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# Beyond economics: cultural factors affecting early school leaving—A systematic literature review

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Early school leaving (ESL) remains a critical challenge across Europe, with profound implications for individuals and society, encompassing economic disadvantages, social exclusion, and reduced life opportunities. This systematic literature review examines the cultural factors that underpin patterns of ESL, employing the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) methodology to synthesize findings from 59 studies conducted across diverse European contexts between 2003 and 2023. The review delineates five primary thematic domains influencing ESL: cultural values, beliefs and behaviors; cultural and social barriers; academic barriers within schooling structures; discrimination and prejudice; and culturally constructed gender norms. Through the analysis, the review argues that cultural determinants are interwoven with socioeconomic and institutional factors, shaping educational aspirations, engagement and outcomes. The review highlights the central role of parental attitudes, cultural capital and systemic responsiveness in either mitigating or exacerbating risks of ESL. It calls for culturally responsive educational policies and practices that acknowledge the heterogeneity of student backgrounds and promote inclusive, equitable learning environments. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of ESL's complex sociocultural dimensions and highlights targeted interventions to reduce early school leaving across the world.

## KEYWORDS

early school leaving, cultural factors, educational disadvantage, systematic review, culturally responsive education

## 1 Introduction

According to Eurostat (2025), in 2024, the average percentage of 18–24-year-olds who left education and training early in the European Union (EU) was 9.3%. However, the percentage varies widely across EU member states, ranging from 2.0% in Croatia to 16.8% in Romania. Numerous studies have also attempted to explore measures to reduce Early School Leaving (ESL; see for example, Schmitsek, 2022; Brown et al., 2021; Bademci et al., 2020; Araújo et al., 2019; Doyle and Keane, 2019; Banks and Smyth, 2021) and have also highlighted the profound social and economic implications of ESL for individuals and communities (Bembich, 2019; Borgna and Struffolino, 2017; de Castro and Pereira, 2019; Drăghicescu et al., 2021; Fehérvári, 2020; Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2022; Traag and Van der Velden, 2011). This phenomenon is not limited to compulsory schooling. There are a parallel set of studies exploring the causes and impacts of University dropout which mirror many of thematic areas emerging in this study. One of the most significant of these published by Lizarte Simón and Gijón Puerta (2022) seeks to identify key causes of early

university dropout through a study using the College Persistence Questionnaire (CPQv2). Drawing on Tinto's Institutional Departure Model it categorizes dropout theories into psychological, sociological, economic, organizational, and interactional models. As we will see, these thematic areas resonate with the categories that have emerged from this study.

Numerous typologies have also been used to classify factors that affect ESL, with the two most frequently used being endogenous and exogenous factors, as well as family [socioeconomic status (SES), single parent, education level of parents, parents' professional careers, culture] school-level (school climate, school size, quality of teachers and the availability of learning resources) and individual (cognitive ability, language ability, age and gender) factors (Brown et al., 2021; Hamilton, 2013; Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2022; Tarabini et al., 2019).

To make meaning of these two classifications, in this paper, we have used the taxonomy employed in the European Commission, European Education and Culture Executive Agency (2014) entitled "Tackling Early Leaving from Education and Training." In the report, factors contributing to ESL are classified into two areas: (1) family, gender, migration and socioeconomic factors; and (2) education-system-related factors. Exogenous factors (outside the education system) include all individual and family-level factors, while endogenous factors include school-level (workshops, meetings and programmes for family involvement, extra-curricular opportunities for partnership between school and local businesses and organizations) and national level factors (policies and policy measures to ensure equitable and inclusive education). These factors are inextricably interwoven, and studies frequently approach them collectively or in groups. However, since there are higher rates of ESL amongst vulnerable groups such as pupils with immigrant backgrounds, it is essential to understand the role of social determinants in underachievement and consequently in ESL.

While social determinants of underachievement encompass institutional, socioeconomic, cognitive, linguistic, gendered, psycho-emotional and wellbeing-related factors, this paper focuses specifically on the cultural dimensions shaping underachievement and influencing ESL, set against the backdrop of recent demographic shifts, changing equity policy priorities, and emerging debates on the structural drivers of student attrition (Martin et al., 2025; Sancho et al., 2024; Herzog-Punzenberger et al., 2023; O'Hara et al., 2023). Using the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews) technique, the paper provides an overview of cultural factors leading to ESL and focuses on answering the following research question:

*What does the literature say about the cultural factors and causes behind underachievement in relation to ESL?*

The first part of the paper provides the context and background of the study which is followed by a definition of culture that guided the review, literature search and screening methodology. Leading on from this, the background to the literature included in the paper is presented. This is followed by an analysis of the themes that emerged from the review together with a discussion of the interplay between cultural factors and other social determinants of underachievement and ESL and policies, gaps and solutions. Finally, the discussion and conclusion section of the paper highlights the key findings derived from the review.

## 2 Methodology for the investigation of cultural factors affecting ESL

### 2.1 Definition of culture that guided the search

Defining "culture" can be complex, as it is a term with multiple legitimate interpretations. To establish parameters for the review, we deliberated and agreed upon a specific definition of culture. The resulting definition is a combination of several definitions.

Culture, as Frierson et al. (2010) define it, is a complex concept that encompasses a set of learned and shared behaviors, values, customs and beliefs that are unique to a specific group or society (p. 75). Additionally, culture has a cognitive component that involves ways of knowing, which refers to how people approach learning, problem solving and knowledge construction and transmission across generations (Fetterman, cited in Rothstein-Fisch and Trumbull, 2008, p. 3). This cognitive aspect of culture is relevant to how students think and learn in the classroom (Brown et al., 2018). The term "culture" encompasses the entire mode of existence of a community or group. This involves their clothing, dietary habits, customs surrounding marriage and family, employment practices, religious observances, recreational activities and artistic creations. It is also evident in their language, thoughts and behaviors, as well as through physical objects such as artwork, literature, landmarks, museums and through social interactions, including those involving decision-making, relationships and shared experiences (Altrichter et al., 2021).

Having established a working definition of culture, we subsequently executed the review following the guidelines established by PRISMA, which enhance the replicability, validity, transparency and adequacy of systematic reviews (Moher et al., 2009). Therefore, the selection and extraction procedures followed PRISMA's statement, which provides a series of well-defined stages to ensure the accuracy of the research process.

### 2.2 Databases and search strategies

For the purpose of this review, a systematic search was performed using three electronic databases—Web of Science, Scopus and PsycINFO—covering the period from 2003 to 2023. These databases were selected due to their extensive data sources and user-friendly navigation systems. The search terms were developed collaboratively and shared with the consortium partners for review. Several searches were conducted on these databases using the following terms: (culture, cultural factors, cultural identity, ethnic disparities, cultural competence, cultural sensitivity) AND (academic achievement, at-risk youth) AND (early school dropout, early school leaving, early school departure, school retention, school disengagement). The specified search terms were also combined using Boolean operators.

### 2.3 Screening

Following the primary literature searches, each study's title and abstract were reviewed to determine their potential relevance.

Subsequently, studies that passed the initial screening stage were further evaluated for eligibility. A comprehensive illustration of the screening and study selection process is presented in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1).

After applying the inclusion/exclusion criteria, a total of 1,400 studies were generated from three databases (Web of Science,  $n = 744$ ; Scopus,  $n = 447$ , PsycINFO,  $n = 209$ ); out of these, 135 studies were excluded due to duplication and a lack of full text.

Screening of the titles and abstracts resulted in the exclusion of studies deemed unsuitable for the review. After this initial screening, 89 studies were considered for the full text review, eight studies were further excluded for comparing the learning and achievement patterns or ESL reasons within European countries with countries outside Europe and 22 for focusing on the use of IT resources, MOOC or cyber-bullying or for not focusing directly on ESL or achievement. Consequently, 59 studies were identified and included in the present review. The review also included four papers that were selected through expert polling. Three papers were chosen for their strong relevance to culturally responsive assessment (see Brown et al., 2016, 2022a; Young et al., 2018), while one paper was selected as foundational work on culturally responsive school leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016).

The background to the type of literature included in the systematic literature review is shown in Table 1 that summarizes the authors, year of publication, objectives, place, size of sample and the method used of which the findings derived from the review are presented in the next section of the paper.

### 3 Themes emerging from the systematic review

Cultural factors can exert a significant impact on academic achievement and ESL. To some extent, we can link this discussion to Franz Boas's theory of cultural determinism, which posits that individuals are largely shaped by the cultural values, beliefs and practices of the society or community in which they live and that culture plays a predominant role in shaping their thoughts, emotions, behaviors and even identity. Cultural norms and expectations can in some cases limit individual agency and free will as highlighted in Van Den Berghe et al. (2022) study with support workers who cited cultural determinism as a reason for ESL. The support workers in the study attributed ESL to individual conflicts between students based on ethnicity, religion, culturally inspired gender roles, the student's perspective of the value of education and parents' lower educational aspirations (p. 9). By association, the systematic review of the literature identified several cultural factors that can influence learning motivation and achievement patterns that can lead to ESL and have been classified into five themes:

1. Cultural values, beliefs and behaviors (of both students and parents)
2. Culture and social barriers
3. Culture and academic barriers
4. Discrimination and prejudice
5. Cultural norms concerning gender and education

### 3.1 Theme 1. Cultural values, beliefs and behaviors (of students and parents)

This section explores the literature on the impact of cultural values, beliefs and behaviors of students and parents on the role that these play in patterns of ESL within Europe. It will examine the connected concepts of expectation and aspiration and seeks to link these to the concepts of capacity, agency and capital in all of their various manifestations. Mindful of the expansive definition of culture outlined earlier in the paper, while issues of migration, ethnicity and inclusion will emerge organically from the literature, this section explicitly does not conflate culture with any of these concepts and provides an overview of the theoretical landscape identified in the literature examining the discrete though connected areas of parental and student attitudes and expectations.

#### 3.1.1 Background and theoretical framing

There is widespread recognition that parents play a significant, if not pivotal, role in the academic success of their children (Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir, 2014; Hartas, 2016). However, there is some debate about the mechanisms whereby parental actions, beliefs and values impact achievement across the continuum of education (McCulloch, 2017).

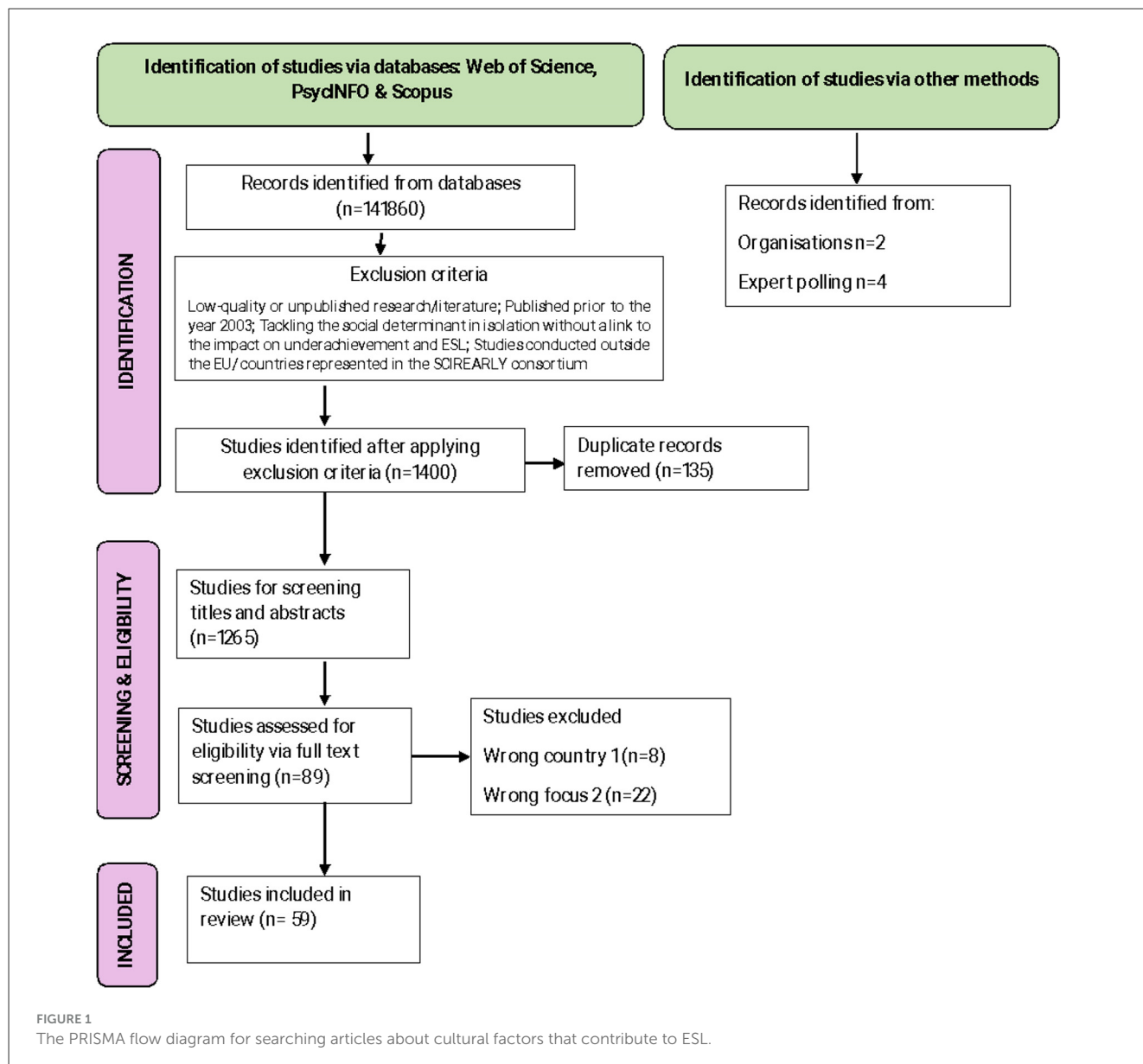
Drawing on human capital theory, Traag and Van der Velden (2011, pp. 47–48) exploring ESL in the Netherlands suggested that parental influence is inextricably linked with family resources and that these encompass four discrete types of “capital” (Economic, Human, Cultural, Social). They argue that the parental capacity to navigate the education system in a manner that is beneficial to their children depends not only on financial status but also on educational background, integration, cultural agency and broader social and familial relationships (Traag and Van der Velden, 2011). This analysis also resonates with Vryonides (2007), Khattab and Modood (2018), and Hartas (2016) and Behtoui (2017), who suggest that the concept of capital, and in particular cultural and social capital, is central to the linked ideas of educational aspirations and expectations.

Behtoui (2017, citing Buchmann and Dalton, 2002, p. 101) argues that accounting for “educational expectations—realistic goals—and aspirations—ideal ones’ (p. 487)” is particularly important, as

“idealistic” aspirations and “realistic” expectations “are highly correlated and yield similar results,” and explain a substantial portion of the variation in the future educational achievements of individuals (p. 486).

#### 3.1.2 Parental aspirations and expectations

In a study exploring the impact of the educational ambitions of immigrant parents on the school experiences of their children, Dollmann and Weißmann (2020) provide a useful, practical examination of the aspiration/expectation dynamic in German education where, “there is consistent evidence that many immigrant and ethnic minority groups have comparably high



educational aspirations, finding also known as the “immigrant optimism hypothesis” (Kao and Tienda, 1995; Feliciano and Lanuza, 2016)” (p. 34). This aspiration ultimately results in both significantly higher achievement at the top end of the scale (p. 43) and comparably higher dropout rates (p. 34).

They suggest that one of the reasons for the latter are what they term “information asymmetries” (Dollmann and Weißmann, 2020), which result in parents making choices based on incomplete systemic knowledge. Arguably, these asymmetries are an example of a deficit in cultural capital (Hartas, 2016) and impact parental beliefs and behaviors in all communities, but perhaps more so in marginalized groups. Indeed, there is some evidence of this based on a study conducted with the Roma community in Hungary (Nguyen Luu et al., 2019) which explores the way in which parents seek to leverage the education system to enhance the life opportunities of their children. Traditionally excluded from social and educational structures, it was found that parents have high

aspirations for their children but rely on incomplete knowledge to translate these aspirations into realistic expectations. To bridge this gap, they adopt strategies that focus on “squeezing out” attention, assistance and resources (p. 131) relying on engagement to access information and action. This proactive approach explicitly rejects a “deficit” framing of their approach to education (p. 121). In addition, they also seek to activate existing family and community networks and resources to whatever extent they can (p. 118).

The Roma experience shares many commonalities with that of other communities. The reliance on family and other networks is highlighted in studies from Sweden (Behtoui, 2017), the UK (Khattab and Modood, 2018), Poland (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2013), and Iceland (Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir, 2014). Behtoui (2017) specifically links the capacity to access resources, information and networks to Bourdieu’s (2001) concept of “social capital,” differentiating between “within family” and “extra-familial” (p.

TABLE 1 Summary of the types of literature included on the review.

No.	Study	Objectives	Place	Size of sample	Method used
1	<a href="#">Alvarez et al. (2021)</a>	To highlight the benefits brought about by a learning-through-the-arts project aimed at creating links between the cultural heritage of students from diverse backgrounds and the fundamental aims of school instruction	Spain	20 fourth-grade students (10 girls and 10 boys aged 9–10) benefited from the experience under analysis	Observations and reflections as well as records of the process and end products of the activities carried out by the schoolchildren participating in the project. A socio-demographic questionnaire and a brief interview on cultural identity and school interests were administered to the children in order to get to know them better
2	<a href="#">Alvarez-Roldan et al. (2018)</a>	To explore the reasons why Gitano adolescents are disproportionately more likely to dropout of high school than their non-Gitano neighbors	Spain	63 students, teachers, and parents. The participants' age ranged from 13 to 50 years	Concept mapping
3	<a href="#">Araújo et al. (2019)</a>	To investigate possible relationships between how principals perceive both ESL and the measures to deal with it and the culture of the school as an identity of differentia specific (ethos)	Portugal	Four principals	Semi-structured interviews of principals of upper secondary schools in Porto
4	<a href="#">Bademci et al. (2020)</a>	To present the findings of surveys-factors leading to ESL and to contribute to the development of a novel methodology that fosters equity, inclusivity and equality in education where marginalized children feel valued.	Bulgaria, Italy, Malta, Romania, and Turkey	796 teachers and 900 students from Bulgaria, Italy, Malta, Romania, and Turkey completed standard electronic surveys. The teachers' survey consisted of secondary school teachers from Bulgaria ( $N = 147$ ), Italy ( $N = 105$ ), Malta ( $N = 71$ ), Romania ( $N = 261$ ), and Turkey ( $N = 212$ ). For the second survey, 250 secondary school students from Bulgaria, 109 from Italy, 67 from Malta and 401 students from Turkey took part in the study	Two online surveys with teachers and students
5	<a href="#">Banks and Smyth (2021)</a>	This paper explores how these approaches (school completion programme and Youth reach programme) can inform mainstream school culture by improving teacher–student relationships and addressing barriers to learning for students who experience marginalization in school	Ireland	A postal survey of all SCP coordinators and chairpersons of the school clusters and all Youth reach coordinators and in-depth interviews of staff working in the School Completion Programme (10 clusters) and staff and young people participating in the National Youth reach Programme (10 clusters)	In-depth interviews and postal survey
6	<a href="#">Bayón-Calvo et al. (2021)</a>	To analyze some endogenous factors (scholastic performance, educational attainment or holistic needs of students) behind ESL	Spain	All regions	Quantitative analysis of secondary data (regional level data collected by the Ministry of Education)
7	<a href="#">Behtoui (2017)</a>	To explore the determinants of the educational expectations of young people in disadvantaged urban areas	Sweden	2033 students in 50 schools in their final year of “compulsory school” (ninth grade) and the first year of “secondary school”	Survey (as a part of the RESL.eu project, Reducing ESL in Europe, in Sweden)
8	<a href="#">Bembich (2019)</a>	To examine the theoretical implications associated with the study of the phenomenon of ESL amongst foreign-born students	Italy	Review	Review
9	<a href="#">Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir (2014)</a>	To examine the contribution of parenting practices to students' completion of upper secondary school through their school engagement	Iceland	$N = 835$ Icelandic youth, 54% female	A longitudinal study with data collected at three stages. (1) Questionnaires, (2) Standardized National Achievement Test
10	<a href="#">Borgna and Struffolino (2017)</a>	To examine gender differences in ESL, assessing the role of previous scholastic performance, parental education, and differential employment opportunities	Italy	$N = 1,508$ and $N = 5,233$	Quantitative analysis of secondary data sets: ESL Dynamics Survey (ESLD) Participation and Labor, Unemployment Survey (PLUS) conducted by the Italian national research institute for vocational training (ISFOL)

(Continued)



TABLE 1 (Continued)

No.	Study	Objectives	Place	Size of sample	Method used
11	<a href="#">Broc (2018)</a>	To transfer research on academic achievement in compulsory secondary education (CSE) students (12–18 years) from personal factors to others of a psychosocial or sociological type and to develop a brief measurement instrument to predict academic achievement	Spain	317 students of Secondary Education	A questionnaire (Family, psychosocial and contextual settings)
12	<a href="#">Brown et al. (2021)</a>	To explore Early Leaving this paper applies a conceptual framework of five key categories (personal challenges, social relationships, family circumstances, institutional features of school/work, and structural factors) to consider the comparative contexts of risks to Early Leaving in Spain and the UK	UK and Spain	77 interviews and focus groups with 309 educational stakeholders across 21 settings involved in the European Commission funded project [Orienta4YEL]. The young people interviewed were aged between 12 and 18 years old	Interviews and focus groups
13	<a href="#">Casquilho-Martins and Matela (2021)</a>	To analyze the intervention experiences of teams with immigrant children and young people at risk	Portugal	Five professionals working in multidisciplinary teams intervening with immigrant children and young people (age range 25–56 years)	Semi-structured interviews
14	<a href="#">Cunningham (2019)</a>	To report on the extent to which teachers' discourses reveal power and control over children's language linguistic repertoires in school (how languages beyond English are dealt with in schools)	UK	Interviews from 31 participants	Interviews from a range of roles in schools: Head teachers, deputy head, teachers, class teachers, EAL coordinator, SEN coordinator, family liaison and students
15	<a href="#">D'hondt et al. (2016)</a>	To study the interplay of perceived ethnic discrimination by teachers, parents' ethnic socialization practices, and ethnic minority students' sense of academic futility	Flanders (Belgium)	1,181 ethnic minority students (50.6% girls; mean age = 15.5) in 33 schools	A written questionnaire and academic results provided by the schools.
16	<a href="#">de Castro and Pereira (2019)</a>	To evaluate the relationship between internal working models of students, their perceptions of the quality of their relationships with teachers, and their academic performance (relational dimension)	Portugal	A sample of 305 students from the 8th grade of regular education and the Alternative Curricular Course.	The study uses three measures: (i) the "Inventory of Attachment in Childhood and Adolescence" (IACA) measure, (ii) the "Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment" (IPPA) measure—concerning the attachment to teacher, and (iii) a socio-demographic questionnaire
17	<a href="#">Derrington (2007)</a>	To identify and examine the range of variables associated with Gypsy Traveler students' engagement with secondary education	England	A longitudinal study of 44 Gypsy Traveler students was conducted across several regions of England between 2000 and 2005	Phenomenological design
18	<a href="#">Dollmann and Weißmann (2020)</a>	To investigate how enrolment and completion rates change over time—from the end of lower secondary education until the end of upper secondary education—and how this affects ethnic inequalities in educational outcomes	Germany	The study draws on the German part of the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Survey in Four European Countries (CILS4EU-DE). 144 schools, 271 school classes, and 5,013 students in the first wave in Germany (2011). A total of 5,820 respondents participated in the sixth wave (2016)	Longitudinal survey
19	<a href="#">Downes (2011)</a>	The study focuses on school climate and emotional support issues to prevent ESL	Ireland	Interviews with senior government officials and secondary school management representatives across eight European countries	Qualitative interviews
20	<a href="#">Doyle and Keane (2019)</a>	To examine ESL from the perspective of parents of early school leavers in an inner-city local authority housing estate in the Republic of Ireland living with the challenges of significant marginalization	Ireland	Nine parents of early school leavers	In-depth, semi structured interviews

(Continued)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

No.	Study	Objectives	Place	Size of sample	Method used
21	<a href="#">Drăghicescu et al. (2021)</a>	To investigate teachers' perceptions and attitudes regarding ESL	Italy, Lithuania, Portugal, and Romania	256 teachers from the four country (Italy, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania)	A questionnaire addressed to teachers and focus groups with teachers
22	<a href="#">Fehérvári (2020)</a>	To explore the school (teaching) practices in the (sample) schools and identify risk factors that may increase or decrease the chances of leaving school early	Hungary	83 primary schools in Budapest and the number of respondents ( $N = 1,255$ ) teachers	Questionnaire-based survey
23	<a href="#">Fernández-Batanero (2014)</a>	To identify effective practices in education in order to address the issue of failure amongst pupils in secondary schools (strategies for inclusion in the face of social exclusion)	Spain	47 in-depth interviews with the management team, staff in the Guidance Department and teachers involved in the development of the various measures for differentiation were carried out and 12 classes were observed	Case study—document analysis, interviews, and classroom observation
24	<a href="#">Fredricks et al. (2016)</a>	To examine relationship among context, student engagement, and adjustment	Finland	Review	Review (a review cum foreword to a special issue of European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction, Early)
25	<a href="#">García-Fernández et al. (2021)</a>	To know the relationship between teachers' beliefs about immigrant students and their possible influence on academic achievements	Spain	167 teachers of Early Childhood, Elementary and High School Education	Survey questionnaire
26	<a href="#">Gil-Flores et al. (2011)</a>	To examine the influence of gender, educational attainment and family related variables on the academic aspirations of students	Spain	3,963 students and 3,842 families	Academic Achievement Assessment in Andalusia and questionnaires
27	<a href="#">Guerra et al. (2019)</a>	To examine the role of perceived discrimination and acculturation orientations on immigrant children's achievement and wellbeing in the school context	Portugal	Immigrant ( $n = 229$ ), immigrant descendant ( $n = 196$ ), and native Portuguese children ( $n = 168$ ) from 4th to 6th grade participated in the study	Self-report questionnaire
28	<a href="#">Hamilton (2013)</a>	To examine (some of the) factors which may impact upon migrant children's social and emotional wellbeing, and thus their learning (whether migrant children have access to inclusive educational and social opportunities, are making successful transitions within their new school environments and their lives beyond the school setting)	UK (North Wales)	40 children (age of the children ranged from 3 to 11 years), 37 teachers, eight EAL teachers, nine Eastern European parents; and six community practitioners	Qualitative-interpretive paradigm—a blend of grounded theory, ethnography and case study. The methods included: interviews, questionnaires, documentary analysis and observation
29	<a href="#">Hartas (2016)</a>	To examine the contribution of young people's psychosocial and background factors and home environment to their educational aspirations in the UK	UK	The sample included 5,020 young people in Wave 2 and 5,911 in Wave 3 with the final sample including children who participated in both waves ( $N = 4,427$ )	Quantitative analysis of secondary data that came from Understanding Society, or the United Kingdom Household Longitudinal Study. Self-completion questionnaire a pencil-and-paper instrument for young people aged 10–15
30	<a href="#">Hiller (2014)</a>	To explore dynamics between gender inequality and cultural norms along the process of development	France	180 countries	Quantitative analysis of secondary data: Female Labor Force Participation and Economic Development data
31	<a href="#">Johansson and Strietholt (2019)</a>	To explore the hypothesis of global convergence by addressing the issues of the globalization of curricula and achievement	Sweden and Germany	59 countries that participated in at least two cycles	Quantitative analysis of secondary data. The study uses secondary school data from five assessment cycles (1995–2011) of the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)

(Continued)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

No.	Study	Objectives	Place	Size of sample	Method used
32	<a href="#">Kaukko et al. (2022)</a>	To investigate what students with a migrant background in Finnish comprehensive schools report as difficult, and how they succeed in overcoming these difficulties	Finland	In total 347 student responses were given in 2016, and 291 in 2021. Age range 7–16+ years	The data used for this article consists of two similar surveys collected in Finnish comprehensive schools: the first in a paper-and-pen survey in 2016 and the second in a combined online and paper-and-pen survey five years later, in 2021
33	<a href="#">Khattab and Modood (2018)</a>	To investigate educational attainment of Muslim boys and girls within the British educational system	UK	8,343 at KS2, KS3 and GCSE results and 3,559 in the analysis of being at a university	Quantitative analysis of secondary data (longitudinal study of young people in England)
34	<a href="#">Lamonica et al. (2020)</a>	To investigate the effectiveness of a small experimental pilot (an intervention aimed at reducing ESL while supporting standard school curricula) addressed to foreign adolescents with low language skills and high dropout risk in lower secondary school in Turin, North-West Italy	Italy	Total 21 students with 14 years average age (11 have been included in the treated group and 10 in the control group by complete random assignment)	Experimental randomization approach (A pilot study part of a larger project, funded by the national AMIF (Asylum Migration and Integration Fund), aimed at preventing ESL among foreign adolescents in Italy)
35	<a href="#">Lavrentsova and Valkov (2019)</a>	To reveal the risks that increase the propensity of Bulgarian students to ESL, with a particular focus on those SES influences and ethnic background which have the most important effect. And to identify the interventions and tools for prevention	Bulgaria	152 students studying in 5th, 6th, and 7th grade (11–17 years old)	Questionnaire
36	<a href="#">Nguyen Luu et al. (2019)</a>	To present how Roma children in three Budapest tanodas, and their parents, cope with the adversity associated with being a stigmatized and discriminated group with low SES	Hungary	17 tanoda students between the ages of 11 and 17 (44.4% girls; 55.6% boys, mean age: 14.0) and 14 of their parents	Interviews
37	<a href="#">Mäkelä and Kalalahti (2020)</a>	To explore the agency of migrant background girls during the last year of comprehensive school and achieve insights into their bounded agency experienced during educational transitions	Finland	34 15-year-old migrant background girls	Interviews
38	<a href="#">Mateos-Claros et al. (2019)</a>	To analyze the differences in performance due to the different languages and cultures in the multicultural society	Spain	A sample of 501 students of the third year of Early Childhood Education was used	Questionnaire
39	<a href="#">McCulloch (2017)</a>	To examine the trajectories followed by young people's educational aspirations in England over the age range from 13 to 16 years and their relationship to educational achievement	England	15,770 young people participated in the first wave of interviews of the original study and 8,222 in the second wave	Quantitative analysis of secondary data (LSYPE Longitudinal Study)
40	<a href="#">Mendez (2015)</a>	To analyze whether country differences in the non-cognitive skills or qualities that children are encouraged to learn at home, i.e., differences in culture, account for country differences in student performance	Spain	PISA scores of second generation immigrants using the 2003, 2006, 2009, and 2012 reports of the PISA, coordinated by the OECD	Quantitative analysis of secondary data. Comparing PISA language, mathematics and science scores of second-generation immigrants of different origins living in Australia, Austria, Belgium, Finland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Switzerland
41	<a href="#">Miulescu and Ruth (2021)</a>	This paper explores the importance of different parameters influencing young people's Early Leaving of school or training (EL) in applying a five-category research framework, which includes: personal challenges, family circumstances, institutional risks, social relationships and structural risk factors	Germany and Romania	43 interviews and focus groups with 111 teachers and 203 young people	Interview and focus groups

(Continued)



TABLE 1 (Continued)

No.	Study	Objectives	Place	Size of sample	Method used
42	Montero-Sieburth and Turcatti (2022)	To identify the latest researched practices for preventing school disengagement resulting in Early School Leaving (ESL) within the European Union	UK	Review	Review
43	Nayir et al. (2019)	To explore culturally responsive assessment policies, professional development and practices that were administered to school principals in four European countries (Austria, Ireland, Norway and Turkey)	Austria, Ireland, Norway, and Turkey	Austria ( $n = 100$ ), Ireland ( $n = 120$ ), Norway ( $n = 29$ ), and Turkey ( $n = 120$ ). School principals	Survey questionnaire
44	Nortvedt et al. (2020)	To investigate how migrant students are affected by assessment, both summative and formative, at the classroom level, with a focus on culturally responsive assessment	Austria, Ireland, Norway, and Turkey	Review	Review
45	O'Connell and Freeney (2011)	To explore early school-leaving in a sample of second-level schools by applying Theory of Planned Behavior	Ireland	20 post-primary schools—1,131 boys (60.3%) and girls (39.7%) of mean age 14 years and 7 months	Survey questionnaire
46	Oczlon et al. (2021)	To investigate the relation between four facets of cultural pluralism climate (learning about multicultural topics, learning about intercultural relations, interest shown by teachers, interest shown by non-immigrant students) and immigrant students' self-esteem, academic self-concept, achievement and perceived discrimination	Austria	A sample of 700 immigrant students. Participants' age ranged from 10 to 16 years ( $Mage = 12.62$ years; $SD = 1.12$ ; 45.4% female) from 87 Austrian secondary school classes	Data was collected through paper-pencil questionnaires
47	Piechurska-Kuciel (2013)	To analyze the relationship between adolescents' social support network and L2 achievement	Poland	Polish secondary grammar school students ( $N = 609$ ), (384 girls and 225 boys) whose mean age was 17.50	Questionnaire
48	Rodríguez-Izquierdo (2022)	To investigate teachers' (Primary Education teachers, Compulsory Secondary Education teachers, and Baccalaureate) perspectives of school dropout factors and the perceived inspiring practices to prevent ESL	Spain	15 teachers age range 33–62 ( $M = 46$ )	Qualitative methods: included in-depth, open-ended 15 interviews with teachers and 3 focus groups
49	Schmitsek (2022)	To explore educational experiences of dropouts in England, Denmark, and Hungary, and compares the measures related to ESL	England, Denmark, and Hungary	28 interviews with students in three different country contexts	Empirical data were collected from observations and interviews
50	Schotte et al. (2018)	To investigate the association of cultural identity with several indicators of academic achievement and psychological adaptation in immigrant adolescents	Germany	$N = 3894$ , 51% female, $Mage = 16.24$	Quantitative analysis of secondary data from the National Educational Panel Study (NEPS) a longitudinal study conducted in Germany. Student questionnaire data and test scores from the 2010/11 school year provide the basis of their analyses
51	Spiegler et al. (2018)	To examine whether changes in ethnic and national identity predict school adjustment rather than vice versa	Germany	( $N = 146$ ; $MT1 = 10.42$ years, 46.6% male)	Quantitative analysis of Questionnaire completed by children. Data were drawn from a study on resilience and positive development among Turkish immigrant-origin youth in Germany (SIMCUR project)
52	Strand and Winston (2008)	To assess the nature and level of pupils' educational aspirations and to elucidate the factors that influence these aspirations	England	Over 800 pupils, aged 12–14 completed a questionnaire assessing pupils' experience of home, school and their peers. A sub-sample of 48 pupils selected by teachers to reflect ethnicity and ability levels in individual schools also participated in detailed focus group interviews	Questionnaire and focus group

(Continued)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

No.	Study	Objectives	Place	Size of sample	Method used
53	<a href="#">Suárez et al. (2016)</a>	To compare homework involvement and academic achievement in a sample of native and immigrant students, as well as to study immigrant students' relationship between homework involvement and Math achievement	Spain	1,328 students, 10–16 years old from Spanish families (85.6%) or immigrant students or students of immigrant origin (14.4%) from South America, Europe, Africa, and Asia	Homework Survey: One survey part is answered by students, other survey part by parents and the third one by teachers
54	<a href="#">Tarabini et al. (2019)</a>	To explore the impact of secondary schools in student (dis)engagement and subsequent opportunities to succeed in school	Spain	In-depth case studies in five secondary schools. Interviews with teaching staff ( <i>N</i> 47) and students ( <i>N</i> 54), focus groups of teachers ( <i>N</i> 5) and students ( <i>N</i> 6)	Case study (interviews and focus groups)
55	<a href="#">Traag and Van der Velden (2011)</a>	To explain ESL in lower secondary education in the Netherlands, taking into account background characteristics, family resources and school composition factors at the same time	Netherlands	19,254 students from a random sample of 108 schools	Quantitative analysis of secondary data of a representative longitudinal survey carried out in the Netherlands by Statistics Netherlands and academic researchers
56	<a href="#">Van Caudenberg et al. (2020)</a>	To contribute to a more nuanced understanding of school belonging by focusing on the experiences of young people with a first- or second-generation migration background in mainstream secondary education and alternative learning arenas	Belgium (Flanders)	34 young people	Semi-structured in-depth interviews
57	<a href="#">Van Den Berghe et al. (2022)</a>	To explore the intersections of influencing factors on the process of school dropout among students with a migration background from a more holistic perspective (causes, important actors and support to stay in schools)	Belgium	15 support workers interviews	In-depth interviews
58	<a href="#">Vryonides (2007)</a>	To investigate the effects of non-monetary forms of capital (social and cultural) to provide explanations for educational processes relating to post-secondary choice making	Cyprus	450 students graduating from secondary schools (questionnaire) and 28 parents (in-depth interviews)	Mixed methods (questionnaire and in-depth interviews)
59	<a href="#">Wolfgramm et al. (2014)</a>	To examine the relation between ethnically based rejection sensitivity and academic achievement	Germany and Switzerland	936 immigrant students of ninth grade	Quantitative study: Literacy test and comprehensive packet of questionnaires

489). Highlighting the role of “social stratification” ([Bourdieu, 2001](#)), this study provides examples of how families from higher socioeconomic strata benefit from access to knowledge and resources that ensure better school outcomes. The availability of extra-familial parental networks, engaged school staff, positive peer groups and a wide range of supportive structures provides both support and information. In addition, the presence of high parental educational aspirations ([Strand and Winston, 2008](#)), combined with resources that support and challenge students, is considered pivotal in aligning aspirations with expectations ([Piechurska-Kuciel, 2013](#)).

This alignment is also apparent in [Khattab and Modood \(2018\)](#) study exploring the educational attainment of British Muslims and in [Strand and Winston's \(2008\)](#) work examining educational aspirations in inner city British schools. Focusing on the issues of gender and expectation, the 2018 study suggests that parental and student expectations play a critically important role in enhancing

outcomes, suggesting that the interplay of both has an explicitly positive impact at age 13–14, resulting in enhanced attainment in English Key stage 3 assessments (p. 243). This persists through the remainder of secondary schooling, resulting in enhanced higher education access patterns for Muslim women, a fact that the authors ascribe to the realistic expectation of parents that their daughters will advance to post-secondary education as well as the cultural reality of higher parental involvement and less social independence in this group. As we will see later in this section, the agency of Muslim women and their proactive choices in the area of study and attainment are also important, as is the interplay between their own and their parents' expectations as opposed to aspirations.

[Strand and Winston's \(2008\)](#) study similarly emphasizes the importance of idealized aspiration in the early years of secondary education through school completion. Exploring aspirations across ethnic groups, the study addresses the complex interplay of discrimination, exclusion, cultural and social capital when

examining the outcomes of schooling, suggesting that traditionally marginalized groups adopt attitudes that might be identified with a model of “pragmatic rationality” (Strand and Winston, 2008, p. 23), acknowledging deep seated social constraints while at the same time allowing for personal and familial agency. This latter point, and in particular the role of family attitudes toward education and their impact on incidences of ESL is explored in the next section.

### 3.1.3 Parental attitudes toward education

As previously stated, there is broad agreement across a wide range of studies that parents play a pivotal role in students’ academic achievement (Gil-Flores et al., 2011). In addition to the conceptualization of this in terms of aspiration and achievement, there is also a realization of the centrality of parental attitudes to educational attainment (Mendez, 2015; Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir, 2014; Broc, 2018).

Nguyen Luu et al.’s (2019) study on the Roma experience in Hungary demonstrated that a positive parental attitude toward education was central to the efforts of this community to move beyond a deficit model of education. The challenges that emerged were not attitudinal but related to capacity and capital. Studies by Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir (2014), Piechurska-Kuciel (2013), Mendez (2015), and Suárez et al. (2016) also suggest that a positive parental attitude toward education is at the center of a complex web of interactions that supports student attainment. Each of these studies examined proxy measurements of parental attitudes which, broadly speaking, can be summarized as involving an investment in time, resources, emotional stability and interest. Mendez’s (2015) investigation of the intergenerational transmission of skills considered essential to academic success, defined in this study as cognitive and non-cognitive, explicitly states that these are “jointly determined by parental investments and environments at different stages of childhood” (p. 78).

The importance of this is evident in the research into Dutch ESL published by Traag and Van der Velden (2011), which suggests that while cognitive capacity exerted a significant impact on school completion, some of the negative impacts of lower scores in this area can be ameliorated by parental attitudes and engagement. Specifically, they noted that:

“Pupils with very supportive parents are up to 50% less likely to drop out of school compared to pupils with totally unsupportive parents” (p. 55).

Perhaps a key question here relates to what is meant by supportive parents? Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir’s (2014) study of ESL in Iceland suggests that the most successful approach to parenting involved an “authoritative” style, meaning an approach to parenting that is marked by “high acceptance, supervision, and psychological autonomy granting” (p. 778).

This combination of support and autonomy is considered critical to facilitating engagement with learning and schooling, a process that they argue is central to reducing ESL. The concept of engaged and challenging parenting resonates with Piechurska-Kuciel (2013), who suggests that academic success in a Polish context is built on inputs by engaged teachers, supportive peers and

demanding parents. This attitudinal focus often finds expression in specific activities.

A study by Suárez et al. (2016) examined parental involvement in homework, differentiating between native and immigrant groups. Arguably, engagement with homework can be used as a proxy measure for parental attitude given the investment of time and possibly financial resources in the successful completion of these tasks. Of course, the challenge for immigrant parents might be one of capacity, whether it be educational, financial or indeed linguistic, rather than attitude; thus, this measure should be approached with caution (p. 2). Indeed, the work of Hartas supports this caution:

Families’ cultural capital was a better predictor of young people’s aspirations than were more educationally driven parent–child interactions (i.e., homework support, participation in extra-curricular activities/tutoring, parental interest in school). (2016, p. 1158)

Finally, the value placed on education underpins many of the general studies around culture, beliefs and behavior. Previously mentioned studies examining Muslim female and inner-city educational experiences in Britain (Khatab and Modood, 2018; Strand and Winston, 2008) both identify the value placed by parents on education as being a critical factor in educational attainment and school completion. While identified subgroups, such as migrants and defined ethnic minorities, tended to have parental attitudes that placed a high value on education, in Strand and Winston’s (2008) study, white working-class families placed less overall value on continued engagement with formal schooling. This may have been because of extended, familial employment traditions that prioritized vocational education and apprenticeships over and above more formal learning environments, or it may have been because of more marginalized communities’ perception of the potentially transformational role of educational qualifications. Khatab and Modood (2018) specifically note the importance of this latter factor to the educational decisions of young Muslim women.

### 3.1.4 Student aspirations and expectations

Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir (2014) argue that the Icelandic data identifies the importance of student disengagement in the eventual decision to leave. Arguing that dropout is a process rather than an event, this study suggests that to properly understand student agency in this area, there is a need to move beyond the narrow link between engagement and behavior (p. 780). This conceptualization finds support in the work of Fredricks et al. (2016, p. 2), who suggest that engagement is multi-modal and has “behavioral, emotional/affective and cognitive” elements.

Students who are in danger of dropping out, therefore, need to be supported in addressing each of these domains. Each of these elements will have an impact on the way students engage and set expectations.

The differentiation between the idealized aspiration and the more realistic expectation and the process of setting both is a key challenge for students (Behtoui, 2017). This process can be made even more complex by the involvement of other stakeholders in the process, particularly parents, peers and teachers.

Khattab and Modood (2018) study suggests that students with more realistic expectations were able to navigate schooling more successfully than others. The expectation gap between parents and students can be a source of tension; however, it is also important to recognize that parental expectations are often based on aspirations for advancement that draw heavily on their own educational and social capital. Part of the challenge can be a lack of what Strand and Winston (2008) refer to as “navigational capacity.” By this they mean the ability of parents, students and other key stakeholders—particularly those from underrepresented or disadvantaged backgrounds—to access, interpret, and act upon the informal and formal knowledge needed to succeed within educational systems. Dollmann and Weißmann (2020) demonstrate this when examining migrant parents’ educational choices in a German context. Specifically, they suggest that a lack of understanding of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) option in the highly stratified German system, which may be based on a lack of comparable structures in their own educational experience, results in a situation where parental aspiration does not correlate with expectation and can result in disengagement and ultimately dropout. Part of the problem here is the lack of systemic “isomorphism” (Johansson and Strietholt, 2019, p. 536) and the inability to correlate personal experiences across systems.

In this reality of conflicting demands and aspirations, student intentionality is often central to engagement and academic success. Khattab and Modood (2018) study demonstrates how a highly “instrumental” (p. 245) approach to education on the part of Muslim young people sees them, and young women in particular, progress through secondary education into higher education to enhance their social and economic position rather than necessarily broadening their educational horizons. This study suggests that they are the “most employment minded” (p. 249) of all the groups surveyed. This instrumental approach which focuses on the achievement of narrow, often utilitarian outcomes, can also be observed in the experience of Roma children in Hungary. Research by Nguyen Luu et al. (2019) indicates that this group often seek to enhance their capacity to survive what is often hostile educational contexts through “social creativity” which is defined as the building of alliances, the adoption of identifiable roles, class clown or class leader, or disruptive disengagement designed to enhance their social standing but with the connected problem of reducing educational attainment (p. 129). This latter example connects to Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir’s (2014) process of disengagement which ultimately results in dropout and all the social challenges associated with ESL.

One key group who impact student commitment to school are peers. Piechurska-Kuciel (2013) suggests that while they are the least important of the three major relationship nodes in schooling—the other two being parents and teachers—they are central to the capacity of students to commit and engage and to generate “pro-social values” (p. 135). The impact of the absence of these values is evident in Strand and Winston’s (2008) study, which suggests that the presence of a peer group who undervalue and actively denigrate the process and aspirations associated with schooling leads to a process of partial disengagement and ultimately to complete disengagement and dropout.

Ultimately, students can be helped to develop the cognitive and non-cognitive skills that help them emerge as resilient and engaged

participants in schooling. Mendez (2015, p. 79) identification of the “conscientiousness personality factor” along with Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir’s (2014) suggestion of a parenting style that facilitates the enhancement of personal autonomy and engagement on the part of the student are critical to their ultimate success in a range of education systems and demonstrate how structures, personalities and systems can be planned to facilitate school completion rather than ESL.

## 3.2 Theme 2. Culture and social barriers

This section of the paper provides an analysis of the most salient cultural and social obstacles that have been identified in the literature to affect ESL, examining the understanding of culture and interlinked social barriers and how these obstacles can affect students’ ability to meaningfully engage in education. It also provides a description of empirically sound initiatives that have been put in place to curtail these obstacles, followed by recommendations for future research that can have an impact on reducing the effects of cultural and social barriers on ESL. First, however, it is necessary to distinguish between the often reciprocal and yet subtle differences between the terms *cultural* and *social barriers*, as their effects on ESL are not always interpreted in the same way in the ESL literature (Van Caudenberg et al., 2020).

While cultural barriers can have a profound impact on both teachers’ and students’ attitudes toward the educational environment they occupy (Tarabini et al., 2019), these barriers are often associated with refugees (Casquilho-Martins and Matela, 2021) and other cultural minorities such as the Roma (Montero-Sieburth and Turcatti, 2022) and the Irish Traveler community (OECD, 2020). However, regardless of a student’s cultural affiliation, social barriers can also relate to social and economic factors that limit students’ access to education, such as poverty and a lack of resources to meaningfully engage in education (Downes, 2011). This distinction is particularly relevant to analyzing the effects of cultural and interlinked social barriers that affect ESL, as not all students from cultural minorities are affected by externally derived social barriers that exist. Instead, a review of the literature suggests that they can also be affected by barriers that exist at the school level, such as a teacher’s unconscious and at times conscious bias toward cultural minorities (García-Fernández et al., 2021) along with incongruent modes of teaching that do not always resound with cultural minorities (Lamonica et al., 2020). Nonetheless, the combined effects of cultural and socially aligned barriers can have a profound effect on ESL (Bademci et al., 2020).

According to Lamonica et al. (2020), “being a migrant is one of the most relevant predictors of school dropout, especially if associated with a low socioeconomical background” (p. 3). The manifestation of these predictors of ESL into adulthood is profound and can result in this cohort of students being “more likely to be unemployed or have low-quality and low-paid employment, have poorer health and be involved in anti-social behavior and crime” (Banks and Smyth, 2021, p. 1). On this point, it is necessary to acknowledge the multifarious cultural and social barriers that can exert an effect on the intractable and, at times, complex nature of ESL (Van Caudenberg et al., 2020). There is also a need for more



finite studies on the effects that these barriers have on students within the confines of the school grounds (Miulescu and Ruth, 2021).

On the one hand, while schools are frequently and at times wrongly tasked with solving the macro problems of society, Tarabini et al. (2019) make the point that, “school engagement, or more specifically disengagement, is one of the most useful concepts in capturing the gradual process through which students disconnect from school, and is, therefore, a sound indicator for predicting the risk of ESL” (p. 227). This issue involving the cultural and social barriers that affect student engagement at the school level appears to be the dominant theme emerging in this review.

According to Bembich (2019), “in approaching this multifaceted phenomenon (ESL), it is important to analyze the true nature of failure in learning settings, examining the complexity of risk and protective factors that can have an impact on foreign-born students’ academic pathway” (p. 55). More generally, at the school level, several dominant cultural and social barriers relating to the true nature of failure among cultural minorities have been identified in the literature. These barriers and associated strategies to curtail their effects on ESL relate to a sense of belonging; family and school relations and expectations along with a need to implement curriculum and assessment strategies that are culturally sound (Bembich, 2019). In terms of a sense of belonging, Van Caudenberg et al.’s (2020) study of migrant youths in Flemish secondary schools revealed that “experiences of exclusion and struggles to claim specific educational spaces as places where they “belong” often resulted in feelings of being an outsider rather than a valued member of the school community” (p. 428). The literature also reveals cultural and socially responsive strategies and initiatives that can be used to enhance students’ belonging in schools (see for example Lamonica et al., 2020; Miulescu and Ruth, 2021; Montero-Sieburth and Turcatti, 2022).

Firstly, small class sizes should be provided for migrants and pupils with “poor socioeconomical backgrounds” (Lamonica et al., 2020, p. 4). Furthermore, having a more culturally diverse teacher workforce that is in alignment with the culturally diverse populations that exist in schools “can develop students’ self-confidence and increase their motivation” (Khalifa et al., 2016). Finally, there is a need to consider means by which citizenship and, by association, culturally responsive education can improve a student’s sense of belonging where according to Lamonica et al. (2020), among others, embedding citizenship education into the curricula has demonstrated that students can become more participative in school life, both in terms of individual and collective participation (p. 4).

Miulescu and Ruth’s (2021) study on migrant youth in Romania and Germany illustrates this point, where in the students’ own words, the effects of unrelatable curricula translate into “uninteresting content” (Pupil 4, Germany), ‘deadly boring teaching’ (Pupil 2, Germany) and an ‘overload of content’ (Pupil 1, Germany) whose meaning was beyond the students’ comprehension.” Finally, and possibly the most prescient issue relating to the multiple strategies and initiatives that can be used to reduce ESL, relates to the need for the “pro-activity of schools, teachers, and parents in using these practices, so that teacher-student relationships fostered by trained and dedicated teachers can keep students engaged” (p. 139).

In conclusion, despite almost a decade of research into ESL, questions relating to the effects of cultural and interlinked barriers at the school level largely remain unanswered and as stated by Fernández-Batanero (2014), “What educational practices help bring about a decrease in educational failure in underprivileged contexts? What is the role of teachers and the managerial staff in developing effective educational practices? To what extent do internal practices (curricular, organizational, those related to relations with surroundings, etc.) developed by schools contribute to problems involving attendance and school leaving rates” (p. 416).

### 3.3 Theme 3. Culture and academic barriers

This section of the paper reviews academic barriers widely believed to contribute to school failure (Schmitsek, 2022) where there is some agreement that these barriers can be classified into two interlocking categories: structural academic barriers and school-based academic barriers (Brown et al., 2021). For example, Brown et al. (2021) describe them as institutional features and structural factors. Structural issues are defined as essentially national or regional policies, with funding largely outside the control of schools or teachers and characterized by highly rigid structures, slowness to respond to diversity and heterogeneity, compulsory schooling/compulsory subjects, unsuitable assessments, a lack of alternative pathways and programmes and over-representation of disadvantaged groups in certain schools (Brown et al., 2021, p. 750). To these characteristics, one can also add poor language supports, large class sizes, poor levels of resourcing and poor provision of adequate teacher training and continuing professional education (CPE).

Institutional features are defined largely as being school-based and include organizational policies, institutional norms and expectations, relationships with principals, teachers and peers, lack of language support for migrants and unsuitable curricula (p. 746).

However, this is a somewhat artificial division, since the ability of schools to respond to some of these issues is predicated on the policies and resources of the bodies that control them and the degree of freedom or otherwise which they are accorded. Nonetheless, will begin by examining structural issues and problems, which are identified in the literature as forming formidable barriers to school achievement amongst students at risk of failure and ESL. We will then proceed to examine school-based barriers and for both categories we will also attempt to identify the potential solutions highlighted in the review.

#### 3.3.1 Structural barriers to educational success amongst students at risk of school failure and ESL

The difficulty and artificial nature of separating the structural from the institutional in accounting for ESL is well illustrated in Drăghicescu et al. (2021) in reference to teachers who were researched, that “many think it is not the school and even if it is they do not have the power to help” (p. 96). This is an apt illustration of how these factors overlap, and the authors continue to discuss the ways in which schools and teachers are caught in the trap of having responsibility but no power. Within this, respondents highlighted



what they perceived as “inefficient education policy” and argued that the mandated curriculum is “not meeting student needs so we need to rethink the curriculum” (p. 105). These teachers (256 in four countries) proceeded to list a further array of structural policies that they regarded as being political and thus above and beyond what they can influence. Among these problems which are perceived to be structural related to “oversized classes of students” and “promoting exclusively cognitive curricula and ignoring moral and socio-emotional education” (p. 104). In a similar vein, [Araújo et al. \(2019\)](#) suggest that schools are hindered by a lack of resources but also, that policy makers exhibit no imagination in developing alternative pathways for those at risk, such as specialized schools; “artistic schools respond better to pupil needs by offering work that appeals” (p. 156). A similar point is made by [Alvarez et al. \(2021\)](#), who researched the much wider use of arts in the curriculum and argue that they are “inclusive and do not depend on language proficiency” (p. 3) but note that the freedom to introduce curricular alternatives is very constrained.

[Hartas \(2016\)](#) argues that the best way forward is the creation of “diversity in young peoples’ opportunities” (p. 1161). Similarly, [Schmitsek \(2022\)](#) suggests that “rigid education systems need to adopt more flexible methods and adaptive learning pathways” (p. 173) and suggests a major expansion of “second chance provision that are tailored to support the acquisition of self-efficacy and career adaptability” (p. 174). She proceeds to argue for remedial measures which are essentially structural in that they cannot be introduced without an increase in spending; “easy to access, youth friendly career guidance services,” “multi-disciplinary teams focusing on students’ wellbeing, learning issues career education and guidance” (p. 188). She also suggests smaller class sizes of a maximum of 15. Somewhat similarly, [Brown et al. \(2021\)](#) suggest that it is also important to “raise the status of technical education” (p. 745). [Van Den Berghe et al. \(2022\)](#) infer that at both structural policy level and in schools, “the goals, values, standards and expectations within education in the host country often vary widely compared to the country of origin” and that this needs to be addressed.

There is broad agreement in the literature that the structural level, both in terms of policy and funding, is responsible for significant barriers to success in education for many young people. However, most of the solutions presented represent policy changes, which are accompanied by major increases in public spending and are thus unlikely to be adopted in the short to medium term. We now turn our attention to the school and teacher level, noting again that many of the suggested changes are heavily dependent on both structure and policy at the structural level.

### 3.3.2 School-based barriers to educational success among students at risk of educational failure and ESL

The literature identifies a very broad variety of school-based factors contributing to ESL. Chief among these are unsuitable and inflexible programmes and curricula, the ethos of the school, attitudes of teachers, assessment that lacks cultural responsiveness and issues concerning language proficiency and the needs of immigrant students.

### 3.3.3 Programmes and curricula

A constant theme in the research regarding ESL is the extent to which rigid, inflexible and unsuitable curricula contribute to alienation and failure in school. In the previous section of this paper, it was noted that a considerable body of research highlights a lack of choice, limited alternative pathways and curricular rigidity as causes of ESL. [Schmitsek \(2022\)](#) suggests that such pathways must be “flexible and customized to students’ individual needs and desires.” She adds, however, that these pathways will have limited value without teacher support that has “special regard to positive relationships such as adult-student and peer support and friendship as sources of motivation” (p. 177). [Kaukko et al. \(2022\)](#) also note that language is a key factor in curricula and suggest that programme content changes should be aware that that subjects which depend strongly on language such as science subjects are most problematic and that areas such as the arts and vocational and practical education should be prioritized for at-risk students. [Van Den Berghe et al. \(2022\)](#) suggest that, among all students, not only migrants, formally taught cultural pluralism can promote the appreciation of diversity and foster learning about different cultures. [Brown et al. \(2021\)](#) note that compulsory subjects and even compulsory schooling combined with the over-representation of disadvantaged groups in particular schools means that “the system is general and the same for everyone but clearly not all neighborhoods are the same” (p. 755).

### 3.3.4 School ethos and teacher attitudes

Regarding school ethos, it has been widely suggested that in many cases, schools have failed to adapt to meeting the needs of all students. For example, [Kaukko et al. \(2022\)](#) with reference to [Miller et al. \(2018\)](#) argue that schools must make the effort to be “places of belonging by creating conditions for belonging through explicit teaching of values and by developing a school culture of respect and reciprocity” (p. 3). [Nayir et al. \(2019\)](#) also state that schools have largely failed to deliver new policy at the school level for working with students from migrant and other disadvantaged backgrounds.

Areas in which imaginative innovations and initiatives which could be driven by schools are many and varied in the literature. For example, [Drăghicescu et al. \(2021\)](#) suggest that schools that are not meeting students’ needs must re-think the curriculum, optimize teacher competences and create a positive learning environment.

Likewise, the importance of teacher attitudes and skills is widely stressed in the literature as being vital in keeping children at risk in school where according to [de Castro and Pereira \(2019\)](#), interventions aimed at reducing ESL “should have the promotion of the quality of student teacher relationships as its main goal, which in turn promotes a sense of security and facilitates the learning process.” The same authors also report that at-risk students “feel less accepted by their teachers” (p. 13) and that teachers and schools predict these students to be less teachable and to fail. They suggest that as teachers’ support is vital for school performance, initial teacher education and CPE must be greatly improved in these areas. A similar point is also made by [Cunningham \(2019\)](#), who states that “teachers want to do the right thing but find it difficult because of not knowing what to do in positive terms in the classroom” (p. 289).

### 3.3.5 Assessment that lacks cultural responsiveness

For several decades, it has been recognized that certain forms of assessment present powerful obstacles to disadvantaged groups, including migrants and refugees but also to those not culturally or temperamentally suited to terminal written high-stakes assessments (Nortvedt et al., 2020). Nortvedt et al. (2020) suggest that assessment should be “culturally responsive,” which they define as entailing classroom-based assessments being conducted by teachers “trained in cultural responsiveness” (p. 5) who can deliver “teaching and assessment negotiated in the classroom and adjusted to account for students’ cultural ways of knowing.”

A similar argument is also made by Nayir et al. (2019) among others (Brown et al., 2016, 2022b; Young et al., 2018) who note that what they describe as the supremacy of standardized testing that is unsuitable for disadvantaged and migrant students. They observe that, across the majority of OECD member states, persistent attainment disparities exist both between socio-economically disadvantaged pupils and their peers, and between migrant and non-migrant students. In response, Nayir et al. (2019) strongly support the concept of “culturally responsive assessment,” including modes of assessment such as “creativity assessment,” “peer assessment,” and “self-assessment.” However, they are rather pessimistic about progress in these areas, arguing that by and large national assessment policy has not changed for those at the greatest risk of early ESL and similarly that there is a lack of policy at the school level.

### 3.3.6 Language proficiency and the needs of immigrant students

It is widely accepted that the lack of proficiency in the language of instruction is one of the key factors in limiting academic achievement at school and thus contributing to ESL (Kaukko et al., 2022; Cunningham, 2019) and according to Mateos-Claros et al. (2019) “the problem of linguistic disadvantage distorts educational performance causing a decrease for those students whose mother tongue and culture does not match the official one” (p. 44).

The point here, where culture is mentioned along with mother tongues, is one made by other scholars such as Cunningham (2019). It is that “native” students may suffer from linguistic deprivation as much as those immigrating. In other words, cultural issues arising from poverty, such as a lack of cultural capital due to familial lack of interest in education, limited or no access to books or other forms of culture etc., can be as educationally debilitating as poor language skills in the language of instruction. Regarding the problem of language skills the solutions suggested are naturally and primarily concerned with much greater language supports in schools and communities.

Of particular significance to the standard demands for such inputs on a large scale, Cunningham (2019) argues that “teachers’ attitudes toward children’s languages and cultures have been shown to be instrumental in the development of self-esteem and academic achievement” (p. 283). She argues that as well as more help in the language of the school, we need more intercultural education including references to or opportunities to demonstrate different languages and cultures in the classroom.

## 3.4 Theme 4. Discrimination and prejudice

European research on the impact of discrimination and prejudice on education outcomes and ESL focuses on the way an adolescent can integrate into the mainstream community in which they find themselves and search for their cultural identity and the consequent impact on their success in school. According to Schotte et al. (2018), cultural identity is often construed as a multidimensional construct that captures various elements, including self-categorization, commitment and feelings of attachment to relevant ethnic groups, identity exploration, as well as the importance and salience of the perceived group membership (p. 17). Adolescents from a disadvantaged or migrant background face particular challenges as they try to develop their identity within the mainstream context and culture, which is so often at variance with their own culture.

Doyle and Keane (2019) examined ESL from the perspective of parents of early school leavers in an inner-city local authority housing estate in Ireland living with the challenges of “very significant social and economic marginalization and exclusion” (p. 72). It is a revealing examination of the perceptions of parents and their children of how the marginalized are treated by the education system. Three findings stand out: “(1) feeling let down by school, and (2) being stigmatized being from a ‘disadvantaged’ area, and (3) dealing with life traumas. For the participants, these factors significantly constrained their child/ren in engaging with education” (p. 76). Parents also acknowledged that family trauma and substance abuse, etc. alongside early deaths in their families through violence or substance misuse, naturally had a significant impact on their children and their academic outcomes.

The participants’ core message about their child/ren’s ESL was that “while they valued education and wanted to see their children progress, they were significantly constrained by (a) what they perceived as an unsupportive and discriminatory education system and (b) the human need to prioritize surviving everyday life in their challenging world (over education)” (p. 82). Furthermore, parents felt “let down” by an “unsupportive” and “irrelevant” discriminatory education system” once their child/ren had finally left school early.

However, “having to cope with frequent and significant life traumas, and fighting to survive everyday life in their lived realities, seriously constrained educational engagement” (p. 82). “The impact of life stressors and traumas on people is highly significant, not least on young people at delicate developmental stages who are simultaneously expected to engage with academic demands on a par with pupils who have very different, and supported, life experiences” (p. 82). Most of the parents, according to Doyle and Keane (2019), were consumed with the task of “getting by on a daily basis” and providing for their children, with educational progress taking a backseat. Indeed, they acknowledged that sometimes the priorities of the home and school do not align.

This insight provides us with a visceral image of the impact of poverty on the lives of students and constitutes a backdrop to the research which documents how teachers need to become better educated about the impact of disadvantage and become more informed about the impact of cultural diversity in their classrooms which is focused on in Derrington’s (2007)

and García-Fernández et al. (2021) research. The studies by Spiegler et al. (2018), Fehérvári (2020), Oczlon et al. (2021), and Rodríguez-Izquierdo (2022) also emphasize the impact of teachers' attitudes and prejudices on early school dropout and call for pre and in career professional development.

D'hondt et al. (2016) attributes feelings of discrimination in school to the fact that it is "more difficult to manage others devaluing your cultural background if you have been taught to be proud of it at home." So the prouder a student is of their culture, the more chance there is of them to be "more vulnerable for the negative experience of ethnic teacher discrimination" (p. 1086). Van Caudenberg et al. (2020) also found that many students felt like outsiders in their schools as a result of not being fully welcomed into the dominant white culture of some schools, leading to academic failure, while Wolfgramm et al. (2014) contest that this rejection sensitivity is more heightened if the student is from a culturally distinct home environment. However, the ones who stayed in school, according to Derrington (2007), were also more likely to "participate in extracurricular activities ... coupled with a firm sense of cultural identity of which the students were proud. This apparent sense of belonging to and being able to switch between two cultures, without compromising one's own sense of cultural and familial identity" (p. 365), which all helps to "cultivate bicultural adjustment" and can "help to minimize social isolation in school and lessen the effects and tensions of cultural dissonance" (p. 361).

Derrington's (2007) research also draws on findings from a longitudinal study of Romani Traveler students attending English secondary schools. The analysis of over 400 interviews with 44 Romani Traveler students, their parents and teachers over a 5-year period identified several pull and push factors that impact secondary school engagement and retention. Of these, "cultural dissonance (a result of conflicting expectations between home and school) and social exclusion feature strongly." Students reportedly relied on "maladaptive coping strategies" (mainly fighting) to deal with psychosocial stress and subsequently tended to drop out of school early. These maladaptive strategies are referred to here as "fight (physical and verbal retaliation and non-compliance), flight (self-imposed exclusion) and playing white (passing identity by concealing or denying one's heritage)" (p. 357).

In summary, Derrington (2007) encourages teachers to be more aware of prejudice and racism, as "for schools to be more inclusive, teachers need to develop a greater understanding of the subtle and overt effects of cultural hegemony on the educational engagement of Gypsy Travelers" (p. 356). He argues that an understanding of this concept of cultural hegemony is critical as the dominant culture subtly shapes values, expectations, and practices in ways that marginalize students whose cultural backgrounds differ. This hegemony is not maintained through overt coercion but through the everyday norms of school life, which reinforce particular ideas about behavior, achievement, and belonging, often to the disadvantage of minority or working-class pupils. In this context, cultural hegemony functions to reproduce social inequalities while appearing neutral or "common sense." This finding is supported by Spiegler et al. (2018), who studied Turkish immigrants in Germany that

revealed "distinct trajectories of identity development" (p. 1022). Within this, they "found a higher and stable ethnic identity to be positively linked to motivation and teacher support" (p. 1022).

According to Schotte et al. (2018), cultural identity and adaptation is moderated by specific characteristics of the immigrant groups, such as their immigration histories and levels of acceptance in the mainstream society, as was found in Germany between the Turkish and former Soviet Union, as the dominant culture was more accepting of the Soviet Union migrants (p. 17).

García-Fernández et al. (2021) examined whether teachers' thinking is "prophetic, that is, whether attitudes and actions permeate the students and condition their academic performance" (p. 1). To this end, they analyzed the beliefs of 167 teachers in Spain. Their findings are stark, as they conclude that firstly "the teacher's cognitive architecture harbors the idea that foreign students achieve worse academic results and require more effort and pedagogical help" (p. 7). Furthermore, "teachers are not aware of the power exerted by their beliefs on their students' performance" and that "foreign-origin students present lower performance than their Spanish peers" (p. 7). They conclude that there is a need for teachers to implement an endless training spiral to "permanently enrich their conscience with the largest possible number of fair, logical and ethical reasons" (García-Fernández et al., 2021, p. 7).

In Rodríguez-Izquierdo's (2022) study, which was a part of a larger project focusing on promoting inclusion to combat ESL in Europe, the majority of the teachers appeared to "misrecognise latent relations between school dropout, school actions and teachers' practices/responsibilities" (p. 133), as teachers believe that ESL is "primarily related to student characteristics and traits, family background, and lack of commitment" (p.133). Furthermore, "the school factors, according to which have a significant influence on failure at school, disengagement from school and school dropout were essentially disregarded by teachers" (p. 134).

According to Rodríguez-Izquierdo (2022), "to believe that the student is the cause of their difficulties (the student is the problem) is a misstep that can taint the teacher's perception of students and their needs" (p. 134). To this end, according to Rodríguez-Izquierdo (2022), pre-service and in-service teacher training should consider all the factors that can contribute to ESL to ensure that teachers have in-depth knowledge and skills to engage more profoundly with the complex processes associated with ESL and intercultural education during initial training but continue to be critically reflective on their "latent attitudes and everyday teaching practices that might result from these attitudes" (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2022, p. 134). This focus on "latent attitudes" is important as they force teachers to acknowledge and address the unconscious beliefs that subtly influence their responses to cultural diversity and may perpetuate deficit views despite overt commitments to inclusion.

Fehérvári (2020) also investigated the nature of schools and school climate with 2,555 teachers in schools with the highest dropout risk in their respective regions of Hungary and concluded that teachers' beliefs that "they and their schools play an important role in preventing dropout" was significantly influenced by the school climate. "In schools where the climate was seen as more positive, where teacher-student relations were good and the teaching staff shared common pedagogical values,

the respondents felt that they had a great impact on fighting dropout” (p. 152). [Oczlon et al. \(2021\)](#) research consisting of 700 adolescents in Austria with an immigrant background from 10 to 16 years also found that “Students’ perceptions of a classroom atmosphere characterized by a teachers’ interest in and learning about diverse cultural backgrounds and relations translates into a higher academic self-concept of immigrant students and thus, indirectly, into higher academic achievement” ([Oczlon et al., 2021](#), p. 71).

[Wolffgramm et al. \(2014\)](#) examined the relation between the heightened vigilance associated with ethnically based rejection sensitivity and academic achievement in a sample of 936 immigrant students in Germany and Switzerland and concluded that “ethnically based rejection sensitivity is particularly detrimental to integration as it likely operates as a vicious circle: The activation of rejection expectation related to one’s ethnic membership leads to vigilant scanning for possible rejection, which in turn heightens the readiness to perceive rejection in ambiguous situations” ([Wolffgramm et al., 2014](#), p. 313). Finally, [Van Caudenberg et al. \(2020\)](#) draw on data collected over a 2-year period (2015–2016) in the framework of the large-scale European research project “Reducing ESL in Europe” (RESL.eu) in Belgium Flanders of which the findings reveal a recurring theme involving the need to feel a sense of school belonging if “migrant origin youths from lower income families will successfully stay in school” (p. 441).

### 3.5 Theme 5. Cultural norms around gender and education

The impact of culture and cultural norms have long been recognized as having a significant impact on female participation in education and the critique of the impact of gendered educational priorities is one that continues to influence research in the area of ESL. In addition to this, there is also a smaller, yet no less important, literature on the impact of culture and cultural norms on the experience of males in the educational space and the manner in which this impacts on their continuation in formal schooling up to and beyond mandated ages. In this section we will seek to explore both of these realities with a view to examining points of similarity and points of divergence.

Cultural norms concerning gender and education reflect broader beliefs about the traditional role of women and girls in society, such as the belief that women should focus on domestic responsibilities rather than education and careers. These beliefs can inhibit students from continuing their studies and completing their schooling. Several sub-themes of this aspect of culture can be found in the literature, which are not entirely different from general perceptions of gender and education, such as: culture and gender stereotypes ([Khattab and Modood, 2018](#)); the availability of opportunities and access to education; discrimination ([Lavrentsova and Valkov, 2019](#)); a lack of role models in immediate and extended families or communities ([Bayón-Calvo et al., 2021](#); [Mäkelä and Kalalahti, 2020](#)).

[Hiller \(2014\)](#) provides an historical perspective on gender stereotypes and argues that historical situations generate the cultural norms concerning genders and take very long to change.

For example, in the agrarian past, economic activities required physical strength; therefore, men and boys were considered more productive than women and girls. This norm of relying on men for economic development perpetuated an assumption that “male education fosters economic development through the accumulation of human capital” (p. 457). Consequently, boys became the first to receive education, while parental investment in girls’ education was delayed.

In some communities, this practice can still be observed, as described in [Alvarez-Roldan et al. \(2018\)](#) study concerning Spanish Roma students, whose strong cultural norms influenced how families, gender and marriage are viewed. Hence, unequal gender expectations often result in older girls caring for younger siblings when parents engage in seasonal work, or entering early marriages, both of which hinder the educational aspirations of Roma girls during adolescence and contribute to their disengagement from schooling. [Lavrentsova and Valkov \(2019\)](#) also observe that where traditional gender roles limit Roma girls’ access to education, their inconsistent attitude toward the value of education and their emotional connection to school are influenced by the social exclusion and stigmatization they face from others. Here the concept of social exclusion is important in that it highlights the systematic marginalization of individuals from full participation in educational structures in a manner that alienates them and contributes to reduced educational and social outcomes. Therefore, ESL cannot be solely attributed to their cultural norms; rather, the discrimination that they experience at school plays a significant role in this. Moreover, [Van Den Bergh et al. \(2022\)](#) interviewed support workers for migration and refugee background students to explore the reasons for their early dropout. Amongst a host of other factors, support workers strongly emphasized the impact of “culturally-inspired gender roles” on educational progression and ESL. Several features that support workers mentioned included culturally prioritizing marriage and starting a family over education, especially in the case of female students. Girls and boys can also be expected to adopt certain careers that traditionally align with their gender roles. Such norms often restrict students from following their own interests and passions, thus exerting pressure on their academic pursuits. These differential family expectations perpetuate the unequal treatment of boys and girls in their educational journeys. [Borgna and Struffolino \(2017\)](#) also emphasize the crucial role that gender plays in schooling decisions, educational expectations and eventually in learning outcomes. [Mäkelä and Kalalahti’s \(2020\)](#) study on migrant girls found similar results: in certain cases, a girl’s chosen career path was viewed as culturally inappropriate, leaving her with no option but to align her career goals with parental expectations.

These culturally grounded gender expectations not only shape career aspirations but also contribute to different patterns of school engagement and early school ESL among boys and girls. [Drudy et al. \(2005\)](#), quoted in [O’Connell and Freeney, 2011](#)) also maintain that amongst other economic and social reasons for ESL, boys leave school due to the lack of role models to emulate because the Irish teaching workforce is predominantly female. By association, it can be assumed that since in some migrant and minority communities, girls do not have women in their families who did well in education or who are pursuing careers, they may feel less motivated to study and leave school. Conversely, [Khattab and Modood \(2018\)](#) found



TABLE 2 Cultural factors and ESL comparison table.

Cultural factor	Key stakeholders	Core issues	Examples from review	Suggested interventions
Cultural values, beliefs and behaviors	Students, parents	Aspirations vs. expectations, parental engagement, capital (social, cultural, economic)	Roma parents navigating education (Nguyen Luu et al., 2019); Muslim student trajectories (Khatab and Modood, 2018)	Parental engagement strategies; building cultural capital
Culture and social barriers	Students, teachers, school leadership	Sense of belonging, cultural incongruence, social exclusion	Exclusion in Flemish schools (Van Caudenberg et al., 2020); traveler students (OECD, 2020)	Diverse teacher workforce; culturally responsive citizenship education
Culture and academic barriers	Policy makers, School leaders, Teachers	Rigid curricula, assessment norms, institutional inflexibility, language support	Curricular rigidity (Schmitsek, 2022); teacher attitudes (de Castro and Pereira, 2019)	Flexible pathways; responsive curricula; language support
Discrimination and prejudice	Students, teachers, peers	Ethnic identity conflicts, stereotyping, deficit assumptions by teachers	Teacher biases (García-Fernández et al., 2021); Romani traveler coping strategies (Derrington, 2007)	Anti-bias training; promotion of bicultural identity; inclusive school climate
Cultural norms around gender and education	Students (esp. girls and boys), parents, community	Gendered role expectations, early marriage, labor market pull, access inequality	Roma girls' early school exit (Alvarez-Roldan et al., 2018); Muslim girls' HE progression (Khatab and Modood, 2018)	Role models; gender-sensitive pedagogy; delaying marriage expectations

that Muslim girls in Britain, despite the general perceptions of their religio-cultural background, tend to outperform Muslim boys, as do the girls in the majority group. They seem to be assimilated into the UK's educational cultural pattern. The researchers are of the view that this is primarily due to second-generation migrant girls who are born and raised in the UK and have undergone a cultural transformation, unlike their mothers. Instead, these girls may be more inclined to adopt a robust Islamic identity, which helps them overcome obstacles from their local and familial environment when making life choices and planning for the future (p. 256).

Cultural norms not only restrict the girls' academic aspirations but also pull the boys out of schools where across Europe, as in 2024, the proportion of boys' ESL (10.9%) is higher than the girls' (7.7%; Eurostat, 2025). Borgna and Struffolino (2017) suggest that the labor market culture in which boys have more formal and informal employment opportunities than girls leads to a higher likelihood of boys dropping out of school. In contrast, since young women face challenging competition from young men, especially in terms of access to low-skilled jobs, they tend to pursue higher qualifications to access better employment prospects. O'Connell and Freaney (2011) refer to "the pull of the labor market" as being one of the reasons for leaving school amongst male students. Finally, it is also worth noting that girls, especially from migration and minority backgrounds, are more likely to face discrimination and harassment (Khatab and Modood, 2018), hence making the learning environments unsafe and hostile and resulting in low academic achievement and ESL (Wolfgramm et al., 2014).

## 4 Interplay between cultural factors and other social determinants of underachievement

ESL is an immensely complicated and difficult subject and there are no simple answers or solutions to counteracting ESL (Table 2). Indeed, according to Van Den Berghe et al. (2022) "school dropout is increasingly seen as a complex, cumulative, long-term

process of school disengagement that is influenced by a myriad of interconnected risk factors" (p. 3).

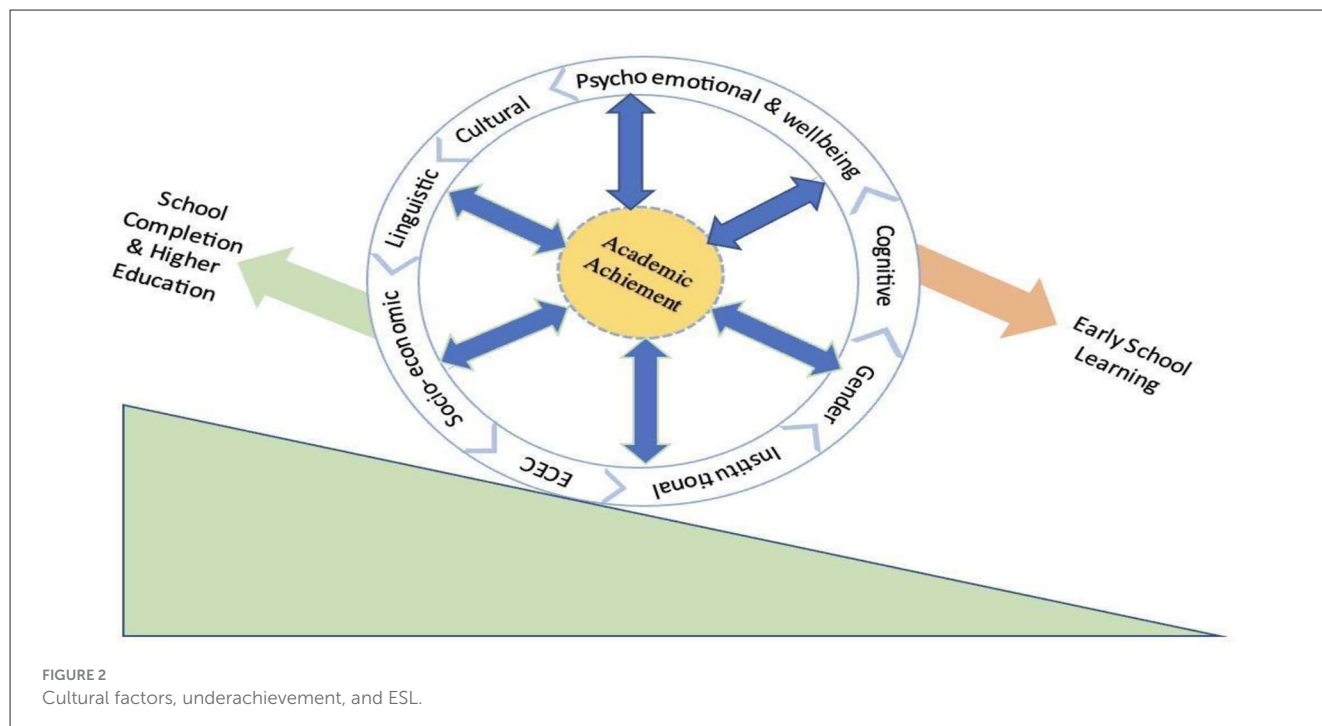
Numerous factors have been identified for further investigation such as institutional, socioeconomic, cognitive, cultural, linguistic, gender, psycho-emotional factors and the wellbeing and quality of Early Childhood Education and Care. Research generally classifies them into three large groups: family resources, school-related factors and individual factors (Doyle and Keane, 2019; Fehérvári, 2020; Traag and Van der Velden, 2011). Within these classifications, there are many sub-themes. For example, Brown et al. (2021) suggest that no single factor is a predominant contributor to ESL; it is "the cumulative result of negative experiences, but low achievement is the most significant" (p. 745); a sub-theme of cognitive ability or institutional factors. Van Caudenberg et al. (2020) also emphasize social relations and school belongingness as major factors, which can be sub-themes of institutional factors. Miulescu and Ruth (2021) also contend that "personal challenges and family circumstances" are strong predictors of early leaving in Romanian culture (p. 784).

Indeed, most of the research insists on accounting for all ESL risk factors to achieve an accurate evaluation of the issue (Miulescu and Ruth, 2021). For instance, a student from a low socioeconomic background who also faces discrimination due to their cultural and linguistic background may be more likely to experience psycho-emotional challenges, which can contribute to lack of motivation, disengagement with school and ESL. Similarly, students' cognitive and learning ability, gender expectations to follow certain education trajectories, and institutional resources to support struggling students so that they can have better outcomes can mitigate student attrition.

Each social determinant can contribute to ESL on its own but cannot be the sole determining cause of ESL. The combined effect of multiple determinants over a period of time can create a much stronger likelihood of underachievement and ESL. The following wheel diagram illustrates this point (Figure 2).

The cultural factors that we have discussed in this paper as causing or preventing ESL indicate a clear overlap between the two sets of factors explained in the European Commission,





European Education and Culture Executive Agency (2014)—those relating to individual and family circumstances, as well as those relating to the education system. As evident from Section 4 of this paper, these factors encompass all other social determinants, whether they are structural, institutional, individual, or familial. The literature frequently refers to cultural factors as the issues faced by migration background and minority students (Bembich, 2019; Wolfgramm et al., 2014). Several conceptual labels such as social exclusion, adaptive strategies, parents' and students' aspirations, school adjustment, parental involvement and teachers' expectations emerged during the literature review. These conceptual labels are not just relevant to minority, migration background or refugee students. They are equally applicable to students coming from majority cultures. While Bembich (2019), in her Bioecological Framework of Early Leaving, stresses the need to be cognizant of the cultural dimension for foreign-born students, it is equally important to be aware of the culture of majority students to avoid cultural dissonance (Derrington, 2007), ensure inclusion and remove barriers to learning.

## 5 Policies, gaps and solutions

During this literature review we identified several ESL reduction policies and strategies discussed in the literature across Ireland, Germany, Romania, and Spain (Banks and Smyth, 2021; Bayón-Calvo et al., 2021; Miulescu and Ruth, 2021). We used the Educational Council's recommendations for a three-pronged strategy as our guideline to review the effectiveness of these policies or strategies to address the cultural factors to combat ESL that includes the following steps in developing policies or strategies: (1) Prevention measures that address root causes before ESL occurs; (2) Intervention measures that support students through difficulties

by improving education quality and providing targeted supports; (3) Compensation measures that provide alternative pathways for those who have already left education and training early to obtain qualifications (European Commission, European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2014, p. 51).

### 5.1 Policy approaches targeting culture

During the literature review, we encountered several references to policies that are meant to tackle ESL (Banks and Smyth, 2021; Bayón-Calvo et al., 2021; Miulescu and Ruth, 2021). The policies referred to in these studies are not exclusively meant to address the cultural factors leading to ESL but instead focus on reducing school dropout rate, enhancing student engagement and/or providing new opportunities to achieve skills and qualifications to be a productive member of the labor force as recommended by the European Council (2021) to all students who are potentially at risk of ESL. This failure to disaggregate the discrete variables that are combined in national policy interventions makes it difficult to indicate causal links between specific sub-themes when examining impact. However, it is possible to explore the overall impact of policy choices, both positive and negative, on the global rates of ESL and to infer from this the need to examine, as is proposed in this study, the individual thematic elements that influence these policies. Against this background, the can examine some of the interventions across European countries that have had quite different global impacts.

Banks and Smyth (2021) mention three programmes successfully operating in Ireland, encompassing all three aspects of preventing ESL The School Completion Programme focuses on providing every form of support to children or young people

to keep them engaged in full-time education and the most recent research by the [Smyth et al. \(2025\)](#) highlighted “the value of the programme as a vital support for vulnerable children and young people” (p. 10). The Youthreach Programme provides various opportunities for early school leavers to re-engage with education, and recent research highlights the value of the programme in supporting young people facing multiple challenges, while also identifying areas for improvement—particularly in enhancing their personal and social skills, such as communication and organizational abilities ([Smyth et al., 2019](#), p. 214).

Finally, the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme is designed to reduce the disparities in education participation and engagement by offering supplementary resources and support to schools serving socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. The DEIS programme enables these schools to have smaller class sizes in primary education, provides access to literacy and numeracy support and offers additional assistance through designated staff in promoting parental involvement (p. 3). According to the latest evaluation of the effectiveness of the home school community liaison scheme by the [Department of Education Inspectorate \(2024\)](#) “the HSCL coordinator provides two different types of intervention: interventions designed to build relationships between the school and the parents; and community-based interventions, which focus on identifying and building relationships with the local community” (p. 4). Currently, access to the HSCL scheme is available to all schools in the DEIS programme where a teacher within each school works full time in the role as liaison.

When attempting to explore the impact of the different elements of the DEIS programme, the [Department of Education Inspectorate \(2024\)](#) explicitly identifies the engagement of the HSCL with the cultural realities of end users as being an important variable stating that “The focus of the role is to improve the attendance, participation and retention of children in school.... Participation refers to the active involvement of a child or young person in their education and is closely linked to the culture and environment of the school and the extent to which children and young people experience success in their learning” (p. 3). The evaluation concluded that “The evaluation concluded that “The links between the schools and their local communities were effective across all schools” (p. 31). Supporting this assessment, [Walsh et al. \(2022\)](#), suggest that “A culture of support for parental involvement was in evidence across all schools involved in this study and associated stakeholders” (p. 87).

In summary, it is arguable that these measures have, in an aggregated sense, contributed to the low rate of early school leaving in Ireland. By 2023, the ESL rate had fallen to just 4%, making it the third lowest among EU member states ([Eurostat, 2025](#)).

The Ministry of Education and Scientific Research in Romania, in 2015, according to [Miulescu and Ruth \(2021\)](#) have also developed a multi-faceted strategy to reduce ESL. The strategy covers a wide range of dimensions to deal with ESL including, the revision of the national curriculum, training of education professionals (teachers, principals, counselors, practice tutors, inspectors, etc.), research, financial aids for different categories (students and parents, teachers, school, etc.), tutorial

actions and individualized student and parent support measures and development of the educational infrastructure (p. 769). Nevertheless, due to the inefficiency of the Romanian Integrated Education Information System to provide multi-purpose real-time data, the authors believe the decision-making at various governmental levels is somewhat constrained. This is also one of the reasons that the ESL targets set for 2020 revealed that the 2015 strategy, despite being comprehensive, could not achieve the expected results. Romania still has the highest ESL rate in Europe.

In contrast, [Miulescu and Ruth \(2021\)](#) describes measures taken in almost all German states since the early 2000s to identify and take actions to prevent ESL. Within this, they mentioned the establishment of “ReBUZ centers” in the Bremen region. These centers have a team of professionals consisting of educational pedagogues, social pedagogues, psychologists, social workers and other specialists such as speech therapists. The centers provide services for the schools located in their local coverage area in close collaboration with school staff and through parental involvement (p. 768).

[Bayón-Calvo et al. \(2021\)](#) highlight three important educational reforms that are focused on improving the quality of education and ESL in Spain: “Organic Education Law” (LOE) in 2006, “New organic Act for the Improvement of the Quality of Education” (LOMCE) in 2013, and Plan to Reduce ESL (PRESL) in 2008 that was later updated in 2015 to align with the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in the field of education and training. These reforms encompass various measures such as career guidance, education pathways flexibility, second-chance education, language support, and data collection and monitoring. The authors particularly praise the Basic Vocation Training programme, launched under the LOMCE Act in 2013, as an alternative and second-chance opportunity for young people to undertake vocational education as early as 15 years and assert that the Spanish education system being decentralized leaves the responsibility of the implementation of the policy measures to regional education departments. They referred categorically to the Catalonia region for successfully implementing these measures.

The policy measures in these four countries are undoubtedly responsive to the Educational Council’s recommendations for tackling ESL. In the cases of Spain, Germany and Romania, the policy measures are meant to address the cultural factors of ESL to some extent through, for instance, language support, curriculum review and psychosocial support for at-risk students. Beyond Economics, the programmes implemented in Ireland do not directly address linguistic support for students whose home language differs from the language of instruction or whose language proficiency is affected by the lack of cultural capital at home. Similarly, no reference is made to adapting the curriculum to ascertain “pedagogy for inclusive education” ([Bademci et al., 2020](#)).

## 5.2 Gaps identified in existing research

Previous research studies have not accounted for the entirety of the cultural factors that either contribute to or prevent student

ESL. This paper is a pioneering effort to provide a comprehensive perspective concerning cultural factors. Furthermore, previous research has predominantly concentrated on one vulnerable group, such as Roma, travelers, migrants or refugees, and explored the issues related to culture and ESL in their specific context. However, limited research has been conducted to evaluate the opportunities available to these groups within their societal context and how these opportunities compare to those of majority groups. Within these minority groups, there are several sub-groups who are to be studied for their coping mechanisms and resilience. [Khattab and Modood \(2018\)](#) conducted a study that focused on Muslims students from Pakistan, Bangladesh and India in England, while [Spiegler et al. \(2018\)](#) investigated Turks settled in Germany. Nevertheless, there are many other groups, such as Africans, Arabs, Eastern Europeans, whose push and pull factors need to be explored, as highlighted by [Traag and Van der Velden \(2011\)](#). The topic of interactions amongst the various minority groups, between minority and majority groups, and how interactions can potentially serve as a support system to prevent ESL, remains relatively unexplored in the literature.

### 5.3 Potential solutions for reducing the impact of culture on underachievement

Research studies have not only identified the issues around culture that cause underachievement and ESL but have also offered solutions to mitigate their impact. [Bembich \(2019\)](#) stresses the importance of helping teachers “to develop specific professional competences to support students to overcome the difficulties they face” with respect to “the challenge of adapting to their new social context, adopting different cultural patterns, and at the same time continuing to maintain those of shared by their family of origin” (p. 62). To develop culturally and socially responsive pedagogical practices, teachers should be trained to recognize and respect cultural differences and tailor their instruction to the needs of diverse students. Several studies ([Drăghicescu et al., 2021](#); [Kaukko et al., 2022](#); [Miulescu and Ruth, 2021](#)) have highlighted the need to revise and adapt curricula to make them relevant to the needs of all cohorts of students to keep them motivated and engaged in learning.

[Lamonica et al. \(2020\)](#), [Miulescu and Ruth \(2021\)](#), and [Montero-Sieburth and Turcatti \(2022\)](#) all highlight the importance of fostering inclusive school environments that enhance school belongingness amongst students and eradicate othering. [Bademci et al. \(2020\)](#) contend that facilitating teachers’ contributions to an academic environment in which children at risk of school exclusion can be supported to achieve higher levels of educational attainment is crucial. [Van Den Berghe et al. \(2022\)](#) emphasize the need to instill cultural pluralism in schools that recognizes diversity as an asset, rather than a liability, and seeks to create an ethos that appreciates and values differences. Such an environment acknowledges and respects the differences amongst students and encourages mutual understanding and cooperation between them, while also promoting equal opportunities for every student regardless of their cultural backgrounds.

Several studies (for example [Dollmann and Weißmann, 2020](#); [Hartas, 2016](#); [Nguyen Luu et al., 2019](#)) also acknowledge the role of parents, families and communities in increasing student retention rates. Section 3.1.3 highlights the link between parents’ expectations and students’ aspirations, as well as the importance of parents’ values, beliefs and attitudes toward their children’s success or failure in education. Schools, by involving parents and communities in the education process, can bridge the gap between home and school expectations and can help students understand the relevance of education to their lives. Finally, [Hartas \(2016\)](#) and [Schmitsek \(2022\)](#) highlight the importance and availability of alternative pathways and second-chance provisions for students to bring early school leavers back to education and training.

## 6 Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this paper indicates that cultural factors exert a more persistent and enduring influence on ESL than individual, family, or institutional factors. This is because cultural norms and values shape, each of these domains that inform the beliefs, expectations, and behaviors of all relevant stakeholders. The various aspects of culture presented in this paper encompass almost all other social determinants, including SES, language, psycho emotional wellbeing, gender, institutional and cognitive factors viewed through the lens of culture. Cultural factors exert more comprehensive and overarching influences than any other social determinant. Furthermore, no social determinant of underachievement and ESL operates in isolation. In the context of schools, the term “culture” does not solely refer to the culture of students with a minority or migration background but encompasses the culture of all cohorts of students. As schools become more ethnically and culturally diverse, the concept of cultural pluralism becomes increasingly relevant. Cultural dissonance, which can arise from differing expectations between the home and school environment, can also be one of the significant contributing factors to ESL ([Derrington, 2007](#)).

In conclusion as previously stated throughout this review, ESL is a complex phenomenon and is typically not an abrupt or unexpected occurrence; rather, it is an outcome of interactions between a multitude of factors and the culmination of a long process of disengagement from school that can be traced back to “early warning signs” ([Bayón-Calvo et al., 2021](#); [Miulescu and Ruth, 2021](#); [Tarabini et al., 2019](#)). In fact, by recognizing and interpreting these warning signs at an early stage, it is possible to put in place measures to prevent ESL ([Miulescu and Ruth, 2021](#)). However, solely focusing on economic factors relating to ESL yields an incomplete understanding of ESL and is a plausible contributing factor as to why ESL varies across countries. Indeed, this review highlights the fact that cultural factors emerge as primary and inextricably interwoven influences on students’ educational trajectories and disengagement. It is therefore essential to move beyond economics and to recognize that cultural context is central to both understanding and addressing ESL.

## Author contributions

MB: Writing – original draft, Investigation, Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. SG: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation. JO'H: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Conceptualization. GM: Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Conceptualization, Writing – original draft. AC: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. MM: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Conceptualization.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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