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Addressing underachievement and early school leaving in Europe: the role of institutional factors

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ABSTRACT

This systematic review aims to analyse the existing evidence on the institutional factors that counteract underachievement and Early School Leaving (ESL) in Europe. Considering the role of context in generating optimal learning environments, a more nuanced understanding of how institutional aspects could be shaped to improve students' school outcomes is paramount. The Web of Science, SCOPUS, and PsycINFO databases were used to identify relevant papers following the PRISMA guidelines. A total of 7,049 entries were generated from the initial search and were subjected to a blind review process using the web application Rayyan, which resulted in 34 articles being included in the final review. Following a thematic analysis, it was found that adopting heterogeneous classrooms, promoting a climate of high expectations in schools, implementing critical pedagogies and an engaging, culturally sensitive curriculum, facilitating positive and dialogic interactions with adults and peers, providing tailored support and guidance services, and nurturing a culture of co-creation and equitable involvement of families and communities act as buffers against the risk of underachievement and early school leaving. These findings shed light on possible practical approaches for addressing these issues, including the implementation of Successful Educational Actions, providing targeted support for the most vulnerable, and promoting a whole-school approach to ensure that dialogues between educational communities and school staff are frequent and constructive.

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Systematic review; early school leaving; underachievement; successful educational actions; vulnerable groups

Early School Leaving (ESL) is a significant challenge facing education systems globally, with far-reaching consequences for both individuals and society. In Europe, ESL has been associated with reduced opportunities on the labour market, poverty, health problems (European Commission, n.d.), and diminished participation in political, social, and cultural activities (European Commission, 2015). It is crucial to address this issue,

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especially that ESL has been shown to have devastating consequences for both the individuals who do not complete their education and for society as a whole (Brown et al., 2022; Brunello & Paola, 2014).

While definitions vary between countries, the concept of ESL at the EU level is defined as the percentage of young people between 18 and 24 years old who have completed, at most, lower secondary education and who are no longer engaged in education or training (European Commission, 2013). Meanwhile, underachievement is a related term which is understood as non-attainment of a number of preset goals for a particular age of students, reflected in some negative tendencies such as grade repetition, low motivation, chronic absenteeism, and learning difficulties.

Considering the negative consequences and prevalence of ESL in Europe, the European Commission set the goal of reducing the average incidence of ESL to 10% by 2020 (European Commission, n.d.). Although there has been a decline in the proportion of early leavers in the last decade and nearly reaching the EU target of 10%, this does not reflect the reality of those most affected by ESL. For instance, there are significant variations in ESL rates across different countries and regions, with Romania (16.6%), Spain (13.7%), and Germany (12.8%) being among those with the highest rates according to 2023 statistics (Eurostat, 2024). In the EU, pupils with immigrant backgrounds are also nearly twice as likely to leave school early compared to their native peers (Hippe & Jakubowski, 2018). This situation is even more concerning for Roma students, with 71% of 18- to 24-year-olds leaving school before completing upper secondary level and not pursuing further education or training (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2021). While some progress has been made in improving school outcomes and reducing underachievement in Europe, statistics show that the target of reducing low levels of reading, maths and science to less than 15% in 2020 was not reached. Indeed, based on the 2018 PISA results, the EU average showed an underachievement rate of 21.7% in reading, 22.4% in maths, and 21.6% in science (European Commission, 2019).

When analysing underachievement and ESL, scientific research has mainly focused on individual variables, such as family background, absenteeism from school, poor school achievements, and low motivation, among others (Archambault et al., 2009; Fortin et al., 2006; Szabó, 2018). As a consequence, ESL has been mostly explained from an individual perspective, which not only provides a fragmented view but may also reinforce the “blame the victim” approach (Lee & Burkam, 2003). ESL is a complex phenomenon associated with individual, social, and organisational variables (González-Rodríguez et al., 2019) that aggravate or reduce the risk of ESL. In this sense, it is clear that the context in which students learn plays a crucial role in their academic development and success.

The role of institutional factors in early school leaving

Rumberger (2004) refers to ESL as driven by individual and/or institutional factors, where the former alludes to personal characteristics and behaviours and the latter to family, school, and community aspects. The school context presents an interesting domain for this review, considering that the characteristics and practices of educational institutions and systems play a pivotal role in students’ tendency to leave or stay in school (De Witte et al., 2013a; Rumberger, 2004). School-related institutional factors involve elements such as the educational model, pedagogical aspects, teaching practices, school

infrastructure, and tutoring services, which can significantly impact student learning (De Witte et al., 2013b; Giano et al., 2022; González-Rodríguez et al., 2019; Savvides et al., 2021). In fact, existing literature shows that when schools provide supportive environments that address these institutional barriers, they foster academic growth and equal opportunities for all students (Khalifaoui et al., 2020). Understanding the influence of context and institutional factors is essential for educational institutions to make informed decisions, implement improvement interventions, and ensure a more effective learning process for students (Sunza-Chan et al., 2021).

Objectives and rationale

Several systematic literature reviews have been implemented on the topics of underachievement and ESL. For instance, Guerrero-Puerta and Torres (2023) analysed extant literature on ESL from a life course perspective, highlighting the importance of life trajectories, transitions, and agency-structure interactions in understanding this phenomenon. Meanwhile, other scholars focused on specific geographical and area contexts, such as Berral-Ortiz and colleagues' (2022) review of studies on reducing ESL in Spain and Fehérvári and Varga's (2023) review on mentoring as a specific measure in preventing ESL. Adopting a more comprehensive approach, De Witte and colleagues (2013b) conducted a systematic review examining a broad range of factors influencing ESL, including those related to students, families, schools, and communities. The review underscores the potential concern of reinforcing specific profiles of at-risk students, largely stemming from the tendency of many studies to focus on identifying personal and social characteristics that distinguish potential dropouts from graduates, while also noting that the organisation of schools remains an underexplored dimension in the existing body of research.

To address this gap, a systematic literature review was conducted on school-related institutional factors shaping ESL. This approach is underpinned by a shift toward a systemic and contextual perspective and away from an emphasis on personal attributes. The study is framed within the Horizon Europe project "Policies and Practices based on Scientific Research for Reducing Underachievement and Early School Leaving in Europe" (SCIREARLY), and aligns with the project's aim of identifying, systematising and replicating successful and evidence-based policies and practices that have proven to reduce underachievement and ESL.

The systematic review examined empirical literature on school-related institutional factors of underachievement and ESL in Europe over the past two decades, focusing on students in early years, primary, and secondary education. This region-specific focus was adopted to enhance the contextual relevance and impact on stakeholders of the SCIREARLY project, within which this review is framed. Considering the unique landscape of educational systems, policies, and practices within the EU, a systematic review centred on this region is also well-positioned to uncover trends and insights specific to this context. It was implemented alongside complementary analyses by other SCIREARLY consortium researchers, which explored other social determinants such as socioeconomic, gender, cultural, linguistic, socioemotional, and quality early childhood education and care factors. The findings from these parallel reviews are briefly discussed in this paper, revealing the interplay between these factors and institutional ones. Overall, the review adopts a transformative lens by focusing on the school aspects that have been shown

to have a buffering effect on underachievement and ESL especially for systematically disadvantaged groups.

Methods

This systematic literature review covers scientific literature published in peer-reviewed journals between 2003 and 2023 to examine which (and to what extent) institutional factors influence underachievement and ESL in early years, primary, and secondary education in Europe. This systematic review focuses on literature from 2003 onward due to the exponential increase in scientific production over the past 20 years, a period which coincides with significant changes in teaching and learning processes. Limiting the search to the past two decades also ensured a manageable number of publications for analysis. The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al., 2021; Rethlefsen et al., 2021) were used as a reference for this review to ensure rigour in the search and to enable replication (see Figure 1).

Identification and selection

The literature search was conducted between January and February 2023, focusing mainly on scientific articles published in indexed journals (Web of Science and SCOPUS) as well as those included in Education and Psychology databases (PsycINFO). The combination of these three databases, which covers the fields of education, social sciences, and educational psychology, enabled a comprehensive search of literature to be done on a complex and interdisciplinary topic such as ESL. The search routes involved combining different keywords on institutional aspects connected with underachievement and ESL (Table 1) using the Boolean operator “AND” for all the combinations. This resulted in a total of 624 searches (208 for each database). These terms were pre-selected by the wider consortium of SCIR-EARLY project researchers based on previous knowledge of the topic, after which a preliminary search was carried out to test the appropriateness of the terms and their combinations. Table 1 reflects the refined list of terms used for the systematic literature review.

The web application Rayyan (Ouzzani et al., 2016) was used to collate the articles and implement a blind review process. The inclusion and exclusion criteria used are outlined in Table 2.

Synthesis

Key information from the eligible articles were extracted, such as metadata and study characteristics (see Table 3). These details and the key findings are outlined in tabular format. Thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017) was implemented to identify the institutional features that have been shown to increase or decrease the likelihood of students leaving school early as well as the mechanisms through which they operate.

Results

The initial search of the Web of Science, SCOPUS, and PsycINFO databases yielded 7,049 entries, of which 2,074 duplicates were removed (Figure 1). A total of 4,975 papers

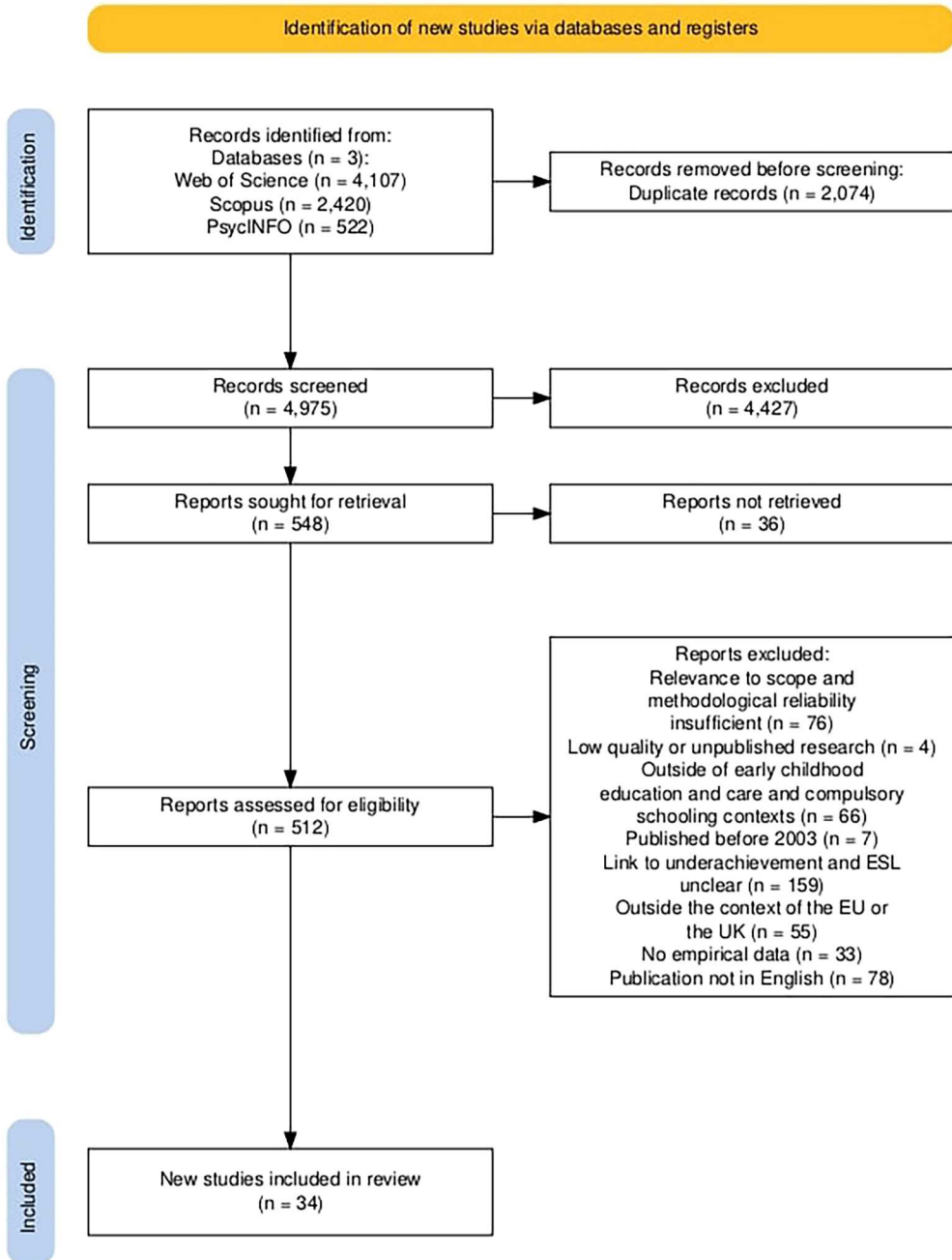


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow diagram (generated using Haddaway et al., 2022).

underwent screening, whereby the articles’ titles and abstracts were blind reviewed by two researchers using the inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 2). For those articles with disagreements, a third reviewer was involved. This process resulted in 548 entries, 512 of which had retrievable full texts. They were then screened for eligibility by evaluating the relevance of the study to the scope of the review and applying the inclusion and

Table 1. Search terms

General keywords	Keywords related to institutional factors
Underachievement	Ratio
Academic achievement	Teacher* quality
Early school leaving	School leadership
School dropout	Calendar
School disengagement	Teaching method*
	School facilities
	Streaming
	Single sex schooling
	Peers
	Educational policies
	Assessment
	Resources
	Decision making level
	School autonomy
	Successful educational action*

Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
(1) Focus on students in primary and secondary education	(1) Pertaining to studies conducted with students outside of early years and compulsory schooling contexts
(2) Focus on institutional elements as a social determinant of underachievement and/or ESL and their impact	(2) Unpublished research or literature
(3) Publications are high-quality papers published in peer-reviewed journals, scientific books, policy documents, research reports, and other grey literature from relevant public and private institutions	(3) Published before 2003
(4) Published in 2003 or later	(4) Tackling the social determinant in isolation without a link to the impact on underachievement and ESL
(5) Empirical studies conducted in the context of EU Member States (and the UK)	(5) Studies conducted outside the context of the EU and the UK
(6) Pertaining to relevant disciplines/fields (education, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics)	(6) Publications with no empirical data
(7) Literature reported in English	(7) Publication is not in English

exclusion criteria. At this stage, descriptive data were also extracted such as the article's general information and study characteristics. A total of 478 papers were excluded, thereby narrowing down the papers for analysis to 34 articles (Table 4).

Methodological and geographical characteristics of the articles reviewed

Based on a review of the 34 articles included in the analysis, it was found that most of the research has been conducted in educational settings – primarily in secondary education – and has particularly focused on vulnerable populations at risk of leaving school early. The studies employed diverse methodological approaches, including quantitative ($n = 16$), mixed methods ($n = 9$), and qualitative methodologies ($n = 9$). In terms of geographic context, the studies included were conducted across Europe encompassing different

Table 3. Data extracted from the articles.

Metadata	Characteristics of the studies
Author(s)	Participants/population
Type of source	Objective of the study
Date of publication	Method
Reference	Type of study
URL	Potential Solutions/Buffering Aspects
Date Accessed	

Table 4. Summary of the studies included (n = 34).

Authors (Year)	Country	Participants	Research design	Key findings
Ahola and Kivelä (2007)	Finland	124 secondary students	Mixed methods	Effective school guidance and counselling should adapt to the needs of the young people.; Redefining "at-risk" students and shifting the blame is a necessary prerequisite to guarantee inclusive education
Alvarez-Roldan et al. (2018)	Spain	63 high school students and teachers (38% Roma)	Mixed methods	Grade retention, compensatory or diversity programmes and learning gaps are linked to dropout among Roma students at risk of social exclusion or with special educational needs
Aubert et al. (2017)	Spain	3 teachers, 2 mothers, 4 children, and 3 classrooms catering to learners aged 3–5	Qualitative	Higher levels of cognitive development and the promotion of positive social and emotional development are associated with mixed-ability groups such as Interactive Groups
Bayón-Calvo et al. (2020)	Spain	Comparison of educational policies and prevalence of student dropout between regions	Mixed methods	Educational policies that foster equity are associated with lower ESL rates, where inequalities are confronted by specific measures of intervention for disadvantaged students
Brown et al. (2022)	United Kingdom	110 young students at risk of ESL (12–16 years old) and educators, tutors, etc. across 11 educational settings	Qualitative	An early individualised and tailored institutional support, alternative educational environments and reduced class size are more beneficial to at-risk learners and due to the complexity of issues that students at risk of ESL face
Cockerill et al. (2021)	England (UK)	30 primary schools	Qualitative	Non-negotiable expectations about performance of all learners and adults, analysis and accountability of educational provision, professional improvement that celebrates innovation, culture of shared accountability for student achievement, and familial support and engagement are identified as key drivers of inclusive education for at-risk students
Cudworth (2008)	United Kingdom	6 primary teachers in a school with a significant proportion of Gypsy/ Traveller children	Qualitative	An inflexible curriculum negatively affects Roma students' achievement; The marketisation of school results has a detrimental effect on the provision of inclusive education for all children; Establishment of positive relationships with parents and the removal of the emphasis on performance data is one way to enhance educational engagement
de Castro and Pereira (2019)	Portugal	305 8th grade students (average age: 14 years old)	Quantitative	Promotion of the quality of student-teacher relationships promotes a sense of security, and facilitates the learning process; Additional (attachment) figures may become crucial in the lives of at-risk students and reduce dropout, especially in young people with insecure attachment representations
Díez-Palomar et al., 2020	Italy, United Kingdom	418 children aged 7–11	Quantitative	Altering the educational context, such as by implementing successful strategies like Interactive Groups and Dialogic Literary Gatherings, can positively shift students' attitudes towards learning.

(Continued)

Table 4. Continued.

Authors (Year)	Country	Participants	Research design	Key findings
Duffy and Elwood (2013)	United Kingdom	Senior educational staff, governors, teachers, and Year 10–13 students from 18 educational institutions	Qualitative	The classroom environment, including student-teacher relationships, peer interactions, and the pedagogical methods employed, are crucial factors in understanding student engagement
Frehill and Dunsmuir (2015)	Ireland	37 Traveller and 41 non-Traveller students from three secondary schools	Quantitative	The promotion of a sense of belonging in schools reduces absenteeism among traveller students in secondary school
Gasser et al. (2018)	Switzerland	1,209 upper elementary grade students from 5th to 6 th grade (11–12 years old)	Quantitative	High emotional support from teachers protects students with high academic disengagement from developing negative perceptions of teacher justice
Gómez-González et al. (2022)	Spain	Family members and teachers in 8 elementary schools with minority students and that have implemented Family Education in at least 2 years	Mixed methods	Family Education is increasing minority families' educational expectations of their children's education; Three elements have been identified as facilitators: (1) the co-creation of a high expectations climate in the schools; (2) the improvement of family members' academic skills; and (3) the generation of new role models
Hardoy and Schøne (2013)	Norway	277,233 students (All students enrolled in secondary school, 1996–2003)	Quantitative	The promotion of peer quality relationships and social interaction emerges as a protective factor against ESL; The results show that the concentration of immigrants has a positive impact on the dropout likelihood of natives; The preferred estimate suggests that a 10 percent increase in the number of immigrants leads to a 3 percent increase in the dropout rate of natives
Hodgson and Spours (2014)	United Kingdom	2,400 students (14–16 years old)	Mixed methods	Encouraging an explicit focus on building progression skills into the curriculum; Rebuilding collaboration between all schools, employers, higher education and wider stakeholders; Making mixed routes more available post-16; Expanding local high-profile apprenticeships prevent early school leaving
Högborg and Lindgren (2023)	European Union	800,000 students (15 years old)	Quantitative	Students' sense of belonging fosters school engagement; Intense and high-stakes testing can have negative effects on school-related wellbeing, especially among marginalised pupils
Holen et al. (2020)	Norway	63,131 students, (15–16 years old; more than 60% boys)	Quantitative	Providing intensive training has mixed results, placing some students at greater risk of dropping out. Short-time interventions are not sustainable; The schools need time to both explore measures that suit their needs and culture; Measures recommended by the authorities should be research-based to avoid spending time and resources on implementing interventions that have no effect or that can even be harmful
Jerrim et al. (2022)	Spain	102,534 students (15 years old)	Quantitative	Grade retention designed as a pure repetition of a given academic year (without providing additional materials or resources) does not leverage repeaters' achievement Spain's education laws seem to be harming students born late in the year, to the extent that they are more likely to repeat a grade; Changing the starting date may seem a potential solution

(Continued)

Table 4. Continued.

Authors (Year)	Country	Participants	Research design	Key findings
Kerekes et al. (2017)	Romania	1,280 students (13–17 years old)	Mixed methods	Five factors have been identified to have statistically important influence on continuing education: parents, education, the age, the number of siblings, the school performance, computer skills
Lambrev (2015)	Romania	10 participants (7 teachers, 2 principals, and 1 vice-principal), 20 Roma (2 students and 18 adults – family members, community leaders, and NGO staff; 15–45 years old)	Qualitative	School segregation, imposition of mainstream curriculum and neglect of educational needs appear as risk factors of ESL
Lasarte et al. (2020)	Spain	1,468 students (51% girls; 49% boys), 12–17 years old	Quantitative	Students' perceived support from their social environment and academic performance influence their level of school engagement; Teachers and families should strive to offer social support to students as a means of strengthening perceived academic self-efficacy
Lavrijsen and Nicaise (2015)	27 European countries	141,178 respondents (20–30 years old)	Quantitative	The design of the educational system (tracking age, extent of vocational education) impacts on social distribution of school dropout risk; A large vocational sector in upper secondary education functions seems to act as a safety net against dropout
Longás-Mayayo et al. (2021)	Spain	2,301 students (16–18 years old, whose families are living in relative poverty)	Quantitative	Academic support programmes and personalised academic accompaniment lower number of dropouts; Repeated grade retention is strongly associated with ESL
MacMaoilair and McGillicuddy (2022)	Ireland	33 female school students, 4 teachers, 2 year heads, 2 parents	Mixed methods	A critical pedagogical approach empowers female at-risk students, enhancing self-confidence, motivation, empathy, and engagement with issues impacting their lives; Reported outcomes included more positive relationships with adults/peers, increased re/engagement in class and enhanced sense of belonging in school
Makarova and Herzog (2013)	Switzerland	4,384 fifth-grade students, 1,186 migrant youths (10–16 years old; 50.3% male and 49.7% female)	Quantitative	Low-achieving immigrant youth with negative attitudes towards school and poor relationships with teachers and peers are especially at risk of hidden and, eventually, of actual school dropout
Moreira et al. (2022)	Portugal	Gypsy (n = 42) and non-Gypsy students (n = 76) (9–16 years old)	Quantitative	Discrimination, racism, segregated classrooms, and teachers' negative expectations towards their academic success led to Gypsy students' cognitive disengagement; Gypsy and non-Gypsy students were highly similar in perceived support from teachers and peers
Moreira et al. (2023)	Portugal	213 students with Roma background, from the 5th to 10th grade (10–19 years old; 56% male)	Quantitative	Parental involvement impacts on the emotional and cognitive aspects of school engagement; Different forms of parental involvement (e.g. home or school-based) might operate through different pathways and be associated with different learning outcomes

(Continued)

**Table 4.** Continued.

Authors (Year)	Country	Participants	Research design	Key findings
Pelin et al. (2022)	Romania	120 pre-teens (64 boys and 56 girls) at risk of dropout	Quantitative	The results underscored that the most important values for pre-teens at risk of school dropout are related to social relations, skills development, free time and respecting rules; Pleasant and uncompetitive peer relations at school mitigate risk of ESL
Roca-Campos et al. (2021)	Spain	10 primary and secondary teachers (including training courses) from 7 schools in Valencia, Spain, and who had been developing the Zero Violence Brave Club in their schools	Qualitative	The Zero Violence Brave Club has contributed to reducing bullying in the classroom where it has been implemented, and instances of reporting for peer aggression as well as peers taking an active part in putting a stop to violence have increased; Three characteristics were identified that contributed to this outcome, including the promotion of positive feelings of respect, solidarity, and friendship as protective factors against bullying
Savvides et al. (2021)	England and Portugal	209 educational stakeholders and young people who were potentially at risk for ESL (12–21 years old)	Qualitative	Overly academic educational provision; lack of teacher autonomy and time; insufficient school resources and funding, including a lack of adequate career guidance; and ineffective behavioural policies leading to a lack of trust by students in adults places students at risk of ESL; Further vocational provision at school is particularly important to reverse the lack of pedagogical agency
Spruyt et al. (2017)	Belgium	Pupils from 9th to 12th grade ($N = 4,189$), 62 principals of Flemish secondary schools and 28 occasional and frequent truants	Mixed methods	Student technology aided truancy registration systems become an end in itself rather than a starting point to critically reflect on and gain more insight into the meaning of truant behaviour
Valkov and Lavrentsova (2019)	Bulgaria	152 students (53.3% male and 46.7% female), studying in low secondary schools, including Roma schools	Quantitative	Supportive and caring teacher-student relationships and conflict free peer relationships are related to increased school engagement, motivation for learning, and academic performance; In contrast, children who feel rejected or socially excluded tend to become dissatisfied with school and are at a higher risk for dropping out
Valls and Kyriakides (2013)	Spain	3 case studies involving classrooms, teachers, students, and family members of primary schools ($n = 2$) and a secondary school ($n = 1$)	Qualitative	Interactive Groups were shown to increase learning motivation and group participation and decrease conflict among children with behavioural and attention problems; Engaging a diverse pool of adult volunteers through Interactive Groups (such as parents, community members, and former students) expands the range of educational resources and cultural knowledge available
Wilkinson (2014)	United Kingdom	295 British Muslim boys from four secondary state schools in Muslim-dense areas of English inner-cities (11–14 years old)	Mixed methods	Addressing a community's history in school in a positive way promotes the success of its members; History can be more fully and effectively harnessed by teachers; parents and policy-planners to encourage internal integration and external social engagement in British Muslim pupils

countries such as the United Kingdom ($n = 9$, one of them conducted also in Italy), Spain ($n = 10$), Portugal ($n = 3$), Romania ($n = 3$), Belgium ($n = 1$), Norway ($n = 2$), Switzerland ($n = 2$), Bulgaria ($n = 1$), Finland ($n = 1$), and Ireland ($n = 2$). Meanwhile, one of the articles drew on data from a variety of countries (see [Table 4](#)).

Institutional factors and mechanisms affecting underachievement and early school leaving in Europe

After a thematic analysis of the included articles, six institutional factors emerged that have been shown to mitigate or reduce the risk of underachievement and ESL: (1) adopting heterogeneous classrooms, (2) promoting a climate of high expectations in schools, (3) adopting critical pedagogies and an engaging, culturally sensitive curriculum, (4) facilitating positive and dialogic interactions with adults and peers, (5) providing tailored support and guidance services, and (6) nurturing a culture of co-creation and equitable involvement of families and communities.

Adopting heterogeneous classrooms

Segregation practices in education – such as tracking and ability grouping, geographical segregation among schools, and homogeneous classrooms based on ethnic or immigrant backgrounds – have been a prevalent practice in many countries for years and have been shown to negatively affect student outcomes. For instance, early tracking contributes to widening the gap between strong and weak students and between those from different social classes, thereby reinforcing structural barriers for disadvantaged students to proceed successfully in their academic paths (Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015). Some compensatory and remedial programmes for students lagging behind have also been found to have an unintended segregating effect involving students with a Roma or ethnic minority background (Alvarez-Roldan et al., 2018). A long history of segregation alongside experiences of racism and discrimination have been shown to lead to cognitive disengagement (Moreira et al., 2022) as well as underachievement and dropout (Lambrev, 2015) among Roma students.

Considering segregation's negative consequences, a study by Aubert and colleagues (2017) has shown that implementing Interactive Groups (IGs) – an inclusive action based on employing heterogeneous and mixed-ability groupings and tapping on the community's human resources – enhanced reading acquisition, language development, English as a second language, and mathematics among students of participating classrooms in Spain. Skills enhancement was also evident not only among disadvantaged students but also for capable peers as they learn to assist and influence one another. Additionally, a study by Valls and Kyriakides (2013) found that IGs increased students' learning motivation and group participation and decreased conflict among children with behavioural and attention problems. Adopting a holistic approach to learning, including mixed-age arrangements where students go to class with siblings and cousins, also likely contributes to enhancing family support and involvement among those from Gypsy/Traveller backgrounds (Cudworth, 2008).

Promoting a climate of high expectations in schools

Teacher support is widely viewed as crucial for students' engagement, while low teacher expectations regarding attendance and achievement contribute to decreased likelihood of staying in school, especially among Roma students (Moreira et al., 2022). Teachers' negative beliefs could become widespread in the institution, resulting in catastrophic experiences of discrimination and racism that hamper Roma students' academic opportunities and present leaving school as the "natural" path for them (Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015).

To mitigate this, evidence shows that maintaining high expectations even among students from disadvantaged groups and providing them with the necessary support to enhance student learning are paramount (Cockerill et al., 2021; Valls & Kyriakides, 2013). This includes setting challenging and specific targets coupled with regular curriculum mapping to ensure it aligns with students' age and developmental stages (Cockerill et al., 2021).

Gómez-González and colleagues' (2022) study also suggests that the same can be said for their families, whereby perceived trust and in high expectations from school staff made them feel valued and helped overcome emotional barriers such as fear and in security. This, in turn, enhanced their ability to provide educational support to their children, ultimately improving their odds against educational failure and ESL. They also found that raising teachers' expectations was possible when they engaged with other colleagues who held high standards. These outcomes were linked to the Family Education programme, which operated on the principles embodied in Schools as Learning Communities (Flecha & Soler, 2013) and included a range of activities such as language courses, dialogic literary gatherings (DLGs), instrumental training courses, and ICT skills programmes that were based on the actual needs expressed by the families (Gómez-González et al., 2022).

Adopting critical pedagogies and an engaging, culturally sensitive curriculum

Fixed or mainstream curricula that are not sensitive to the cultures embedded in the school context are identified as an institutional factor of underachievement and ESL in Europe (Cudworth, 2008; Lambrev, 2015; Wilkinson, 2014). Specifically in the case of Roma students, Cudworth (2008) found elevated underachievement and ESL when the school curriculum fails to acknowledge the Roma culture or demonstrates a clear lack of knowledge of its traditions. Cudworth's conclusions are aligned with Lambrev's (2015) analysis revealing that mainstream curriculum that neglects Roma's educational needs is linked to students' underachievement. In a similar vein, Moreira and colleagues (2022) found that the persistent undervaluation of their knowledge by schools contributes to Gypsy students exhibiting lower intrinsic motivation and reduced educational aspirations. On the other hand, when this issue was explored among Muslim students, research points out that a well-conceived and sound Muslim history curriculum has a positive impact on multidimensional academic success (Wilkinson, 2014). Adopting a more holistic and flexible approach to learning that involves topic-based and real-life projects has also been shown to particularly benefit students from ethnic minority backgrounds such as Gypsy and Traveller children (Cudworth, 2008). Overall, Savvides and colleagues (2021) point to the need to veer away from a "one size fits all" educational provision model that ignores students' varied needs and skills, both on an academic and practical level.

Along with curriculum design, a critical pedagogical approach (which focuses on raising awareness through reflection and action) emerges as a driver of academic engagement among female students (MacMaoilir & McGillicuddy, 2022). Indeed, it has been shown to empower female at-risk students in marginalised contexts in Ireland by enhancing their self-confidence, motivation and empathy while fostering a sense of belonging in school and increasing (re)engagement in class. This institutional element appears to support the critical awakening of the students, evoking epistemic emotions and ultimately leads to improved academic achievement.

Facilitating positive and dialogic interactions with adults and peers

The scientific literature reviewed suggests that positive student-teacher and peer interactions nurture educational engagement and prevent or mitigate ESL (de Castro & Pereira, 2019; Duffy & Elwood, 2013; Makarova & Herzog, 2013; Pelin et al., 2022; Valkov & Lavrentsova, 2019). Positive peer interactions are especially important (Duffy & Elwood, 2013; Hardoy & Schøne, 2013), whereby fostering respect, friendship, and a sense of solidarity among students can lead to a reduction of violence in schools and positive student wellbeing overall (Roca-Campos et al., 2021).

More specifically for student-teacher interactions, it was found that high emotional support from teachers protected students with high academic disengagement from leaving school early (Gasser et al., 2018). Duffy and Elwood's (2013) study reinforces these findings, concluding that student-teacher relationships are key factors that contribute to school engagement in 18 educational centres with students aged 10–13 in Ireland. Meanwhile, de Castro and Pereira (2019) found that students' perceptions of acceptance and understanding from their teachers is associated with enhanced school performance both for those attending regular and alternative education. To achieve positive outcomes, Cockerill and colleagues (2021) emphasised the importance of equipping and deploying a skilled teaching staff, as well as fostering regular staff discussions for collective curriculum development and providing support for novice or weaker staff members.

In addition to relationships with teachers, existing research points to the important role that other adults play in the classroom to encourage school engagement. For instance, the involvement of adult volunteers from the community in Interactive Groups was perceived to accelerate the learning process among those from highly marginalised groups by multiplying learning interactions among children and between children and adults (Aubert et al., 2017). In a wider sense, students' sense of belonging has been found to be a significant predictor of school absenteeism, as evidenced by Frehill and Dunsmuir's (2015) study. However, students' feelings of connectedness and wellbeing can be diminished by educational policies oriented towards performance culture – such as an increased focus on high-stakes testing (Högberg & Lindgren, 2023) and positioning in league tables (Cudworth, 2008) – and experiences of racism and prejudiced behaviours (Cudworth, 2008). Instead, fostering positive interactions is paramount in tackling underachievement and ESL. For instance, Lasarte and colleagues' (2020) study involving 1,468 secondary students in Spain found that perceived social support from teachers, families, and peers at school predicted school engagement both directly and indirectly through perceived academic performance.

Providing tailored support and guidance services

The existence of accessible counselling and school guidance has been shown to provide a safety net against ESL. According to Hodgson and Spours (2014), 14- to 16-year-old learners from six schools in southern England acknowledged the value of accessible counselling services and guidance in the school setting in terms of helping them consider different options as they shape their academic path. This is coherent with Savvides and colleagues' (2021) findings while exploring risk factors for ESL across 18 educational settings in Portugal and England, which revealed that the students' lack of choices to direct their learning paths could be reversed by providing accessible vocational provision at the school level. Additionally, Lavrijsen and Nicaise's (2015) study showed that vocational guidance in upper secondary education provides additional support to students by offering different academic pathways as a valuable alternative with relatively attractive labour market prospects. Facilitating this kind of provision within the school setting might improve students' learning experiences as well as help them overcome the lack of choices, freedom, and flexibility to pursue successful educational paths (Savvides et al., 2021). Similarly, when Ahola and Kivelä (2007) explored this issue in Finland, they found that a shortage of counsellors or a restricted service might have a negative impact on students' opportunities to access these important resources. Equally as important, several studies have alluded to the evidence supporting the effectiveness of continuous identification and follow up (Longás-Mayayo et al., 2021; Spruyt et al., 2017) as well as prompt and sustained personalised support for students at risk of ESL (Brown et al., 2022). As Pelin and colleagues (2022) suggest, teachers, psychologists, parents, and other significant adults in the lives of pre-teens can intervene by offering social support and security, and by addressing academic and everyday successes or failures without making comparisons to other children.

Nurturing a culture of co-creation and equitable involvement of families and communities

Holistic measures that are coherent, consistent, inclusive, ethical, and that enable all stakeholders – including young people – to be agents of their learning pathways emerge as key elements of policies when tackling ESL in Europe (Savvides et al., 2021). Several studies alluded to the importance of family and community involvement both in the students' academic journeys and also in the wider school processes. With regard to the former, Moreira and colleagues (2023) concluded that involving parents in the students' learning contexts enhances school engagement. Similarly, a study by Gómez-González and colleagues (2022) in the Spanish context found that programmes oriented towards involving families and raising their academic skills, especially linguistic ones, enhanced their capacity to provide educational support to their children. Through these initiatives, family members are able to rethink their role in the process, raising their confidence to help with homework or engage in conversations about school with them. As a result, the benefits are evident not only in the way families talk about their children's educational futures but also in their behaviours, such as actively participating in educational processes and setting a positive example for their children.

In relation to the community's involvement in the wider school processes, several studies alluded to the importance of having liaisons or school governors from ethnic minorities (Cudworth, 2008), engaging a diverse pool of adult volunteers in

classroom activities through Interactive Groups (Valls & Kyriakides, 2013), as well as enabling families to contribute in planning, delivering, and evaluating lessons and students' progress (Cockerill et al., 2021). Valls and Kyriakides (2013) found that the presence of community adults from minority backgrounds in the classroom positively influences children's learning as they serve as role models and help bridge cultural and language gaps. These initiatives resonate with García-Carrión and colleagues' (2018) study showing that establishing structures for family and community participation in decision-making processes, especially based on egalitarian dialogue, can improve academic outcomes as well as reduce ESL. Indeed, existing literature shows how providing spaces for family and community involvement in schools, such as in shared learning activities and decision-making processes, can improve academic outcomes and mitigate the risk of leaving school early, especially among those from ethnic minority backgrounds (Flecha & Soler, 2013; García-Carrión & Díez-Palomar, 2015). Additionally, Cockerill and colleagues (2021) found that leveraging local intelligence networks is crucial for promoting high achievement in schools. This approach allows for prompt notification of changes in students' familial circumstances and the swift provision of specialist support to address emerging challenges.

Concluding discussion

This systematic review aims to analyse the influence of institutional determinants on underachievement and ESL in Europe. After a rigorous review process, 34 studies examining the impact of various institutional factors on ESL were selected. Following a thematic analysis, the review concludes that certain institutional factors act as buffers against the risk of underachievement and leaving school early. These factors include adopting heterogeneous classrooms; promoting a climate of high expectations in schools; implementing critical pedagogies and an engaging, culturally sensitive curriculum; facilitating positive and dialogic interactions with adults and peers; providing tailored support and guidance services; and nurturing a culture of co-creation and equitable involvement of families and communities. Some of these institutional factors affect school (dis)engagement, which is a powerful mediator of children's learning outcomes and is found to be linked to underachievement and ESL (Kerekes et al., 2017).

As a second objective, this review also aims to illustrate how these institutional factors interact with other social determinants in the phenomena of underachievement and ESL, as they clearly do not act on their own. For instance, school policies and practices can foster the educational success of students facing deprivation and low socio-economic conditions (Alvarez-Roldan et al., 2018; Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015; Makarova & Herzog, 2013; Pelin et al., 2022; Savvides et al., 2021). Institutional efforts are also shaped by the wider social, political, and economic fabric in which schools are located, whereby increased public expenditure in education has been shown to correlate with between-region differences in ESL outcomes in country contexts such as Spain (Bayón-Calvo et al., 2020).

Beyond the socio-economic dimension, institutional elements also relate with cognitive, emotional, and behavioural factors. Students' self-esteem is nurtured by properly addressing their emotional needs, which ultimately leads to increased school engagement and higher educational achievement (Brown et al., 2022). In this regard, excessive testing and competitiveness between peers not only correlate with ESL but also might jeopardise

students' well-being (Cudworth, 2008; Högberg & Lindgren, 2023). Finally, positive relationships between students and teachers promote a favourable perception of school (Duffy & Elwood, 2013). Therefore, ensuring a positive climate, which promotes the psycho-emotional development of students, fosters educational success and prevents ESL.

Additionally, institutional factors interact with culture in shaping underachievement and ESL, in the sense that many of them target migrant populations and students with culturally diverse backgrounds as highlighted in several studies (Alvarez-Roldan et al., 2018; Hardoy & Schøne, 2013; Lambrev, 2015; Moreira et al., 2023; Wilkinson, 2014). For Roma students and families, a sense of belonging in school – which has been found to reduce absenteeism (Frehill & Dunsmuir, 2015) and facilitate school engagement (Högberg & Lindgren, 2023) – might be jeopardised by prejudices and systemic barriers at the institutional level, such as curricula that do not include features of Roma culture and traditions (Cudworth, 2008). Therefore, a better understanding and integration of minority cultures, such as Roma or Muslim cultures, into the school curriculum is identified as an institutional factor that fosters school engagement (Lambrev, 2015; Wilkinson, 2014). Additionally, the importance of linguistic differences in school engagement has been emphasised, particularly in studies involving vulnerable populations (Brown et al., 2022). Implementing specific programmes that promote the social and linguistic inclusion of immigrants is thus recognised as an effective institutional strategy to prevent ESL (Bayón-Calvo et al., 2020).

Limitations and implications for future research

A review of the scientific literature has identified several gaps in existing research. On the one hand, conducting more longitudinal studies (including the interrelationship and mediation processes of as many variables as possible) would enhance the knowledge we have so far about institutional factors as social determinants of underachievement and ESL. Also, a vast number of studies conducted in contexts outside the EU and the UK were not included in the analysis, highlighting a research gap, as there is a significantly greater amount of research carried out in the United States and other continents compared to Europe. In addition, the systematic review did not yield relevant studies on the impact of teacher-student ratio in underachievement or ESL, which suggests that this institutional factor has received limited attention in the literature. Evidence on the impact of school calendar or configuration of the academic year was also missing in the studies analysed, possibly because other institutional factors have a more prominent impact on underachievement and ESL.

Implications for practice and future research

This systematic review adopts a transformative lens to examine extant literature on institutional factors that have been shown to mitigate or reduce the risk of ESL and underachievement. By shifting the focus to actionable contextual elements, it offers a fresh perspective on how schools and institutions can drive change. The review also explores a wide range of both well-established and lesser-known strategies, broadening policy-makers' and practitioners' evidence-informed understanding of how to effectively address these challenges. At the theoretical level, it builds on the findings of previous systematic reviews, providing updated insights from literature over the past decade.

Considering the study's limitations, it would be advisable to analyse through which variables these institutional determinants impact on ESL. That is, mediation analyses could be carried out among other aspects that could be influencing this relationship, such as, for example, the self-concept or self-efficacy of students and families and school engagement, among others. Also, it is possible to analyse how these determinants interact with each other, causing exponentially more negative consequences.

These findings shed light on how educational settings and systems can counteract underachievement and ESL. Inclusive practices such as Interactive Groups and culturally responsive curricula could be implemented to enhance engagement and foster a sense of belonging among students. Teacher training should focus on maintaining high expectations, identifying and reframing biases, and equipping educators with strategies for managing classroom diversity. Schools can also expand counselling and vocational guidance services to offer tailored support. Family and community engagement is crucial, whereby a whole-school approach promoting equal and shared responsibility for students' success is emphasised.

At the policy level, national and European frameworks should support policies mandating heterogeneous classrooms and accessible counseling services in schools, particularly in areas with high ESL rates and underachievement. Teacher professional development should remain a key focus, allocating resources to enhance educators' cultural sensitivity and high expectations. Additionally, policies should incentivise inclusive approaches, such as Schools as Learning Communities and Interactive Groups, while embedding participatory decision-making structures that involve families and communities in school governance. By consolidating existing knowledge from successful initiatives that have reduced ESL and underachievement, this review offers both conceptual insights and practical tools that schools can leverage to design effective and evidence-based strategies that support children's success within and beyond school.

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