underachieving pupils in basic skills and combating early dropout from education and training are the key objectives of European cooperation in education and training.

In this regard, in 2020, the European Commission issued a *Communication on Making a European Education Area a Reality by 2025* that announced the flagship project Pathways to School Success aimed at supporting the inclusive dimension of education and implementing essential measures for recovery and resilience. That communication stated: people-centered policies are more essential than ever. Early childhood education and care, schools, vocational education and training (VET), higher education, research, adult education, and nonformal learning play a key role. Such policies must develop a holistic approach to education and training and recognize its intrinsic value by providing a comprehensive basis for ensuring maximum contribution and participation in society" (European Commission, 2020).

This objective was also shared by the *Conference on the Future of Europe* in its final report of May 2022, in which it called for the creation of an inclusive European educational space, within which all citizens have equal accessibility to quality education. The project on pathways to school success aims to reduce the share of underachievement in basic skills and raise the level of secondary education (Conference on the Future of Europe, 2022).

2   Dimensions and characteristics of the phenomenon of school dropout of immigrant pupils in Europe

According to findings from some international research (Council of Europe, 2022), the disparity in educational achievement between immigrant and native students is due to the fact that the educational attainment of most immigrant pupils tends to be considerably lower than that of their native peers. As a consequence, this results in a higher percentage of dropout cases, lower levels of qualifications and a smaller proportion of young people entering higher education.

In particular, according to the European Commission, "Learners born outside the reporting country are at an even greater risk of dropping out of education and training early (22.4 %), particularly if the country is outside the EU27 (23.2 %). The probability of early dropout from education and training is on average higher for young men born outside the EU27 (25.2 %) than for young women born outside the EU27 (20.9 %)" (European Commission, 2022). Compared to their native peers, moreover, foreign pupils are less schooled in the preschool and upper secondary education segments.

With regard to preschool attendance, it is useful to recall how important it is for all children and especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate in early childhood education and care activities. Specifically, such attendance "Contributes to preventing the formation of early skill gaps and is therefore a key tool for combating inequality and

educational poverty. Early childhood education and care services should be part of an integrated package of rights-based policy measures for children to improve child outcomes and break intergenerational vicious cycles of social disadvantage" (Council of Europe, 2019, p. 1). Undoubtedly, participation in early childhood education and care activities can be an indispensable tool to ensure "educational equity for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as certain migrant or minority groups (for example the Rom) and refugee children, children with special educational needs, including disabilities, children in alternative care facilities and street children, children of parents in detention, and children in families at high risk of poverty and social exclusion, such as single-parent or large families." Refugee children, due to their vulnerable situation, need strengthened support because, "Poverty, physical and emotional stressors, trauma, and lack of language skills can hinder their future educational prospects and successful integration into a new society." Preschool attendance can help decrease these risk factors (Council of Europe, 2019, p. 2).

With regard to upper secondary schooling, however, it is worth noting that immigrant students are overrepresented in professional educational institutions, which do not always provide adequate preparation for entering university studies.
Indubitably, there are many factors that contribute to the educational disadvantage of pupils from a migrant background.

Some are related to personal situation: consider, for example, the unfavorable socio-economic context from which they often come; the loss of value of the knowledge they have accumulated in their country of origin ("particularly their mother language, but also knowledge regarding the functioning of institutions"); the lack of or reduced recognition of previously acquired qualifications; the low expectations of families and communities; and, finally, the absence of recognized role models to which they can refer (European Commission, 2008, p. 8). As far as language is concerned, we are well aware of how good knowledge of the language of the host country is an essential factor for effective integration and successful schooling. This, in fact, in addition to representing a valid means of communication in everyday life is characterized as an important resource for the purposes of training and integration into the labor market. Students whose mother language is different from that in which instruction is given should receive appropriate additional support according to their needs, possibly outside school hours and avoiding any kind of separation or segregation. Skills in their mother language should be enhanced and used as a resource for the whole class.

Often, parents also need language support; in this regard, schools could work in partnership, for example with ONG, to ensure, especially for recently arrived migrants, that they learn the language of the host country and other forms of support, both inside and outside the school, in collaboration with local authorities and services (European Commission, 2022).

Fundamental to successful school achievement turn out to be the educational measures and strategies adopted by the various school systems. On this front, in fact, many studies have found that even in situations that are similar from a migratory perspective, the outcomes of immigrant pupils from the same countries of origin vary from one Member State to another. Essentially, then, these findings suggest that "the structure of the education system and the way schools and teachers relate to migrant pupils can have a significant impact on achievement" (European Commission, 2008, p. 9).

In the Report *Education and migration strategies for integrating migrant children in European schools and societies*, submitted to the European Commission by the NESSE network of experts in 2008, it was stated that the school in the host country must first and foremost promote the school integration of these pupils. In this regard, the Report highlighted how the absence or distorted presentation of migrants in school curricula, textbooks, and school life in general can negatively affect the academic success of these pupils, damage their self-image and self-esteem.

Another factor that can seriously undermine school success is the high concentration of immigrant pupils in the same classes or schools. Often, in fact, these are "concentrated in schools that are effectively isolated from the rest of the system and whose quality tends to decline rapidly, as evidenced, for example, by the high rate of teacher turnover." This tendency, present in many European systems, produces forced segregation that, in many cases, leads to lower-than-normal educational achievement and inhibits "the development of social integration, friendships and social bonds between migrant children and their peers" (NESSE network of experts, 2008, p. 8).

On this front, it is worth noting that, often too, "Systems of grouping or targeting (tracking) pupils according to their aptitudes also have the effect of directing a comparatively high proportion of immigrant children toward courses of study that require lower aptitudes, which is also likely to be reflected in lower initial levels of academic achievement and/or language ability" (European Commission, 2008, pp. 9-10). In contrast, however, several studies have found that many foreign pupils perform better when "they are in a class with children who master the host country's language and are highly motivated academically" (European Commission, 2008, p. 10).

School, as the first context of socialization outside the family environment, plays a very important role in the integration of migrant pupils, so that, "if, instead of helping to mitigate the effects of the socioeconomic origin of migrant families, schools reject, discriminate or segregate, the integration process is unlikely to be successful, and the cost of this failure will fall on society as a whole" (European Economic and Social Committee, 2009).

In order to foster the integration process and school success of immigrant pupils, it is necessary, first and foremost, to avoid the segregation of these pupils in schools attended mainly or exclusively by immigrant children. In fact, the school must not become a ghetto, but rather must reflect the social composition of the community and must be mindful that such segregation is usually flanked by or derived from residential segregation.

In the document *Education and Training 2020. School policy A comprehensive and integrated school approach in the fight against school dropout. Strategic Messages* emphasizes the need to make school a place of exchange and comparison for all students, an environment willing to consider diversity as a resource, to maximize their potential and to adapt to their learning needs (European Commission, 2015, p. 12).

In general, with regard to "Student Support", the Working Group that drafted this document argues that "School policy and mission should place a strong emphasis on dropout prevention. At the emergence of learning difficulties and the first symptoms of academic distress, schools should respond quickly with targeted interventions within a support system aimed at the most at-risk pupils". In this regard, school programs should be more engaging and challenging and didactic approaches more adequate to the needs of pupils. In this sense, while

maintaining high expectations for all pupils, programs should provide for personalized forms of teaching and learning and different evaluation styles. Emphasis should be placed on the importance of formative assessment to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and the development of skills and competencies by bringing out each child's gifts to the fullest while maintaining the quality of curriculum content. Programs should "represent the real life and diversity of society, defending continuity with subsequent education and training cycles or alternative training paths. They should allow for more learner-centered didactic approaches and more collaborative teaching and learning methods. There should also be opportunities for the recognition of nonformal and informal learning".

Regarding teachers, the paper recognizes that in light of new challenges, their role is becoming increasingly complex; therefore, it advocates the need to provide them with new skills and competencies not only in initial training, but also during their professional development. In this sense, we also find an interesting reference to the need to equip teachers with intercultural competencies; in fact, in this regard, it states: "Teachers' knowledge, skills, and abilities in understanding diversity in all its forms, intercultural education, multilingualism, and teaching non-native learners should be part of initial teacher education and reinforced through continuing professional development. The teaching profession should be further promoted, in order to attract a large number of candidates representing the whole society and to be able to select the best, while remaining true to the school's core values and objectives that society and stakeholders share and endorse" (European Commission, 2015, p. 15).

Also in the *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on Making a European Area of Education a Reality by 2025*, the need to support teachers in dealing with linguistic and cultural differences is reiterated with the aim of achieving "improved educational outcomes for pupils and young people from a migrant background" (European Commission, 2020, p. 7).

In this regard, from the 2019 OCSE *International Teaching and Learning* Survey found that many teachers express the need to develop their skills to teach students with special needs, to use digital technologies, and to teach in multilingual and multicultural classrooms (OECD, 2019, p. 13).

In its Communication, in order to promote quality didactic approaches aimed at meeting students' needs, the Commission advocated the importance of fostering international mobility of students, teachers and teacher educators (European Commission, 2020, p. 11).
With regard to parental access to information, the paper's drafters propose to ensure that pupils and their parents, especially those from immigrant backgrounds, "the opportunity to access clear information about the country's education system and available educational options; they should also be given the opportunity to understand the implications of these choices for future studies and choices. Clear information about available guidance, support and assistance services should be provided to pupils and their parents". Essentially, to increase trust and promote mutual understanding, school systems should not only make the usual channels of communication between schools and families more effective, but also create new ones. In particular, to foster relations with immigrant families, the paper proposes involving intercultural mediators, migrant associations, ONG and other community-based organizations.

In such a context, "Cultural events, festivals, and activities on the ground can help build cultural bridges to reach parents experiencing marginalized situations and from ethnic minorities" (European Commission, 2015, p. 17).

Indubitably, the biggest strategic challenge at the European level should be to create an inclusive school, aimed at ensuring that all pupils, including those from migrant backgrounds, have the support they need for good academic performance. As for immigrant pupils, the challenge of integration cannot be addressed without investigating their actual existential, social and economic conditions. Students from immigrant backgrounds, face a series of problems that inevitably end up negatively influencing their course of study. In this regard, think of the difficulties related to the migration process (having to leave one's country of origin, the need to quickly learn the language in order to be able to communicate, adapting to the rules and customs of new schools etc.); problems related to the precarious socio-economic conditions of families and often marginalization; and finally, with regard to schools, the lack of adequate supports for their needs, teachers who are not sufficiently prepared to deal with diversity in the classroom and to deal with the families of these students (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019, p. 9).

In this sense, the European Union, on different occasions, has urged member states to fulfill their integration commitment to immigrants and to ensure that all children and young people, regardless of their social position, have access to the education system and succeed in school. To this end, the various European countries were urged to adopt a school policy aimed at ensuring access to qualified and free schools for all pupils; respect for ethnic, socio-cultural, economic and gender differences; and the characteristics of individual immigrant communities ("characteristics to be taken into account in the design of programs with the objective of intercultural openness of educational institutions"); continuing teacher formation and support of qualified staff regarding knowledge of the language and culture of the communities in the school; preservation and promotion of multilingualism; and implementation of a tutoring project in which older and more experienced students help pupils who have more difficulty in learning various disciplines; the realization of "a platform for dialogue between immigrant and native children, as a tool capable of eliminating preconceptions and strengthening integration"; the institution of adult education courses aimed at people from a migrant background; the promotion of intercultural competencies and the allocation of scholarships and other financial aid to reduce economic disadvantages; and finally, the revision "of school materials so that immigrants are not presented in a negative light" (European Economic and Social Committee, 2009, p. 85).

In order to promote the effective integration of immigrants in all European countries, member States should adopt the "open method of coordination and, in this context, encourage the implementation of comparative studies and research programs that help to collect and disseminate good practices" and share and support innovative initiatives aimed at highlighting issues emerging at the European level and sometimes difficult to recognize on a solely national scale.

In this regard, one cannot fail to note that despite the innumerable indications offered by European Institutions over the past decades, member States, have not always been able or willing to take up these proposals to transform schools into inclusive places. Even today, in many European countries, national school policies focus mainly on the language skills of newly

arrived immigrants, without looking at the psychological and emotional aspects, despite their effects on school performance.

3   Proposals from European Institutions for combating the phenomenon of migrant pupils dropping out of school

In consideration of the observation that many of the proposals put forward in recent decades by European Institutions regarding the school dropout of immigrant pupils tend to repeat similar concepts or, at any rate, are included within directives that deal with the phenomenon of school failure in Europe at a general level, it was preferred to pay attention to a few directives that make more direct and precise explication of the issues that are the subject of our discussion.

In particular, our examination intends to focus on a number of documents that offer a fairly comprehensive picture of the positions taken by the European Union over the years, not only with respect to the school failure of immigrant pupils, but also with respect to the equally fundamental need to promote, through schools and education, the effective social integration of the many immigrants living in member countries.

Particularly interesting in this regard are the *Council of Europe Conclusions of November 26, 2009 on the education of children from a migrant background.* In that document, the Council of Europe, in addition to emphasizing that "providing children from a migrant background with better opportunities for educational success can reduce marginalization, exclusion and alienation", urged member states to develop specific measures for language learning, since, "mastering the official language (or one of the official languages) of the host country is an essential condition for educational success and is also indispensable for social and professional integration" (Council of Europe, 2009).

The Council of Europe also proposed intervening with targeted actions such as "intensive language instruction for newly immigrant pupils, additional support for those with difficulties, and special courses for all teachers to prepare them to teach children whose native language is different from the language of instruction". In addition, to compensate for educational disadvantage and the negative results of poor integration, the Council of Europe suggested the use of targeted supports, such as providing more educational resources for schools located in disadvantaged areas and more personalized instruction, as well as "providing additional educational support , for example in the form of mentoring and tutoring, guidance to both pupils and their parents about the opportunities available to them within the education system, or study and homework centers organized after school hours in cooperation with parent and community associations of origin".

On this front, moreover, the Council of Europe advocated the need to intervene early and with targeted measures from the arrival of school-age children in the host country, to provide long-term programs to support language learning, and finally to revise teaching methods, teaching materials and curricula to adapt them to the needs of all pupils, regardless of their origin (Council of Europe, 2009, p. 5). It also exhorted member states to identify the main factors leading to school dropout and to observe the characteristics of the phenomenon at the national, regional and local levels so as to lay the groundwork for the adoption of specific and functional, evidence-based measures.

On a more general level – but equally important for the purposes of our examination, since it addressed, among other things, the problem of school segregation of immigrant pupils and emphasized the need to value linguistic and cultural differences, suggesting sound intervention policies to prevent immigrant pupils from dropping out of school – was *the Council of Europe's Recommendation of June 28, 2011 on policies to reduce school dropout*. In this document, member countries were urged to implement comprehensive strategies focusing on "prevention measures, intervention measures and compensation measures, the latter aimed at bringing those who have dropped out of education back to study" (Council of Europe, 2011, p. 3).

The "preventive measures," according to the Council of Europe's assessments, were intended to prevent the risks of school failure or dropout through optimization of educational provision. In essence, the objective was to create a solid foundation that would enable pupils to develop their potential and integrate into school. Concretely, this was to result in: (a) in the enjoyment of "high quality education and care from early childhood"; (b) in the expansion of educational provision, ensuring more education and training opportunities beyond the age of obligatory schooling; (c) in promoting integration policies aimed at combating segregation and supporting schools located in more disadvantaged areas or with many pupils from weaker socio-economic backgrounds; (d) in enhancing linguistic diversity, for example, by helping "children of different mother tongues to improve their knowledge of the language of instruction and, where appropriate, of the mother tongue, and teachers to teach pupils with different levels of language proficiency"; (e) in encouraging parental participation and cooperation regarding school activities; (f) in increasing "the flexibility and permeability of training pathways (for example, by modularizing courses or alternating school and work)"; (g) in finally making vocational training pathways more qualitative, more attractive and more flexible (Council of Europe, 2011, p. 5).

As for "intervention policies," these, as expressed by the Council of Europe, were to combat school dropout by improving the quality of schooling and educational training, addressing problems early, and providing targeted support to students or groups of students at risk of dropping out.

These policies were to cover all levels of education: from kindergarten through the second cycle of secondary education. Essentially, their objective should have been to foster learning, to increase the quality of teaching and pedagogical innovation, to expand teachers' skills through initial formation and continuing education, and to provide them with the necessary tools to deal with cultural diversity and know how to handle difficult situations. Specifically, these "intervention policies" should have aimed to: a) "transform schools into learning communities based on a vision of school development shared by all stakeholders, utilize everyone's experience and knowledge, and provide an open, stimulating and pleasant environment that encourages young people to pursue further study or training"; (b) to set up verification activities that would enable early detection of pupils at risk and take all necessary measures to prevent possible problems of distress; (c) to create a network of relationships and cooperation with families and out-of-school educational agencies "such as local communities, organizations representing immigrants or minorities, sports and cultural associations, or organizations of employers and civil society". The Council of Europe, moreover, considered particularly useful and important "the action of mediators belonging to the local community,

capable of facilitating communication and reducing distrust" (Council of Europe, 2011, pp. 5-6). The roster of "intervention policies" also included individual support measures designed to provide pupils with some forms of personalized help such as, for example, mentoring (individually) or tutoring (in small groups); as well as guidance and counseling activities to facilitate school or career choices.

With regard to "compensation policies," which were considered essential for those who dropped out of school early and aimed at giving everyone the opportunity to re-approach study, to attend education and training courses and to acquire the qualifications that could not be obtained previously, the Council of Europe proposed to develop "second chance" education programs. Such programs, were to offer specific learning, corresponding to the needs of school dropouts, and were to be adopted with small groups of students, within a personalized, innovative and adequate age-appropriate education, characterized by flexible training paths. Finally, to the extent possible, such programs were to be "easily accessible and free".

Also as part of "compensation policies," it was proposed to establish remedial courses aimed at facilitating reintegration into the general education system and filling the understandable gaps formed by the early interruption of studies; and to provide for measures to recognize and validate previous training, "including skills acquired through non-formal or informal learning, which boost young people's confidence and self-esteem and facilitate their reintegration into the education system". Such strategies could "motivate students to continue their studies and training and help them identify their talents and make better choices for their professional careers" (Council of Europe, 2011, p. 6).

Essentially, the call made to member states in the *Council Recommendation* of June 28, 2011, to adopt targeted and effective policies and implement a comprehensive strategy focusing on "prevention measures, intervention measures and compensation measures" has been taken up by several countries; in fact, all states, albeit in different ways and at different times, have introduced policies and measures aimed at combating early dropout, or have initiated projects to reduce early dropout rates. With regard more specifically to immigrant students and those from ethnic minorities, many countries, in addition to implementing language support measures, have also begun to put into practice projects aimed at promoting the education and integration of these pupils.

Another document that, in our opinion, is worth examining is the *Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the Importance of Skills in the Language(s) of Schooling for Equity and Quality in Education and for Educational Success* (Council of Europe, 2014). In that document, published in 2014, the Committee of Ministers, while not referring exclusively to the language problems of immigrant pupils, offered some very useful suggestions regarding the need to impart adequate skills "in the language(s) of schooling to all learners". In this regard, starting from the assumption that the right to education cannot be fully exercised if those who are to learn "do not master the linguistic norms proper to school and necessary to have access to knowledge", the Committee of Ministers noted how the lack of language skills greatly conditioned school success and created serious conditions of disadvantage and inequality among pupils. To remedy these problems, the drafters of the document advised the heads of school systems, to work to ensure that all learners, acquire, not only the skills necessary for ordinary communication, but also those of the more "academic"

language used in teaching the various disciplines.

Regarding, more specifically, immigrant pupils, the Committee urged schools to provide for increasing their language skills on the one hand and, on the other, to "recognize that all languages contribute to success in school learning, individual growth and development, preparation for active life and the exercise of citizenship" (Council of Europe, 2014, pp. 6-7). In this regard, it considered particularly useful "the comprehensive conception of language learning developed by the Council of Europe under the name of multilingual and intercultural education" and, among other things, it was suggested "not to isolate artificially the different language experiences of learners and to mobilize their diverse cultural and linguistic resources to address the linguistic challenges they encounter in building knowledge in the various school subjects and to foster their personal growth and fulfillment and their preparation for active life and the exercise of democratic citizenship" (Council of Europe, 2014, p. 11).

In general, the committee of ministers called for greater sensitivity on the part of educational staff in "considering the various languages present in the school as a resource to be exploited", and urged teachers and supervisors to assess periodically, especially at the time of transition from one school level to the next the actual abilities of pupils "to master the forms of the language of schooling required at different school levels, so as to adapt the progression of teaching and arrange adequate forms of support that take into account the specific needs and abilities of learners" (Council of Europe, 2014, p. 8).

On this front, moreover, it was noted that, especially for immigrant pupils and those from disadvantaged socio-cultural backgrounds, language difficulties – especially those related to specific subject areas – often stemmed from the lack "in their environment, of regular exposure to discourse that has the characteristics of the so-called 'academic' language used in teaching". For this reason, the school was called upon to take steps to provide, in general for all pupils, quality and equity in education and, particularly for minority or immigrant language pupils, special attention to their needs and actual language abilities. To make such initiatives truly effective, the measures taken had to follow a linear and, above all, non-isolated path, and consistency had to be maintained "in the progression of learning processes and their complementarity at every stage of the schooling process" (Council of Europe, 2014, p. 11).

In this regard, the Committee of ministers recalled some initiatives implemented by the Council of Europe to promote cooperation at the European level, such as: the organization of exchange forums for those responsible for education in the various member states; the collection and presentation – by the Language Policy Unit, on the Council of Europe's website, specifically on the *Platform of Resources and References for Multilingual and Intercultural Education* –, of the results of positive experiences; assistance to member states, with the Language Policy Unit, in the development of school curricula with the aim of clearly specifying the language skills needed to teach and learn all school subjects; agreement with the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) to train trainers of teachers and school administrative staff on the linguistic relevance of every teaching and learning process (Council of Europe, 2014, pp. 8-9).

In this context, the preparation of the 2014 Eurydice and Cedefop *Report on Combating Early Dropout from Education and Training in Europe: Strategies, Policies and Measures should also be included.* That document, in fact, aimed to strengthen the commitment in this area of both the European Commission and member states and was concerned with monitoring

developments regarding the design and implementation of comprehensive, evidence-based strategies for combating early dropout and supporting student learning. Essentially, the 2014 *Report* provided a lot of up-to-date data and broad indications about the most recent policies and measures implemented by European countries to promote the reduction of early dropout from education and training (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Cedefop, 2014).

Such initiatives, in our opinion, are very important, since on the one hand they allow, as mentioned above, for the promotion of real comparison and effective collaboration at the European level, and on the other hand they clearly indicate the desire to raise awareness and empower those who, in various roles, occupy an important role in education and education regarding the need to ensure that all pupils in general and immigrant pupils in particular acquire adequate language skills necessary to achieve good school success.

From this perspective, it is easy to understand how, the oft-reiterated need to create equitable conditions for all students, regardless of their socio-economic status, must come to terms with an awareness of the challenge that proficiency in the language of schooling represents for educational success. In this sense, we can say that in many European countries the provision of language support to immigrant students – related not only to learning the language of the host country, but also to maintaining the language of origin – is already very much present in educational pathways.

Since the beginning of the new millennium, progressive awareness of the problems that early school leaving can cause, not only for those directly affected, but also for society, has led the European Union and member States to commit to reducing the percentage of young people leaving education and training early to below 10% by 2020 (Council of the European Union, 2009).

In 2019, in order to further combat early dropout, E.U. education ministers also saw fit to agree on a framework for consistent and evidence-based policies. For this reason, working groups composed of policymakers and practitioners from across Europe were established with the objective of fostering policy development across member states through mutual learning and the identification of good practices (European Commission, 2019). These working groups, in addition to providing a forum for discussion and exchange of best practices among experts in education from across Europe, provide new ideas that support European education policies. In this regard, building on the results achieved by the Working Group on Schools, *the Council Recommendation on the Promotion of Common Values, Inclusive Education, and the European Dimension in Education* offers a number of pointers on ways in which education can help young people understand and adhere to the common values enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union. In particular, it seeks to promote quality education for all students and the European dimension of education by raising children's awareness of the social, cultural, and historical unity and diversity of the Union and its member States, as well as, social cohesion and active citizenship (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 2).

Regarding the issues of our interest, the Recommendation states that "education should promote intercultural competencies, democratic values and respect for fundamental rights, prevent and combat all forms of discrimination and racism, and equip children, youth and adults to interact constructively with their peers from different backgrounds" (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 2).

In 2019, an independent evaluation was published on the implementation of the 2011 *Council Recommendation on policies to reduce early school leaving* (European Commission, 2019). The research covered 37 EU and non-EU countries and examined: a) the situation and trends at the European and national levels, as well as existing projects at the national level for monitoring and evaluating early dropout from education and training; (b) the measures implemented at the national level for prevention, intervention and compensation; (c) data on their validity; (d) an analysis of the role and influence of the 2011 recommendation and the policy tools implemented in terms of "relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability." Specifically, these are tools and projects related to monitoring and reporting mechanisms within the European Semester; mutual learning and cooperation among member states under the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020); funding, particularly through Erasmus+ and the European Structural and Investment Funds; and investment in the areas of research and communication.

Overall, the independent evaluation noted the extensive work done at the European level over the years and acknowledged that the 2011 Recommendation "has contributed to reducing the percentage of early leavers from education and training (ELETs) at the EU level (from 13.4 percent in 2011 to 9.7 percent in 2021) and has fostered the advent of changes within educational institutions and policies in the education sector". However, in the face of this progress, early school leaving still remains a difficult challenge for Europe and is still particularly prominent in many countries. Indeed, currently, "more than 3.2 million young people in the EU (aged 18-24) drop out of education and training early, and only 84.3 % (aged 20-24) have completed upper secondary education. There are still significant differences between and within countries, and inequalities between specific population groups persist: the rate of early dropout from education and training is on average 3.5 percentage points higher among young men (11.4 %) than among young women (7.9 %), and clear disadvantages are present for young people born abroad and for learners living in certain remote, rural and peripheral areas. In general, the socioeconomic context of learners has a strong impact on early leavers from education and training" (European Commission, 2022).

In this regard, the evaluation identified a number of shortcomings and situations that require greater efforts, in particular, it found that the measures and actions taken "are often project-based and short-term, address only one issue or do not take into account all dimensions of the education sector, and therefore exert limited impact", it therefore becomes necessary to implement "more systemic approaches at both the school and system levels as current approaches are not yet sufficiently developed"; in many countries, the policy measures taken "are not monitored and evaluated adequately"; collaboration between different policy areas (education and training, health, social services, employment, housing, justice, inclusion of migrants, including refugees, anti-discrimination) and different levels of government (national, regional, local), as well as discussion with stakeholders, are still excessively limited and disconnected; despite the consolidation of compensatory measures, in many countries prevention and early intervention actions are not sufficiently evolved or adequately implemented; there is still no adequate response to the needs "of specific groups (such as learners with visible and non-visible disabilities, learners with special educational needs or mental health problems, learners from a migrant background, including refugees, learners belonging to ethnic minorities such as Roma, and victims of bullying), which is particularly

serious for learners with complex needs (such as minors with a parent in prison, victims of domestic violence, minors in foster care, etc.)"; approaches taken to decrease learning difficulties, are not sufficiently integrated "with measures to promote well-being at school and mental health, or to combat bullying"; students, families, and "key stakeholders (including socially excluded parents, migrant communities, and ONG)" in many cases are not adequately involved in policy design, implementation, and evaluation; teachers and school staff in general are often not sufficiently prepared to deal with problems related to poor school performance, early school leaving, "accommodating diversity, offering appropriate support to children in difficulty or at risk, or learners with needs related to well-being and mental health" (European Commission, 2022, pp. 3-4).

In light of these considerations, *the Council Recommendation*, while moving in continuity with the *2011 Recommendation*, proposes to repeal and replace that *Recommendation* and offer new solutions regarding the reduction of early school leaving (Council of Europe, 2022).
Indeed, according to the drafters of the *Proposal,* "Since the adoption of the 2011 Council Recommendation, European countries have faced new situations, challenges, and opportunities that have profoundly affected education and training systems, among them the growing number of school-age migrants from third countries, including refugees, arriving in the EU, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. Concerns about the deteriorating trend in basic skills achievement (as reflected in the 2018 PISA survey) have been prevalent in the policy dialogue. Education research has provided new insights and policy cooperation at the EU level has highlighted shortcomings and areas for further engagement, making it appropriate to review, update and improve the 2011 Council Recommendation" (European Commission, 2022, pp. 1-2).

The new *Proposal* indubitably presents important new features; in fact, while reaffirming continuity with the 2011 Recommendation, it emphasizes "the need to combine prevention measures, intervention measures, and compensatory measures, but with a greater emphasis on prevention measures, and recognizes that different needs/addressees require different types of action". It also addresses new aspects compared to the 2011 document such as "school management and quality assurance mechanisms, the concept of a whole-school approach and collaboration and partnership within schools and in their settings, the crucial value of social and emotional well-being and education, and the importance of safer, healthier and more supportive learning environments". It points to directions and actions that Member States can implement in order to foster improved educational outcomes for young Europeans, and establishes the European Commission's commitment to supporting and complementing Member States' actions in this context. Finally, it is proposed to: decouple educational attainment and educational attainment from social, economic and cultural status; decrease the proportion of underachieving students and early leavers from education and training in the European Union in order to achieve the "EU-wide 2030 goals of the European Education Area"; encourage inclusive education and training that "encompasses equity, quality, academic achievement, engagement, well-being at school, mental and physical health, and respect for diversity"; increase more, "through mutual learning, a shared understanding of the factors that enable the promotion of educational achievement and well-being, with particular attention to learners from disadvantaged backgrounds" (European Commission, 2022, p. 8).

4   CONCLUSIONS

This quick review of school policies adopted in Europe to contrast the phenomenon of early school leaving shows, indubitably, a clear willingness on the part of both the European Union and individual member states to commit themselves to solving this difficult issue. However, on a concrete level, this phenomenon continues to remain a serious problem for the majority of member States. So far, in fact, although all countries have developed various measures to combat school dropout among immigrant or otherwise at-risk pupils, only a few have developed a specific strategy to combat it, including the desired prevention, intervention and compensation measures.

According to data published in 2020 by the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), which monitors policies in support of migrant integration in six continents-including all EU member States (including the United Kingdom), other European countries (Albania, Iceland, North Macedonia, Moldova, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine), Asian countries (China, India, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, and the United Arab Emirates), North American countries (Canada, Mexico, and the U.S.), South American countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile), South African countries, and Australia and New Zealand in Oceania-although instruction is a growing priority for integration, educational systems are slow to respond. (Migrant Integration Policy Index, 2020).

These data show that the education sector continues to show many weaknesses in most countries' integration policies (40/100). There are still many immigrant pupils who do not receive adequate support in choosing the right school or class or to reach the educational levels of their peers. In many countries it is still "the general education system that solves (or exacerbates) cultural problems". MIPEX surveys demonstrate that educational policies are generally more specific in countries with larger numbers of immigrant students. The "Nordic countries, for example, take an individualized, needs-based approach. Australia, Canada and New Zealand have developed strong targeted education policies through multiculturalism, while the United States focuses additional support on vulnerable racial and social groups". In contrast, the school systems of Austria, France, Germany and Luxembourg "are less sensitive to the needs of their relatively large numbers of immigrant pupils". Finally, "new destination countries with small immigrant communities offer inconsistent targeted support (for example, Asia and Central Europe). In new destination countries with large immigrant communities (such as Greece and Ireland), weak targeted education policies have not reached the now considerable number of immigrant pupils. Czechia, Finland and Korea have better developed policies and lower numbers of immigrant pupils" (Migrant Integration Policy Index, 2020).

Overall, the average MIPEX 56 score has improved by +7 points over the past five years, however, there are still many countries that have not made substantial changes in education since 2014. Some countries "have made improvements by opening education to all legal migrants (for example, Bulgaria and Jordan), establishing basic standards for language support (for example, Serbia and Turkey) and promoting diversity within schools (for example, Czechia, Ireland and Korea)". In Malta and Turkey, immigrant pupils have also benefited from major reforms aimed at facilitating access to education and promoting diversity in schools. In contrast, "more restrictive policies have been introduced in Argentina and the United Kingdom. For example, policies in Argentina provide limited access to education for different groups of migrants".

INTERVENTION POLICIES PROPOSED BY THE EUROPEAN UNION TO COMBAT
EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING AMONG MIGRANT PUPILS

The Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) assigned a score to each country surveyed based on its efforts to promote the school integration of these learners. Specifically, this score is a result of the policies that central and regional governments have adopted to ensure access to schools for migrant students and takes into consideration the services offered by schools to support young people to improve their school experiences.

Nordic countries scored the highest. Sweden "(93 points, first of the 52 countries surveyed) offers students access to every level of education and provides ad hoc initiatives to accommodate their needs. Among the most appreciated measures are mother language study incentives". As for Finland (88 points), a special attention devoted to multilingualism is noted. Among the non-Nordic countries, those scoring quite high are Belgium (74 points), Portugal (69 points), and Luxembourg (64), these states have already been engaged in the implementation of projects and funds "dedicated to the interculturalisation of schools" for several years. In general, if we exclude the Nordic countries and a few other exceptions, there are still many European countries that have poorly inclusive school systems. Among them, it is the Eastern European countries that have the lowest scores, in particular, Slovakia (with only 7 points) and Hungary (0 points). Both of these "States do not guarantee access to compulsory education for all migrant students and, in addition, do not have policies to foster their integration". Overall, what emerges from the surveys is that while access to school is guaranteed to all migrant students in most European countries, there is still a lack of "a genuinely multicultural environment in which cultural and linguistic differences are an added value and not an issue to be ignored" (Migrant Integration Policy Index, 2020).

Notwithstanding the visible changes made in recent decades, in fact, the integration and educational success of immigrant pupils are still limited by the lack of adequate and long-term projects aimed at providing these pupils with the adequate support to successfully complete their schooling and to be prepared for the career path. In many countries, immigrant pupils still face too many obstacles when accessing higher education. In "most countries (39/56) they receive no tailored support. Only in Australia, Finland and the United States is support available to increase access and successful participation in higher education". In many States, systematic educational guidance and financial resources are not provided to schools with immigrant pupils (Migrant Integration Policy Index, 2020). Among the many problematic nodes we also find teacher training and, in particular, the need to provide teaching staff and all those who in various capacities work in schools with adequate training in intercultural competencies. On this front, in fact, if the European schools want to achieve positive results regarding the challenge posed by the new multiethnic and multicultural reality, they absolutely must provide for increased and more efficient initial and continuing teacher training courses.

Finally, on the operational and school policy level, both the European institutions and individual member States should focus greater attention on the success and failure in the school careers of foreign pupils, through the analysis of data and information on their social, economic and cultural situation and migration path; on the approach to schooling in the host country; on strengthening relationships and guidance to families – particularly on interpersonal and linguistic communication to foster understanding of terms that may be unfamiliar to foreign parents as foreign to their experience –; allocating additional funds for the employment of professionals such as intercultural mediators.

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