



School drop-out/early leaving from education and training: diachronic and comparative analysis of conceptualisation and operational definition in Europe and Italy

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Abstract

The political-institutional and academic literature shows a lack of unambiguous positions on the phenomenon of school drop out/early leaving from education and training, both with regard to its conceptualisation (nominal definition) and its operational definition (properties, unit of analysis, reference time of the detected condition, institutions involved).

Considering that the nominal definition and the operational definition of a social phenomenon assume relevance because its descriptive analysis and its monitoring are based on these elements, expressing its significance (prevalence) on a given territory, but also and above all because they serve to help take decisions to solve practical problems, in this specific case, relating to the design and planning of measures aimed at combating it, the contribution aims to help disambiguate the meaning associated with the different expressions and indicators used in the European and Italian political-institutional contexts.

The contribution proposes a diachronic and comparative analysis of a number of European (European Council; European Commission; Council of European Union) and Italian (Ministry of Education) political-institutional documents considering the period from 2000 - the year of the Lisbon Strategy approval, which focuses on the role of education for Europe's social and economic growth - to the first half of 2023.

Based on the salient aspects observed from the analysis of the documents, the contribution traces two perspectives of conceptualisation and detection of the phenomenon: the “*ex post* perspective” in the European context, the “*in itinere* perspective” in the Italian context.

Keywords: *school drop out; ESL; ELET; European political-institutional documents; Italian political-institutional documents.*

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1. Introduction

The contribution aims to reflect on the conceptualisation (nominal definition) and operational definition (properties and units of detection) (Lucchini 2018) of the phenomenon of school drop out/early school leaving in the European and Italian political-institutional “discourse”.

The nominal definition and operational definition of a social phenomenon are important because these elements are the basis for its descriptive analysis and monitoring, which express its significance (prevalence) in a given territory, but also and above all because they serve to help make decisions to solve practical problems, in this case relating to the design and planning of measures to counter it.

Beginning a reflection on the topic just outlined already forces one to face a choice: *what expression should be used to express the meaning of this phenomenon? School dropout? Early School Leaving (ESL)? Early Leaving from Education and Training (ELET)?* Expressions that, moreover, open up for further investigation and broaden the spectrum of categories attributable to the phenomenon: think, for example, of the expression NEET-*Not in Education, Employment or Training*, the term *truant* (school evasion) and so on.

This question introduces the “kaleidoscopic” nature and the complexity of the analysis of this phenomenon, also due to the multiplicity of causes and effects that are articulated in it (Autorità Garante per l’Infanzia e l’Adolescenza 2022). This characterisation cannot but also be linked to the different expressions used in political-institutional documents and academic literature to define it. Therefore, the intent of this reflection diverges from those who use the different terms - such as early school leaving, dropout, early withdrawal, attrition from high school, and student elimination - interchangeably (De Witte et al. 2013b).

Disambiguating the meaning associated with the different expressions on the topic is an intention that certainly parallels that pursued by other authors already a decade ago. For instance, Estêvão and Álvares (2014) pursued the aim of discussing the definition of school dropout and the challenges posed - for research and public policy - by defining school dropout in terms of ESL, recalling the statistical indicator used by Eurostat. The authors distinguished between *formal* definitions (based on the concept of compulsory education, thus linked to age and time spent in the education system) and *functional* definitions (which consider employability and occupational performance linked to the level of education achieved) of school dropout and classified the ESL indicator among the functional ones.

Some have compared the conceptualisations and indicators of the phenomenon used in the international context. Ross and Leathwood (2013), for instance, analysed the conceptualisation of ESL by comparing the European context (which refers to 18-24 year olds who have finished no more than lower secondary education - the compulsory levels - but who may not have obtained any qualifications), the US (where the expression refers to those who have not completed a high school diploma) and the OECD (which indicates 20-24 year olds with education below upper secondary education level). In a similar vein, Santagati (2015) conducted a comparative analysis of school dropping out in Europe and the OECD area, analysing three main indicators, namely ELET, NEET and low achievers in reading, mathematics and science without an adequate level of basic skills.

De Witte et al. stressed the difference between two indicators used by Eurostat – “early leavers from formal education [only]” (ELFE), and “early leavers from education and training” (ELET) - although both “measure the size of yearly cohorts leaving secondary

school ‘without any qualification’” (2013a: p.6). Dwyer and Wyn (2011) stated that the term “early leaving” is more neutral than the term “dropout”.

Other authors have pointed out the increased complexity of the description of the phenomenon when the multiple national definitions are also considered: Vogt, for instance - recalling authoritative overviews of the variety of national definitions of dropout/ESL, such as that of Lamb and Markussen (2011) and that of the European Commission (2014) - states that alongside a basic consensus on the meaning of ESL/dropout, “there is considerable variety in definitions and measurement procedures” (2018: p. 284).

The academic literature also sheds light on the lack of unambiguous positions. In this regard, Besozzi (2017) recalls the debate between positions that consider school dropout as an all-encompassing term, referring to forms of irregularity and or deviation from linear and continuous paths, and positions that, instead, refer only to the exit from the education system. The author, sharing the first position, speaks of it in terms of “[...] a complex and variegated phenomenon that includes everything that is 'lost' - temporarily or permanently - in the course of evaluating the outcomes of the school learning process” (*ibidem*: p. 205, footnote 10), outlining it in terms of “*discontinuity of paths* (delays, slowdowns, early exits) with respect to the regularity envisaged by the regulations and curricula” (*ibidem* 2017: pp. 205-206). The expression school drop-out describes the phenomenon according to which part of the student population does not reach the educational goals it sets itself (Colombo 2010: p. 23), including different indicators of a bumpy pathway, “*evasion of the obligation, dropping out of upper secondary school, dropping out of the obligation without obtaining the qualification, repetitions, flunking out, repeated absences and irregular attendance, delays with respect to the regular age, low performance, fulfilment of the obligation with poor quality of the results*” (Ghione 2005: pp. 51-2).

This introductory framework announces another aspect of the complexity of defining the phenomenon, which suggests another question: *is it necessary to conceptualise, describe and monitor school dropout/early school leaving with reference to a pathway, the outcome of a pathway or both?*

Within the frame of reference just outlined and with the aim of helping to disambiguate some of the expressions mentioned above, the contribution sets itself the objective of analysing the evolution of conceptualisations and operational definitions on the subject of school dropout/early school leaving, presenting a diachronic analysis of some European and Italian political-institutional documents from 2000 - i.e. from the year of the Lisbon Strategy approval, which highlights the role of education for the social and economic growth of Europe - to the first half of 2023.

The first part presents the conceptualisation and operational definition of phenomenon in some European political-institutional documents; in the same vein, the second part looks at the Italian national level, analysing the policy documents produced by the Ministry of Education; the third part, on the basis of the salient aspects highlighted in the first and second parts, presents a comparison between the conceptualisations and operational definitions found in the European and Italian contexts. The fourth and final part concludes by hinting at application implications.

2. Conceptualisation and operational definition of the phenomenon in the European context

The analysis of the conceptualisation and definition of the phenomenon in European policy documents was carried out on the documents summarised in Table 1, which refer to the

Lisbon (European Council 2000), Europe 2020 (European Commission 2010) and European Education Area-EEA 2030 (Council of the European Union 2021) strategies and the Recommendations of the Council of the European Union, i.e. the Council Recommendation of 28 June 2011 on policies to reduce early school leaving and the Council Recommendation of 28 November 2022 on Pathways to School Success.

The analysis showed that, with the exception of the Lisbon Strategy, which provides a definition in the absence of a “label” for the phenomenon, the documents analysed use two expressions to describe the phenomenon (the people who embody it): *early school leaving* (leavers) and *early leaving* (leavers) *from education and training*.

Table no.1. Conceptualisation and operational definition
of early leaving from education and training in the European context

Document	Conceptualisation and operational definition
European Council (2000) <i>Lisbon 2000 Strategy</i>	The number of 18 to 24 year olds with only lower-secondary level education who are not in further education and training
European Commission (2010) <i>Europe 2020 Strategy</i>	- Early school leavers (leaving) - The drop out rate
Council of the European Union (2011)	-The term ‘early school leaving’ is used in connection with those who leave education and training with only lower secondary education or less, and who are no longer in education and training.
Council of the European Union (2021) <i>European Education Area (EEA) 2030 Strategy</i>	- Early leaving from education and training - Eurostat (EU-LFS): the share of the population aged 18-24 with only lower secondary education or less and no longer in education or training. - Early school leaving
Council of the European Union (2022)	- Share of early leavers from education and training - The rate of early leavers - Early school leaving

Conceptually, the Lisbon Strategy, the Europe 2020 Strategy and the 2011 Council Recommendation refer to the expression “early school leavers”. The first and the third document, unlike the second, each report a definition of the phenomenon that allows one to observe some differences attributable to the condition they describe: the Lisbon Strategy with this expression refers to persons who have *only* attained *lower-secondary level education* and *who are not in further education and training*; the 2011 Council Recommendation refers to those who leave education and training with *only lower secondary education or less*, and *who are no longer in education and training*.

In the EEA 2030 Strategy, the expression “early leaving from education and training” appears, although this expression has already been included in other previous documents. For its definition, the document refers to the statistical indicator ELET used by Eurostat: this

indicator expressing “the share of the population *aged 18-24 with only lower secondary education or less and no longer in education or training*”.

Therefore, it is noted that the naming of this indicator brings together the salient aspects already identified in the Lisbon Strategy and the 2011 Council Recommendation. Furthermore, the term “early leaving from education and training” does not entirely replace the previous term.

The 2022 Council Recommendation uses several expressions - share of early leavers from education and training, the rate of early leavers, early school leaving - without providing a disambiguation, a nominal or operational definition of them. The lack of the phenomenon definition seems to highlight a nominal convention now established on the use of these expressions by the various political-institutional actors, expressions that - as we have seen - now appear to be assimilated.

Since the different documents analysed have set and/or referred to different desirable levels of the phenomenon to be reached in predefined time frames (*benchmarks*), the analysis conducted here extends to the statistical indicator used by Eurostat, which is, moreover, referred to in the EEA 2030 Strategy.

In the Eurostat *Glossary* (2022) the expression “early leaver from education and training” replaces the expression “early school leaver”, and the statistical indicator ELET refers to two conditions, which are described in detail with reference to the level of education attained and non-participation in education and training.

Specifically, Eurostat refers to young people between the ages of 18 and 24:

- whose highest level of education or training attained is at most lower secondary education;
- who received no education or training (neither formal nor non-formal) in the four weeks preceding the survey.

The level of education attained - at most lower secondary education - is defined with reference to ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education), specifying that for lower secondary education the indicator assumes:

- from ISCED 1997 (UNESCO 2006) until 2013, education levels 0-3C short (i.e. 0 - Pre-primary education; 1 - Primary education or first stage of basic education; 2 - Lower secondary or second stage of basic education; 3C- short - programmes giving access to labour market, level 4 programmes or other level 3 programmes);
- by ISCED 2011 (UNESCO 2012), considered from 2014 onwards, education levels 0-2 (i.e. 0 - Early childhood education; 1 - Primary education; 2 - Lower secondary education).

Furthermore, it is noted that the indicator used by Eurostat temporally delimits non-involvement in education and training activities, i.e. in the four weeks prior to the survey.

Overall, therefore, the ELET indicator - which, in fact, describes the prevalence of the phenomenon in Europe by comparing the situation in the member States - refines the definition of the term “early leaver from education and training” in the documents, showing:

- a contraction of the education discriminating level from ISCED 1997 level 0-3C short, i.e. an upper secondary education level, to ISCED 2011 level 0-2, i.e. a lower secondary education level, thus excluding any level 3 programmes that “are typically designed to complete secondary education in preparation for tertiary education or provide skills relevant to employment, or both” (UNESCO 2012: p. 38);
- a time reference of the condition of inactivity in education and training that makes the description and monitoring of the phenomenon more dynamic.

Finally, the nature of this indicator is noteworthy: it is taken from the EU Labour Force Survey (LFS), which aims to obtain information on the labour market and related issues (Eurostat 2021).

3. Conceptualisation and operational definition of the phenomenon in the Italian context

The analysis of the conceptualisation and operational definition of the phenomenon in the Italian context has considered the political-institutional documents produced by the Ministry of Education (which has changed its name over time) from 2000 to the first half of 2023 (tab. 2), assimilating the time span of the analysis to that considered for the European level, i.e. since the approval of the Lisbon Strategy.

On the whole, Italian documents conceptualise the phenomenon with the expression “school drop-out” (more appropriate translation to the Italian expression “*dispersione scolastica*”, i.e. school dispersion), as can be seen from most of their titles. However, the conceptual definition of the phenomenon appears to differ from year to year: it has been observed, in fact, that 1) some documents give a more extensive and articulate description of the meaning of the phenomenon; 2) others, on the other hand, present circumscribed and more concise descriptions.

The first grouping includes the ministerial documents (MPI 2000; MPI 2006 and MIM 2023) which define early school leaving as a:

- “complex phenomenon” encompassing different aspects (e.g. non-entry; evasion of compulsory education; drop-outs; leaving compulsory education without qualification; repetition; flunking out; irregular attendance; delay with respect to regular age; formal fulfilment of compulsory education; poor quality of outcomes);
- “systemic phenomenon”, since it affects not only the subjects but also the entire education and training system and its quality.

The first two documents clarify the meaning of the phenomenon by also resorting to the Latin etymology of the Italian term “*dispersione scolastica*” (which in this contribution is translated as school dropout), linking them to the verb “*dispargère*” (composed of *dis* and *spargère*), which recalls scattering things here and there without a predefined order, squandering, leading back to the dissipation of intelligence, resources and the potential of young people.

These documents emphasise that “school dropout” denotes the irregularity of the curriculum, of the course, the discontinuity of the courses with respect to the regulatory provisions (regulations and curricula).

In the second grouping, it is possible to consider ministerial documents produced from 2011 to 2021, which explain school dropout in terms of drop-out, early exit from the education and training system, drop-out during the year, in the transition from one year to the next and from one cycle to the next.

However, the Minister of Education recently (MIM 2023) clarified that “school drop-out” and “early school leaving” “are actually distinct situations”: the first denotes “the discontinuity of pathways with respect to the regularity envisaged by regulations and curricula”, taking on a character both explicit (failure to enrol at school, repeating school years, failure and dropping out) and implicit (the qualification obtained does not correspond to the attainment of adequate skills); the second - i.e. dropping out - represents the outcome of a cumulative process of disengagement that takes place over time, indicating a definitive

interruption of studies without having obtained a qualification by young people who have reached the age of sixteen, thus referring to individuals no longer of compulsory school age. Moreover, the Minister distinguishes these expressions from that of “school evasion”, which indicates “the interruption of studies and the abandonment of school by subjects still of compulsory school age, expressing, on the part of the families, a real violation of the obligations relating to the education of minors”.

Finally, regarding the conceptualisation of the phenomenon, it is noted that some ministerial documents also refer to the European reading based on the indicator *early school leaving* (MPI 2006; MIUR 2013) and *early leaving from education and training* (MIUR 2017; MIM 2023).

The grouping logic of the documents just highlighted for the conceptualisation of the phenomenon cannot be traced for its operational definition: in other words, the conceptual focus highlighted in each document has not always been consistently traced in the declination of the indicators used to describe and monitor the phenomenon.

The ministerial documents produced from 2000 to 2013 assume a series of indicators describing the trend of school dropout according to different phenomena, including rejected pupils, repeat pupils, pupils falling behind the regular age, attendance irregularities, non-formalised interruptions, students admitted to the next class with educational debt. In many of these documents these phenomena denote the condition of true “dropout risk”.

The focus on dropping out, however, is central in the most recent documents (MIUR 2017; MIUR 2019; MI 2021) which describe and monitor the set of pupils leaving the national school system through “five pieces” referring to Secondary School I and II grade: two are related to drop-outs in *Secondary School I grade* during the year (Piece I) and in the transition from one year to the next (Piece II); one concerns drop-outs between one year and the next in the transition between school cycles, from Secondary School I grade to II grade (Piece III); two concern drop-outs in Secondary School II grade during the year (Piece IV) and in the transition from one year to the next (Piece V).

It can be seen that Piece III has been progressively refined in the three documents, taking into account the possible conditions of the pupils, including non-transition to other pathways, such as vocational and adult education pathways.

The Minister of Education (MIM 2023) includes the census survey of implicit school drop-outs, which combines data on the different statuses of students (collected in the Anagrafe dello Studente) and the national surveys of learning levels in Italian, mathematics and English (INVALSI).

Table no. 2. The conceptualisation and operational definition of the phenomenon in Italian political-institutional documents

Document	Conceptualisation	Operational definition
MPI (2000)	- School dropout (closer to the expression “school dispersion”) is an indicator of the quality of the education system. - “School dropout is a complex phenomenon, which cannot be reduced to univocal interpretations of cause and effect and must be analysed according to a systemic model.” (CM 257/94) - Curriculum irregularities and drop-	- Dropping out (dispersion) during schooling: – rejected pupils, – pupils not assessed at the final examinations for non-formalised reasons (too high a number of unexcused absences, interruptions in attendance during the year without any reason, pupils enrolled but never attending),

Document	Conceptualisation	Operational definition
	outs. - In the phenomenon of school drop-outs: non-entry; evasion of compulsory education; drop-outs; dropping out of compulsory education without obtaining a qualification; repeating; flunking out; irregular attendance; falling behind the regular age; formal fulfilment of compulsory education; poor quality of outcomes. <i>Dispersion</i> derives etymologically from 'dispargêre' - compound of dis and spargêre - but is heard as derived from 'disperdere' - compound of dis and perdere -. If the former verb recalls scattering things here and there without a predefined order, squandering, the latter recalls dividing, separating, dissipating, squandering, sending to perdition. Both, in intransitive usage, also mean to stray, to disperse, to vanish (the 'dispersed' or the fog that 'scatters' in the sun). The combination of etymology and meaning leads one to evoke with the term dispersion the dissipation of intelligence, of resources, of the potential of young people.	- repeat pupils, - pupils lagging behind the regular age. - Fulfilment of compulsory schooling - Interruptions in attendance during and at the end of the school year - Leaving vocational education after qualification
MPI-Directorate General for Studies and Programming Office of Statistics (2006)	School dropout is a complex phenomenon encompassing different aspects and affecting the whole school-educational context. The Italian terms "dispersione" and "disperso" do not derive from the Latin 'disperdere (to disperse from a fixed location) but from 'dispargere' (to scatter here and there). In this sense, school dispersion is to be seen as an anomaly in the educational processes that is brought about by the combined effect of both the subjects, who disperse during the normal schooling process, and the school system, which is unable to respond to the needs of the school population with an adequate educational offer.	- The difficulties of statistical knowledge on school dropout (dispersion) are connected with its being at the intersection of several educational worlds: school, vocational training and work. Restricting the analysis to the school sphere, school dropout is not identified solely with dropping out, but encompasses a whole range of phenomena - <i>irregular attendance, lateness, non-admission to the following year, repeats, interruptions</i> - which can lead to the early exit of children from the school system. - These data only allow the identification of those who are at risk of dispersion and/or abandonment. - students not admitted to the

Document	Conceptualisation	Operational definition
	The phenomenon of school dropout is therefore understood as a set of factors that alter the regular course of a student's school career.	next class/not graduated/not dismissed – students admitted to the next class with educational debt; – repetitions; – migration from one school to another (change of study address and in a transition from state to non-state school); – drop-outs: not assessed in the final examination for formalised (due to transfers to other schools or for health reasons) and non-formalised (without any reason or due to a high number of unexcused absences) attendance interruptions; Non-participation in the education system has an impact on the system's summary indicator: the schooling rate. + Early School Leaver (ESL)
MPI (2008)		National reading key - Number of <i>drop-outs</i> detected during a school year: interruption of studies during the school year not formalised. - Indicators of possible causality of the phenomenon (phenomena of irregularity and school failure) such as: – repeat and lateness rates; – rates of non-admission to the following year and admission with educational debt; – transfers to another address or school. European reading key Early School Leaver (ESL): share of young people aged 18 to 24 who have only a secondary school leaving certificate and are out of the education and training system
MIUR (2011)	The phenomenon of drop-outs: share of students who drop out or continue their studies late.	– Selection: pupils not admitted to the next class; – tardy pupils, i.e. those attending a given year of a course at a higher age than the regular age, i.e. the age stipulated by current enrolment regulations; – Suspension of judgement in the

Document	Conceptualisation	Operational definition
		secondary school of the second cycle: admission to the next class is suspended for insufficient assessments in one or more disciplines, but considered recoverable; – likelihood of graduation (ratio of number of graduates to first-year entrants 5 years earlier) – graduation rate
MIUR (2013)	School dropout: premature exit of students from the school system	Italian scope – at risk of dropping out - unjustified exit from the national school system: such an interruption does not preclude the student from re-entering the school system in subsequent years. Moreover, some of the pupils at risk of dropping out, once they have left the school system, could decide to fulfil their right to education by choosing an alternative pathway to the education channel (regional vocational training or apprenticeship). European scope Early School Leaver (ESL): consists of the share of the population aged 18-24 with no higher than lower secondary education and not in training programmes. This indicator, taking a snapshot of a situation referring to earlier times, does not allow a measurement of the phenomenon at present.
MIUR (2017)	School dropout is considered as the phenomenon of students leaving the education and training system. In Europe the indicator used to quantify the phenomenon is the Early Leaving from Education and Training (ELET) indicator, which refers to the share of young people between 18 and 24 years of age with at most a lower secondary school qualification or a	“Five pieces of the school dropout” that together form the set of pupils leaving the national school system: 1. pupils attending I grade secondary school who interrupt their attendance without a valid reason before the end of the year (<i>dropping out during the year</i>); 2. pupils who have attended the entire school year (I and II year of I grade secondary school) and who

Document	Conceptualisation	Operational definition
	qualification lasting no more than two years and no longer in training. By quantifying the premature exit from the education system after a few years, it provides a snapshot of a situation from earlier times.	do not pass to the following year either to the II or III year as repeaters, and do not pass to the II year of I grade secondary school (<i>dropping out between one year and the next</i>); 3. pupils who have attended the entire school year (year III in I grade secondary school) and who do not pass on to II grade secondary school in the following school year or attend grade I secondary school again as repeaters in year III (<i>dropping out between one year and the next in the transition between school cycles</i>); 4. pupils attending II grade secondary school who interrupt their attendance without a valid reason before the end of the year (<i>dropping out during the year</i>); 5. pupils who have attended the entire school year (years I to IV of II grade secondary school), who do not progress to the following year either to year II, III, IV, V in good standing or to year I, II, III and IV as repeaters (<i>dropping out between one year and the next</i>). + Early Leaving from Education and Training (ELET)
MIUR-Uffice for Information Assets Management and Statistics (2019)	Overall dropout - understood as the sum of the dropout occurring during the school year and the dropout occurring between one school year and the next, starting from year 1 of Secondary School-I grade up to year 5 of Secondary School-II grade.	“Five pieces of the school dropout” that together form the set of pupils leaving the national school system: 1. pupils attending <i>I grade secondary school</i> who interrupt their attendance without valid reason before the end of the school year (<i>dropping out during the year</i>); 2. pupils who have attended the entire school year (years I and II of I grade secondary school) and who do not pass on to the following year either to year II and III as repeaters or to year I and II as repeaters (<i>dropping out between one year and the next</i>); 3. pupils who have attended the entire school year (year III in I

Document	Conceptualisation	Operational definition
		grade secondary school) and who do not pass to grade II secondary school in the following school year, in good standing, nor do they attend year III I grade secondary school again, as repeaters (<i>dropping out between one year and the next in the transition between school cycles</i>), nor do they enrol in IeFP courses; 4. pupils attending II grade secondary school who interrupt their attendance without a valid reason before the end of the year (<i>dropping out during the year</i>); 5. pupils who have attended the entire school year (years I to IV of II grade secondary school), who do not progress to the following year either to year II, III, IV and V in good standing or to year I, II, III and IV as repeaters (<i>dropping out between one year and the next</i>).
MI-DGSIS-Office of Information Asset Management and Statistics (2021)	The total number of pupils exiting the education and training system and are represented, for each school order, by the drop-outs occurring during the school year and the drop-outs recorded in the transition between one school year and the next.	“Five pieces of the school dropout” that together form the set of pupils leaving the national education system: 1. pupils attending secondary school who interrupt their attendance without a valid reason before the end of the school year, in each year of the course (<i>dropping out in the course of the year - lower secondary school</i>); 2. pupils who have attended the entire school year, year I or year II of secondary school, and who do not advance in the following year either to year II or III in good standing, or to year I or II as repeaters, or to grade II secondary school as a result of merit advancement (<i>dropping out between one year and the next - lower secondary school</i>); 3. pupils who have fully attended the third year of the first-cycle secondary school, have taken the first-cycle final exam, do not move

Document	Conceptualisation	Operational definition
		on to the second-cycle secondary school in the following school year, in good standing, nor do they attend the first-cycle secondary school again, as repeaters, nor do they enrol in IeFP pathways, nor in first-level pathways at CPIAs or in second-level education pathways at second-level educational institutions (<i>dropping out in the transition between cycles</i>); 4. pupils attending secondary school who interrupt their attendance without a valid reason before the end of the school year, in each year of the course (<i>dropping out during the year - upper secondary school</i>); 5. pupils who have attended the entire school year, the I, II, III or IV year of secondary school, who do not move on to the following year either to the II, III, IV or V year as repeaters, or enrol in IeFP pathways, first level pathways at CPIA or second level education pathways at II level educational institutions (<i>dropping out between one year and the following year - upper secondary school</i>).
MIM-Legislative Office (2023)	School dropout as “School dispersion”: discontinuity of pathways compared to the regularity foreseen by regulations and curricula. Explicit dispersion: non-enrolment in school, repeating school years, failure and dropping out. Implicit dispersion: the qualification obtained does not correspond to the attainment of adequate skills. Early school leaving: the outcome of a cumulative process of disengagement that takes place over time. The term dropping out refers to a definitive interruption of studies without having obtained a qualification by young people who have reached the age of 16. The term early school leaving thus refers to individuals who are no longer	ELET (Early leaver from education and training): percentage of the population aged between 18 and 24 who have at most obtained a secondary school qualification and are not in education or training. Census survey of implicit school drop-outs: through the Student Registry established by the Ministry of Education and through the INVALSI national survey and test administration system.

Document	Conceptualisation	Operational definition
	of compulsory school age. School evasion: the interruption of studies and dropping out of school by individuals who are still of compulsory school age, expressing, on the part of families, a real violation of the obligations relating to the education of minors.	

4. Conceptualisation and operational definition of the phenomenon: European and Italian approaches compared

The salient aspects observed by the diachronic analysis of the conceptualisation and operational definition of phenomenon in the European and Italian context allow a comparison between the two levels, based on the units of analysis, the reference time of the condition detected, the institutions (in)directly considered (tab. 3).

Summarising what has been observed with regard to the European context, the phenomenon is conceptualised and measured in terms of “early leaving from education and training”, it is measured on 18-24 year olds and is expressed in terms of the level of qualification achieved (ISCED 0-2) and current inactivity in education and training. The ELET indicator has replaced the previous ESL, refining the level of education considered (from ISCED level 0-3C short, to ISCED level 0-2) and the time of detection of inactivity in education and training (last four weeks since detection).

With reference to the Italian context, instead, the phenomenon is conceptualised in terms of “school drop-out”. However, this expression in the course of time has shown a conceptual contraction, shifting from encompassing the “complexity of school *dispersion*” - expressed by multiple aspects and measured through multiple indicators, mostly referring to the irregularity of the school career - to the exclusive focus on “dropping out of school”, recorded during the school career, in the transition from one year to the next and from one cycle to the next (“five pieces” relating to the lower and upper secondary school), juxtaposing these pieces with the surveys on learning levels in basic skills, also carried out periodically throughout the school career.

Comparing the two approaches of conceptualisation and detection of the phenomenon, it is possible to state that the European approach is configured as an “*ex-post* perspective” and the Italian approach as an “*in itinere* perspective”.

The European approach, in fact, focuses on pathway outcomes and the “externalities” of early exit from education and training, considering young people who have already left the education and training system, have inadequate qualifications for entry into the labour market and are currently inactive in education and training.

The categorisation of the European approach in the *ex-post* perspective is in continuity with analyses that in the past have highlighted its “retrospective” nature (Estêvão and Álvares 2014), which quantifies the phenomenon with reference to a “population now outside the system” (MPI 2006: p. 2), to a situation referring to previous eras (MIUR 2013; MIUR 2017), calculated “a consuntivo” (Santagati 2015). Moreover, this categorisation, in view of the time of collection, converges towards those characterisations that describe the indicators as a “cumulative measure” and as a “measure of circumstance or status, since it gives a measurement of the situation, defined by the criteria applied, at a given point in time” (Estêvão and Álvares 2014: p. 27).

The salient aspects of the *ex post* perspective traced in the European context, again, refer to intersystemic logics linked to the centrality of the nexus between education and training, on the one hand, and employability, on the other hand, a nexus - in turn - linked to the promotion of Europe’s development. Aspects that represent the foundation and common thread of the documents analysed. The Lisbon Strategy prescribed the reduction of the phenomenon in the awareness of having to adapt Europe’s education and training systems “both to the demands of the knowledge society and to the need for an improved level and quality of employment”. The Europe 2020 Strategy placed education among the targets to be invested for the promoting a smart (developing an economy based on *knowledge* and innovation), sustainable and inclusive growth (fostering a *high-employment economy* delivering social and territorial cohesion) of Europe, proposing - among six others - the flagship initiative “Youth on the move” with the objective of “to enhance the performance of education systems and to facilitate the entry of young people to the labour market” (European Commission 2010: p. 4).

Table no. 3. Conceptualisation and operational definition of the phenomenon in the European and Italian context: a comparison

	Conceptualisation and operational definition	Analysis Unit	Reference time of the detected condition	Institutions involved	Perspective
<i>European approach</i>	ELET (formerly ESL) - Inadequate level of education attained for entering the labour market - Current inactivity in education and training paths	18-24 year olds	- Passed (ISCED level 0-2 achieved) - Present (inactivity in education and training)	- School - Labour Market	<i>Ex post</i>
<i>Italian approach</i>	- From the focus on early school leaving as a complex phenomenon - the focus on early	Lower and Upper Secondary School students (in compulsory	Present: during the school career (in the transition from one	School	<i>In itinere</i>

	school leaving. - Learning levels in basic skills	education and training)	year to the next and from one cycle to the next)		
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Recently, the Council of the European Union (2021), recalling the first priority of the EEA 2030 strategic framework for the next decade - *Strategic priority 1: Improving quality, equity, inclusion and success for all in education and training* - agrees that to thrive in the world of today, and to cope with future transformations in society, the economy and the labour market, all individuals have to be equipped with the appropriate knowledge, skills, competences and attitudes. Education and training is key for the personal, civic and professional development of European citizens. (C 66/4).

Finally, the Strategic Framework for School Success (Council Recommendation 2022) calls for the implementation of an integrated and comprehensive strategy that pursues school success for all learners by ensuring, among other aspects, coordination with other policy areas, including employment.

The intersystemic orientation extolled in the European context, linked to the education-training-employability nexus, however, seems unbalanced on education, attributing it a decisive role, since - as Ross and Leathwood (2013a; 2013b) observe - the basic assumption of the European policy orientation posits a relationship between the creation of a skilled workforce and Europe's economic growth, as well as a causal relationship between early school leaving and alarming levels of youth unemployment, albeit refuted by the share of unemployed graduates.

In the words of Estêvão and Álvares, a drawback of the European indicator might be to consider it as “an indicator of the education- and training-system performance towards achieving its fundamental mission: to qualify the population” (2014: p. 26), which reveals a functional perspective (*ibid.*), an instrumental, utilitarian and standard conception of education and training, neglecting the dynamics of labour demand (Ross and Leathwood 2013b).

Unlike the European approach, the Italian approach is configured as an “*in itinere* perspective”, since it is focused on outcomes recorded during the school career, referring to students still in compulsory education or training who drop out of school in the transition from one year to the next and from one cycle to the next and/or who show inadequate learning levels in basic skills. This perspective juxtaposes with that of other countries where data are collected through student registries, which enable the monitoring of absenteeism, functioning as alert systems for conditions at risk of early dropout (European Commission 2016). Furthermore, it meets the position of those who stress the usefulness of having quantitative data that more accurately report “the main points of resistance and bottlenecks regarding school dropout” in the education and training system (Estêvão and Álvares 2014: p. 28).

Therefore, the Italian perspective makes it possible to highlight the different meaning of the expressions “school dropout” and “early school leaving”, since - as recently reiterated by the European Commission (2019) - the former expression indicates “discontinuing an on-going course, e.g. dropping out in the middle of school term”. In a similar way, the Autorità Garante per l'Infanzia e l'Adolescenza in Italy describes school dropout as “*the missed*,

incomplete or irregular use of education and training services by young people of school age" (2022: p. 20).

From what has been highlighted above, therefore, although the two perspectives diverge with respect to the survey time considered (during the school career in Italy vs. outside the school career in Europe) and, consistently, with respect to the survey units (learners vs. 18-24 year-olds), the expression of the phenomenon in the two contexts is in any case linked to the *exit from the school career*, being the cumulative outcome of a pathway that is to some extent compromised, i.e. marked by multi-factor signals that can be considered risk factors or prodromes of drop-out and disinvestment in education and training.

5. Conclusions

The contribution presented a diachronic and comparative reflection on the conceptualisation and operational definition of the dropout/early school leaving phenomenon, analysing the European and Italian political-institutional "discourse". The interpretation of the policy orientations analysed led to the identification of two perspectives of conceptualisation and measurement of the phenomenon: the "*ex post* perspective" for the European context and the "*in itinere* perspective" for the Italian context.

In conclusion, we would like to express the hope that the disambiguation work carried out and the diachronic framework outlined will support political decision-makers, regional and local institutional actors, professionals, the educating community, etc. in the phases of conception, design and activation of measures to counter the phenomenon (prevention, intervention and compensation, as recommended by the Council of the European Union in 2022). In fact, it is considered necessary that a disambiguous and conscious "use" of the perspectives of signification of a given phenomenon, which guide the study of its significance in a given context, is also placed at the basis of the measures to counter the phenomenon, as well as of the process of evaluating the results and impact of the counter measures activated, in a manner consistent with:

- the conceptualisation of the phenomenon assumed;
- the time frame in which the phenomenon is recorded (during schooling; at the time of entry into employment), also in view of the fact that - as Vogt (2018) pointed out with regard to GSE - the indicators chosen prescribe ages within which results and qualifications are to be achieved;
- the age group of those involved (learners and young people), as well as the institutional actors involved (school, labour market, public services, etc.).

Furthermore, the monitoring of the phenomenon - according to different perspectives - has to be seen as complementary to the analysis of the multiple factors that in national, regional and local specificities may co-determine the phenomenon. In the Council Recommendation 2022, in fact, the focus on what precedes early leavers from education and training is reinforced by recommending that Member States develop or strengthen data collection and monitoring systems at national, regional and local level (according to different territorial circumstances) in order to systematically collect quantitative and qualitative information on learners and factors affecting learning outcomes: on the subject of early leaving the Recommendation highlights the importance of analysing "the scope and incidence of and possible reasons for underachievement and early leaving from education and training, including by collecting the views of marginalised learners and families", as well as of early detecting and identifying "learners at risk of leaving education and training early and those who have done so, in order to provide timely and appropriate support, without labelling or stigmatising such learners". In Italy, the Minister of Education (MIM 2023) traces the causes

of school drop-out to “two types of factors”: on the one hand, the “socio-economic-cultural” ones, linked to the student’s personal conditions of discomfort (deeper discomfort and malaise) and to the context in which he/she lives; on the other hand, those “internal to the school context”, calling into question “unfavourable situations linked to the classroom context and to the school as an institution”.

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Received 9 May 2023, Accepted 25 June 2023