



PREVENTING AND FIGHTING EARLY LEAVING
FROM EDUCATION & TRAINING WITH AI

stAI

Act before it happens: Preventing and fighting Early
Leaving from Education and Training with Artificial
Intelligence

ELET Risk Factors Desk Research - PORTUGAL

Author:





PROJECT INFORMATION

Project acronym:

stAl

Project title: Act before it happens: Preventing and fighting Early Leaving from Education and Training with Artificial Intelligence

Project N°:2023-1-IS01-KA220-SCH-000157308

Sub-programme or KA:

KA220-SCH - Cooperation partnerships in school Education

Website: www.stai-edu.eu

Consortium:



SCHOOL OF EDUCATION



ARTIFICIAL
INTELLIGENCE
RESEARCH GROUP



Colegiul Național de Artă
Octav Băncilă
Iasi



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1. ELET - General National Scope

There are more early leaving from education and training (ELET) in Portugal. According to the latest available data for 2023, the early school leaving rate has risen from 6.5 per cent to 8 per cent. This figure is still below the maximum ceiling of 9 per cent set by the European Union for 2030, but it still deserves reflection.

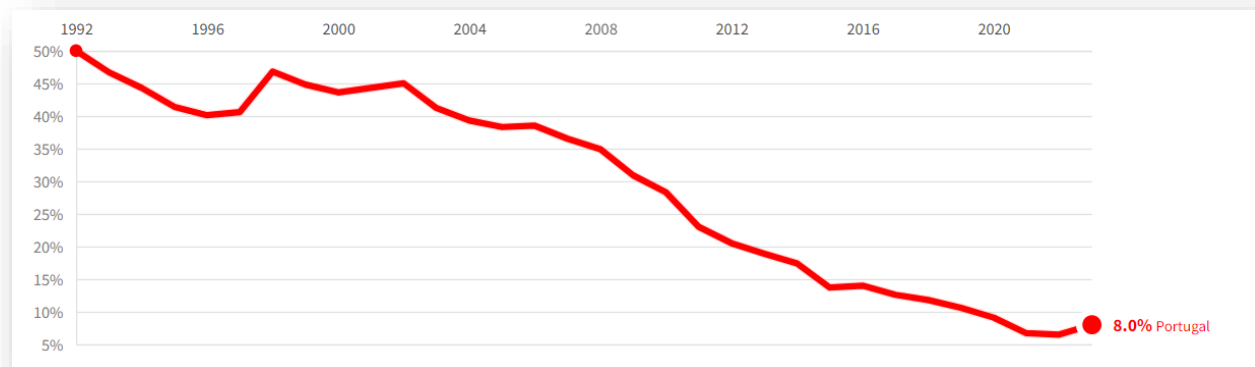


Figure 1 – ELET- Early Leaving from Education and training in Portugal

Source: INE (National Institute of Statistics of Portugal)

Since 2006, with a slight reversal in 2016, this indicator has shown a steady and gradual decline. This positive trend was even highlighted in one of the recent editions of *Education at a Glance* — the OECD's annual report that summarizes key statistics and comparative data on education systems worldwide.

The early leaving from education and training rate, also known as the early school dropout rate, measures the percentage of young people aged 18 to 24 who have not completed secondary education and are not in education or training.

To provide some context on the evolution of this indicator: in 1992, during the early years of extending mandatory schooling to the 9th grade (a policy implemented in 1986), half of the young Portuguese population left school with only a basic education, often incomplete. By 2023, the gap between students who left school without finishing secondary education and those who entered the national education system had dropped to less than 10%.

2. ELET Risk Factors

2.1 Socio-Demographic Factors

Portugal has made significant progress in reducing early school leaving over the past few decades, but it remains a critical issue with various socio-demographic factors playing a role. Early school leaving, defined as individuals aged 18 to 24 who do not have a secondary education and are not in further education or training, has implications for the country's workforce, social mobility, and overall economic growth. To understand the persistence of this issue, we need to consider the influence of several socio-demographic factors such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity.

Government policies, educational reforms, and community-based programs are essential in bridging the gaps caused by socioeconomic disparities, gender, ethnicity, and geographic inequalities. Addressing these challenges will contribute to breaking the cycle of disadvantage and help ensure that all young people in Portugal have the opportunity to complete their education and achieve better life outcomes.

Age

Age is an inherent factor in early school leaving, as the target group is typically young adults between 18 and 24 years old. Within this age group, school disengagement often begins during adolescence, where students feel disconnected from the educational system, leading to eventual dropouts. The longer a student stays in school, the more likely they are to complete secondary education. Interventions that focus on retention during critical transitional phases, such as moving from lower to upper secondary education, have been key in lowering dropout rates.

In Portugal, compulsory education was extended to age 18 in 2009. The change was implemented through the Law No. 85/2009, which established that all children must remain in education or training until they complete 12 years of schooling or reach the age of 18, whichever comes first.

This reform aimed to reduce early school leaving and improve the overall education level of the population, ensuring that young people receive a more comprehensive education before entering the workforce or higher education. Before this change, compulsory education only extended up to the 9th grade, typically around age 15 or 16.

Gender

Gender disparities in early school leaving have also been observed in Portugal. Historically, males have been more likely to leave school early than females, often due to early entry into the labor market, particularly in sectors like construction or manufacturing. These industries may offer immediate financial incentives, which can put young men away from continuing their education. However, as the economy shifts toward more knowledge-based industries, the demand for higher qualifications is rising, making early school leaving more detrimental to future prospects, especially for young men.

Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status (SES) is one of the most influential factors in early school leaving. Young people from low-income families are at higher risk of dropping out due to various barriers such as financial hardship, lack of access to educational resources, and less parental involvement or educational support. In families where parents have lower educational levels, there is often less emphasis on the importance of completing secondary education. Additionally, the need to work to support the family financially can take precedence over continuing education, particularly in low-income households.

Portugal has addressed some of these challenges through government programs like social scholarships and support systems aimed at reducing the financial burden on students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Ethnicity and Cultural Background

Ethnic minorities and immigrant populations in Portugal face unique challenges in education, often reflected in higher early school leaving rates. Cultural barriers, language difficulties, and a lack of representation in the curriculum can lead to a sense of alienation, causing students to disengage. Roma communities, in particular, have historically struggled with high rates of early school leaving, as their educational needs have often not been adequately addressed by the mainstream system. Additionally, immigrant students may experience social and economic disadvantages, making it harder to succeed academically, further increasing their risk of leaving school prematurely.

Geographic Disparities

While not explicitly a socio-demographic factor, the geographic location also plays a role in early school leaving. Rural areas in Portugal, where access to quality education and employment opportunities is more limited, tend to have higher dropout rates compared to urban centers. In rural regions, young people may face additional socio-economic hardships, compounding the effects of low socioeconomic status, and leading to early labor market entry.

2.2 Institutional Factors

Institutional factors play a significant role in early school leaving (ELEC) in Portugal, influencing whether students remain engaged in education or choose to drop out. Key aspects such as the school environment, school climate and culture, and the quality and support of teachers can either mitigate or exacerbate the risk of early school leaving. Understanding these factors is critical in shaping effective interventions to reduce dropout rates and improve educational outcomes.

School Environment

The physical and social environment of a school has a profound impact on student retention. Schools with modern, well-maintained facilities that provide access to

necessary resources create a more inviting atmosphere for learning. In contrast, schools with outdated infrastructure, lack of extracurricular opportunities, or overcrowded classrooms can discourage students, particularly those already at risk of disengagement. In Portugal, schools in urban areas tend to have better resources, while those in rural regions may struggle with fewer financial investments, lower-quality facilities, and less access to technological resources, contributing to higher dropout rates in these areas.

School Climate and Culture

The overall climate and culture within a school — including the relationships between students, teachers, school board and staff — are key to keeping students engaged. A positive school climate fosters a sense of belonging, inclusion, and respect, which encourages students to stay in school. Schools that prioritize student well-being, foster strong communication, and promote a culture of achievement are more successful in reducing early school leaving.

On the other hand, a school culture that is overly authoritarian, lacks flexibility, or fails to address the diverse needs of students can alienate certain groups, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Students who feel disconnected from the school culture, or experience bullying or discrimination, are more likely to become disengaged and ultimately leave school early.

In Portugal, efforts to improve school climate have focused on creating more inclusive environments that cater to the diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of students. Schools that invest in anti-bullying programs, peer mentoring, and student-centered approaches are more successful in reducing dropout rates.

Teacher Quality and Support

Teacher quality and the support they provide are crucial factors in student retention. Teachers play a key role not only in delivering educational content but also in motivating and supporting students to stay engaged in their studies. In Portugal, the relationship between students and teachers is a decisive factor in preventing early school leaving.

Students who perceive their teachers as caring, supportive, and invested in their success are more likely to stay in school.

Conversely, teachers who are underqualified, overburdened, or disconnected from their students' needs can contribute to a negative school experience. Teacher burnout, which can be caused by large class sizes, inadequate support from school leadership, or the pressures of the curriculum, can lead to lower levels of student engagement. Additionally, the way teachers manage classroom discipline and their ability to adapt teaching methods to cater to students with different learning needs can significantly influence whether students stay in school or drop out. Portugal has been working to improve teacher training and support systems to ensure that educators are equipped to handle diverse classrooms and provide the necessary encouragement to students, particularly those at risk of early school leaving. Initiatives that focus on professional development, inclusive teaching practices, and mental health awareness have proven effective in supporting both teachers and students.

2.3 Education Policies and Practices

Education policies and practices in Portugal play a critical role in either preventing or exacerbating early school leaving (ELEC). Factors such as curriculum relevance, assessment methods, and the availability of support services can greatly impact students' experiences in school and their likelihood of staying engaged through the completion of secondary education. By addressing these aspects, Portugal has sought to reduce dropout rates and create a more inclusive and supportive educational system.

Curriculum Relevance

One of the primary reasons students become disengaged from education is the perceived lack of relevance between what they are learning in school and their future goals or personal interests. A curriculum that is overly rigid, theoretical, or disconnected from real-world applications can alienate students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds or those with different learning needs.

In Portugal, reforms have focused on making the curriculum more relevant to students' lives and future career prospects. Vocational education and training (VET) programs

have been expanded to offer alternative pathways for students who are more inclined toward practical, hands-on learning rather than academic routes. By integrating vocational options into secondary education, students who may otherwise have dropped out now have a chance to pursue skills-based learning that aligns with the labor market and their personal interests. These vocational pathways help reduce early school leaving by offering more diverse and relevant educational opportunities. In addition, efforts have been made to introduce more project-based learning and interdisciplinary subjects, which aim to make education more engaging and applicable to real-world challenges, encouraging students to see the value in staying in school.

Assessment Methods

Assessment methods can also influence students' decisions to stay in school. In traditional educational systems, where assessments are primarily based on standardized exams and rote memorization, students who struggle with this type of evaluation may feel discouraged and disconnected from the learning process. In Portugal, students who repeatedly fail exams or assessments are more likely to become disengaged and drop out, especially if they lack adequate support. To address this, Portugal has begun to diversify assessment methods, moving towards more formative and continuous assessment practices, using the digital in the classroom, for example with the National Plane for the Digitalization in Education. These approaches provide students with more regular feedback on their progress, focusing on their development over time rather than relying solely on high-stakes exams. By introducing a wider range of assessment types — such as group projects, oral presentations, and practical tasks — schools can better accommodate diverse learning styles, reducing the pressure on students who may not perform well in traditional exams.

Additionally, differentiated assessment for students with special educational needs (SEN) has been improved, ensuring that all students receive evaluations that reflect their abilities and progress.

Support Services

Support services play a crucial role in preventing early school leaving by providing the necessary guidance, resources, and interventions to students who are struggling academically, socially, or emotionally. In Portugal, support services include academic tutoring, psychological counselling, career guidance, and social welfare programs. These services are designed to address the various challenges that students may face, such as learning difficulties, family issues, or socio-economic hardships, which can contribute to disengagement from school. Schools in Portugal have been increasing their focus on early intervention, identifying at-risk students as soon as possible and providing tailored support to keep them engaged in their education. Guidance counselors work closely with students to help them plan their academic and career paths, while social workers collaborate with families to ensure that students have the resources they need to stay in school.

Moreover, initiatives such as the *Programa de Promoção do Sucesso Escolar* (Program for the Promotion of School Success) aim to enhance school success through targeted interventions, additional learning support, and after-school programs that help students improve their academic performance and personal development.

2.4 Access to Education

Access to education in Portugal has undergone significant changes over the past few decades, with the country making substantial strides in improving enrollment rates and reducing early school leaving. However, challenges remain, particularly in ensuring that all students have equitable access to education, regardless of their geographic location, socioeconomic background, or educational aspirations. This section explores the current state of geographic accessibility, affordability, and educational pathways in Portugal.

Geographic Accessibility

Portugal, with its mix of urban centers and rural areas, faces significant challenges in terms of geographic accessibility to education. While major cities like Lisbon, Porto, and

Coimbra offer a wide range of educational institutions at all levels, rural and interior regions struggle with limited access to schools and higher education facilities.

Key challenges:

Rural-urban divide: Students in rural areas, particularly in the interior regions and the Azores and Madeira islands, face longer commutes or must relocate to urban centers to pursue secondary and tertiary education. The closure of smaller schools due to population decline in rural areas exacerbates this issue, making it more difficult for students to access education locally.

Transport infrastructure: In some remote areas, inadequate public transportation services limit students' ability to travel to schools and universities, increasing dropout rates in these regions.

Government initiatives and solutions

School networks (*agrupamentos de escolas*): To address the issue of small and dispersed schools, the Portuguese government has promoted the creation of school networks, combining smaller schools into larger ones. This allows students from different areas to access better resources, though it also requires efficient transportation systems to support students' mobility.

Expansion of digital learning: During the COVID-19 pandemic, Portugal accelerated its investment in digital learning platforms. These platforms have the potential to bridge the gap for students in remote areas by providing access to quality education through online channels.

Affordability

Affordability remains a significant concern for many families in Portugal, particularly at the secondary and higher education levels. Although public education is free at the primary and secondary levels, there are still indirect costs, they can be prohibitive for low-income students.

Key challenges:

Education costs: The costs of materials, for some families, even with the support of the state in free transport and books, can be a huge problem.

Educational inequality: Students from low-income households often lack access to extracurricular resources, such as tutoring or extracurricular activities, which can enhance academic performance and improve opportunities for further education.

Government initiatives and solutions:

Scholarships and financial aid: The Portuguese government offers scholarships and financial aid programs to students from low-income families. These programs, such as the Social Support Scholarship (Bolsa de Ação Social), help reduce financial barriers.

Free transport, laptops, internet connection, textbooks and school materials: In recent years, the government has provided free transport, laptops, internet connection, textbooks to students in public schools, alleviating some of the financial burdens on families at the primary and secondary levels.

Educational Pathways

Portugal's education system has traditionally emphasized academic progression through secondary education to university, often neglecting vocational and technical education. However, recent reforms have expanded educational pathways, providing more options for students with diverse interests and learning preferences.

Key challenges:

Limited perception of vocational training: Despite improvements, vocational education and training (VET) in Portugal has often been viewed as a secondary option for students who struggle in traditional academic settings, rather than as a valuable pathway to employment. This has limited its appeal and societal recognition.

Rigid educational progression: The structure of the Portuguese education system has historically been rigid, with limited flexibility for students to switch between academic and vocational pathways or to re-enter education later in life.

Government initiatives and solutions:

Expansion of vocational education and training (VET): The Portuguese government has made significant efforts to promote vocational education through the establishment of Professional Schools (*Escolas Profissionais*) and the Dual Education System, which combines classroom instruction with on-the-job training. This has expanded opportunities for students who wish to pursue technical careers and has improved their employment prospects.

Higher professional technical courses (CTeSP): These courses provide an alternative to traditional university education, offering more practical and career-oriented training at the post-secondary level. The CTeSPs have been introduced to bridge the gap between secondary education and the labor market, especially in technical fields.

Adult education and lifelong learning: Portugal has introduced programs aimed at supporting adult education and lifelong learning, such as the *Qualifica* Program, which helps adults return to education to complete secondary school qualifications or gain professional certifications.

2.5 Individual and Family Factors

Individual and family factors play a critical role in shaping educational outcomes, as personal attitudes, family environments, and mental health all have a profound impact on academic performance and long-term engagement with education. When these factors are positive, students are more likely to succeed, remain engaged, and pursue higher levels of education. However, when negative, they can lead to disengagement, absenteeism, and even early school leaving.

Academic performance is closely tied to individual effort, but it also depends heavily on the broader support systems available to students. Students who perform well academically are often more engaged in their studies, motivated by their achievements,

and optimistic about their educational future. On the other hand, students who struggle academically may lose interest in school, feeling overwhelmed or incapable of meeting academic expectations. Factors such as the learning environment, access to tutoring, and the presence of strong support systems significantly influence academic performance. Personal interest and motivation also play a role, as students who find their studies meaningful are more likely to stay engaged, while those who feel disconnected may become disengaged over time.

Attitudes towards education and training are equally important in determining educational outcomes. Students who view education as a stepping stone to personal development and career success are generally more motivated to stay in school. However, negative attitudes—often shaped by past academic struggles, socio-economic factors, or peer influence—can lead to a lack of interest in education. In some communities, education is highly valued, while in others, immediate employment may be seen as more pressing. Peer groups and the presence of role models also significantly shape attitudes, as positive reinforcement from peers and influential figures can encourage students to stay committed to their studies.

Family dynamics and support are foundational to educational success. Families that emphasize the importance of education, offer emotional support, and provide the necessary resources for learning create a nurturing environment for academic achievement. Parental involvement in school activities, homework, and discussions about future educational goals often leads to better academic outcomes. Additionally, parents with higher levels of education are typically better equipped to guide their children academically. However, families facing financial hardship, instability, or conflict may struggle to provide the support necessary for their children's education, which can negatively affect academic performance and engagement.

Mental health and well-being are also critical to a student's ability to succeed in school. Students dealing with mental health challenges, such as anxiety, depression, or trauma, often face difficulties in concentrating, attending school regularly, or maintaining their academic performance. Stress from academic pressures, family instability, or social issues

can lead to disengagement from school. Without access to adequate mental health support, these challenges can escalate, leading to absenteeism or dropout. Ensuring that students have access to mental health resources is essential for their well-being and academic success.

Economic factors, such as labor market conditions, financial constraints, and the economic stability of families, also play a significant role in shaping educational outcomes. The state of the labor market can directly influence decisions about staying in school or entering the workforce. In regions where there are ample job opportunities for young people, especially in unskilled sectors, students may be tempted to leave school early to earn immediate income. In contrast, in times of economic downturn, students may be more inclined to stay in school to improve their future job prospects. However, a prolonged economic crisis may result in early school leaving if families face financial pressures.

Financial constraints are one of the most significant barriers to educational access and success. While primary and secondary education in many countries, including Portugal, is free, the indirect costs of schooling, such as school supplies, can still pose a burden on low-income families.

The economic stability of a family is another crucial determinant of educational outcomes. Families facing unemployment, underemployment, or housing instability are less likely to have the resources to support their children's education. Financial stress within a household often leads to lower levels of emotional support, as parents may be preoccupied with meeting basic needs rather than focusing on their children's academic performance. In some cases, students from low-income families may feel pressure to leave school early to contribute to the household income, further perpetuating cycles of intergenerational poverty.

2.6 Community and Social Factors

In Portugal, community and social factors play a critical role in shaping early school leaving, a persistent challenge in the country. Peer influence is a key factor, as students surrounded by peers who undervalue education or prioritize immediate work opportunities are more likely to disengage from school. This dynamic is particularly prevalent in regions where early employment is seen as a viable alternative to education, contributing to higher rates of school dropout.

Employment opportunities in certain sectors, especially those requiring low-skilled labor, can tempt students to leave school early in pursuit of immediate income. This is more common in rural and economically disadvantaged areas, where students often perceive staying in school as less beneficial compared to entering the workforce.

Cultural attitudes towards education also influence early school leaving. In some rural or lower-income communities, there may be less emphasis on academic achievement, with education not always seen as a priority or a pathway to better opportunities. This mindset contrasts with urban areas, where there is a stronger focus on academic progression and higher education.

Social support networks—including family, local organizations, and government programs—are crucial in combating early school leaving. Support from family members, mentors, or community groups can provide the encouragement and resources students need to stay in school. However, in communities where social support systems are weak or fragmented, students may struggle to find the guidance necessary to persist in their education. Expanding these networks is key to reducing early school leaving across Portugal.

2.7 Economic Factors

Economic factors are critical in addressing early school leaving in Portugal. Improving labour market conditions is essential, as young people often leave school early to take advantage of low-skilled job opportunities. In regions where employment is readily available, especially in sectors like agriculture, retail, or tourism, students may prioritize immediate income over long-term educational goals. To reduce this trend, the

government and businesses can work together to promote employment opportunities that require higher education or vocational training, making it more attractive for students to stay in school and pursue further qualifications.

Financial constraints also play a significant role in early school leaving. Even though primary and secondary education is free in Portugal, the indirect costs of schooling—such as school supplies, and extracurricular activities—can create financial pressure on low-income families. Many students from disadvantaged backgrounds feel the need to leave school to support their families financially. Expanding access to scholarships, grants, and financial aid programs can help alleviate these burdens, making education more accessible to students from lower-income households. Moreover, increasing awareness of available financial support is crucial to ensure that students and families take advantage of these resources.

The economic stability of families is another key factor in reducing early school leaving. Families facing unemployment, underemployment, or job insecurity are more likely to prioritize immediate financial survival over their children's education. When parents are financially strained, students often face pressure to leave school and contribute to the household income. To address this issue, social welfare programs should be strengthened to provide more robust financial support to struggling families, ensuring that children can remain in school without the added burden of contributing to the family's income. Additionally, promoting job creation and economic growth in disadvantaged regions can provide a more stable environment for families, reducing the need for early school leaving. By improving labour market conditions, addressing financial constraints, and enhancing the economic stability of families, Portugal can make significant progress in reducing early school leaving. These efforts will not only improve educational outcomes but also contribute to the long-term economic growth and social well-being of the country.

2.8 Technology and Digital Divide

Technology plays a crucial role in addressing early school leaving in Portugal, and initiatives like the *Plano de Capacitação Digital das Escolas* (Digital School

Empowerment Plan) are vital in bridging the digital divide. This plan aims to provide every student with a laptop and ensure reliable internet access, significantly enhancing educational opportunities. However, while these efforts are commendable, disparities in access to technology and digital tools still exist, particularly for students from low-income.

Access to technology is essential for students to remain engaged in their education, as those without adequate resources are more likely to fall behind academically and disengage from school. The *Plano de Capacitação Digital das Escolas* addresses this issue by equipping students with the necessary devices and internet connectivity, aiming to level the playing field. Equally important are digital literacy skills, which are critical for preventing early school leaving. Even with access to technology, students may lack the skills to effectively use of digital tools for learning. Schools must prioritize teaching digital literacy, ensuring that students can navigate online platforms, conduct research, and leverage educational technology to their advantage. This will help students maximize the benefits of the digital resources provided through initiatives like the *Plano de Capacitação Digital*.

Online learning opportunities also serve as a means to combat early school leaving by offering flexible educational options for students who may face challenges attending traditional schools. For those in remote areas or those who have fallen behind, online learning can provide an alternative pathway to completing their education. By expanding access to high-quality online learning programs alongside the infrastructure provided by the digital capacity plan, Portugal can help retain students in the education system, offering them the flexibility and resources they need to succeed.

2.9 Other Risk Factors

Early school leaving in Portugal is influenced by various risk factors, including language barriers, migration challenges, social exclusion, and health and well-being issues. As the country becomes increasingly multicultural, language barriers pose a significant obstacle for many students, particularly those from immigrant backgrounds. Students who do not speak Portuguese fluently may struggle to keep up with the curriculum, resulting in frustration and disengagement. Without adequate language support, these students are

at a heightened risk of falling behind academically and ultimately dropping out of school.

Migration and refugee challenges also play a crucial role in early school leaving. Many migrant and refugee families face difficulties integrating into Portuguese society, which can impact their children's educational experiences. Factors such as instability, uncertainty about residency status, and the pressures of adapting to a new culture can create additional stress for students. These challenges can lead to higher dropout rates, particularly if schools do not have the necessary resources or programs in place to support the integration of migrant and refugee students.

Social exclusion and discrimination further compound these issues. Students from minority backgrounds or those with immigrant parents may experience discrimination or bullying in schools, which can negatively affect their mental health and overall school experience. This social exclusion can foster feelings of isolation and disengagement, making it more likely for these students to leave school early. Creating inclusive school environments and fostering understanding among diverse student populations are essential for combating these negative experiences.

Health and well-being issues are also significant risk factors contributing to early school leaving. Students facing mental health challenges, such as anxiety or depression, may struggle to engage in their studies or attend school regularly. Additionally, physical health issues can impede a student's ability to perform at school. For families living in poverty or experiencing economic hardship, accessing adequate healthcare can be difficult, further exacerbating these challenges. Schools must prioritize the well-being of students by providing access to mental health resources and support services to help mitigate the impact of these health-related barriers.

Addressing these other risk factors—language barriers, migration challenges, social exclusion, and health issues—is vital for reducing early school leaving in Portugal. By creating supportive and inclusive educational environments, providing adequate resources for language acquisition, and prioritizing the health and well-being of all

students, the country can work towards keeping young people engaged in their education and ensuring they have the opportunity to succeed.

3. Current Trends, Implications, and Perspectives in Addressing ELET

3.1 National public incentives and initiatives regarding preventing ELET

In Portugal, various national public incentives and initiatives have been implemented to address early leaving from education and training (ELET). Here are three notable examples:

Plano Nacional de Redução do Abandono Escolar Precoce (National Plan to Combat Early School Leaving): Launched by the Portuguese government, this comprehensive plan aims to reduce early school leaving rates across the country. It focuses on identifying at-risk students early and providing targeted interventions, such as mentoring programs, tutoring, and emotional support services. The plan emphasizes the importance of collaboration among schools, families, and community organizations to create supportive educational environments. By enhancing school retention strategies and promoting inclusive education, the plan seeks to ensure that all students have the resources and encouragement they need to complete their education.

Educational and Vocational Training Programs: The Portuguese government has introduced various vocational training initiatives aimed at providing young people with alternative pathways to traditional academic routes. Programs such as the *Aprendizagem* (Apprenticeship) program combine classroom instruction with practical training in various industries. This dual approach not only enhances employability but also keeps students engaged in their education by offering hands-on experiences. By emphasizing skills development and direct job opportunities, these programs aim to reduce early school leaving by making education more relevant to the labor market.

Investment in Digital Education Initiatives: With the increasing importance of technology in education, the Portuguese government has launched the *Plano de Capacitação Digital das Escolas* (Digital Plan for Schools). This initiative aims to equip schools with necessary digital resources, providing every student with laptops and ensuring internet access. The plan also includes training for teachers in integrating technology into their classrooms effectively. By enhancing digital literacy and creating more engaging

learning environments, this initiative seeks to keep students motivated and reduce dropout rates, particularly among those at risk of early school leaving.

These initiatives reflect Portugal's commitment to addressing the challenges of early school leaving through targeted strategies that promote engagement, skills development, and access to educational resources. By continuing to invest in these areas, the country aims to foster a more inclusive and supportive educational landscape for all students.

3.2 National private incentives and initiatives regarding preventing ELET

In addition to national public efforts, private initiatives in Portugal have also emerged to address early leaving from education and training (ELET). These initiatives often complement government programs and provide additional support for at-risk students through innovative approaches and community engagement.

One significant private initiative is the work of various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that focus on educational support and mentorship. Organizations such as Acreditar and Cáritas offer programs designed to assist students in overcoming barriers to education. These NGOs provide mentorship, tutoring, and after-school programs that help students who are struggling academically or facing personal challenges. By offering tailored support and creating safe spaces for learning, these organizations play a crucial role in keeping students engaged and motivated to complete their education.

Another example is the collaboration between private companies and educational institutions to create internship and apprenticeship programs. Many businesses in Portugal have recognized the importance of investing in the youth workforce and have partnered with schools to provide students with practical training opportunities. Programs like *Estágios Profissionais* (Professional Internships) facilitate hands-on experiences in various industries, allowing students to apply their academic knowledge in real-world settings. This not only helps students build skills and gain valuable work experience but

also reinforces the connection between education and employment, making it more likely that they will continue their studies.

Furthermore, philanthropic foundations have emerged as important players in the fight against ELET in Portugal. Organizations such as the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation have launched initiatives focused on educational innovation and social inclusion. These foundations often fund projects that aim to enhance educational resources, support vulnerable communities, and promote equal access to quality education. By investing in programs that address the root causes of early school leaving, these foundations contribute to creating a more equitable educational landscape.

Private incentives and initiatives in Portugal play a vital role in complementing government efforts to prevent early school leaving. By offering mentorship, creating internship opportunities, and providing financial support for educational programs, these initiatives help address the multifaceted challenges that contribute to ELET. Continued collaboration between private entities, NGOs, and educational institutions is essential for creating a comprehensive approach to support at-risk students and promote a culture of educational persistence and success.

3.3 Concrete experiences/practices

- *Plano Nacional de Combate ao Abandono Escolar Precoce* (National Plan to Combat Early School Leaving)

This comprehensive strategy was developed by the Portuguese government to reduce dropout rates in schools. It focuses on identifying at-risk students early and implementing targeted interventions, such as academic support, counselling, and family involvement. The plan emphasizes collaboration among schools, local authorities, and community organizations to create supportive environments for students.

URL: <https://www.dge.mec.pt/noticias/prevencao-do-abandono-escolar-recomendacoes-para-profissionais-administradores-escolares>

- *Apoio à Aprendizagem* (Learning Support)

This initiative provides additional academic assistance to students who are struggling in key subject areas. Schools can implement tutoring programs and individualized support to help students improve their skills and remain engaged in their education. The program aims to enhance academic performance and foster a positive attitude toward learning.

URL: <https://www.dge.mec.pt/centro-de-apoio-aprendizagem>

- *Programa de Educação e Formação* (Education and Training Program)

This program offers alternative educational pathways for students who may not succeed in traditional academic settings. It focuses on vocational training, providing practical skills and qualifications that align with labor market needs. The program aims to keep students engaged in their education while preparing them for future employment.

URL: <https://www.dge.mec.pt/programa-integrado-de-educacao-e-formacao>

- *Rede de Mentores* (Mentoring Network)

This initiative connects at-risk students with mentors from various professional backgrounds. The mentors provide guidance, emotional support, and motivation to help students navigate educational challenges. The program aims to foster positive relationships and help students develop the skills needed for academic success.

URL: [https://www.iapmei.pt/PRODUTOS-E-SERVICOS/Empreendedorismo-Inovacao/Empreendedorismo-\(1\)/Rede-de-Mentores.aspx](https://www.iapmei.pt/PRODUTOS-E-SERVICOS/Empreendedorismo-Inovacao/Empreendedorismo-(1)/Rede-de-Mentores.aspx)

- *Acreditar*

A non-governmental organization dedicated to supporting children and youth facing educational challenges. Acreditar offers mentoring, tutoring, and resources to help students stay engaged in their education. The

organization focuses on building resilience and fostering a positive educational experience.

URL: <https://acreditar.org.pt/>

- **Escolas de 2ª Oportunidade (Second Chance Schools)**

These schools provide alternative education options for students who have dropped out. They offer personalized learning experiences and the chance to re-engage with education, allowing students to earn qualifications and prepare for future employment or further education.

URL: <https://www.e2oportugal.org/>

- ***Projeto de Intervenção Comunitária (Community Intervention Project)***

This program engages local communities in supporting at-risk youth through various educational initiatives. It focuses on providing tutoring, social activities, and resources to help students stay engaged in their education while fostering a sense of belonging within their communities.

URL: <https://www.icc.gov.pt/>

- ***Estágios Profissionais (Professional Internships)***

This program connects students with internships in various industries, allowing them to gain practical experience while still pursuing their education. These internships not only enhance employability but also encourage students to remain in school by linking education with real-world opportunities.

URL: <https://www.iefp.pt/estagios>

These programs collectively aim to create a supportive and inclusive educational environment in Portugal, addressing the multifaceted issues that contribute to early school leaving.

3.4 Main challenges and obstacles to be encountered on ELET

Addressing early leaving from education and training (ELET) in Portugal involves navigating several significant challenges and obstacles. One of the primary issues is the diverse needs of students, particularly those from multicultural backgrounds or with varying educational experiences. Language barriers can hinder academic performance and engagement for immigrant students, making it difficult for them to integrate into the school system.

Another challenge is the economic context in which many families find themselves. High levels of poverty and unemployment can force students to prioritize immediate financial support over their education, leading to higher dropout rates. Additionally, students from low-income backgrounds often lack access to essential resources, such as tutoring and extracurricular activities, that can enhance their educational experience.

Social exclusion and discrimination also play a crucial role in contributing to ELET. Students from marginalized groups may experience bullying or a lack of support, leading to feelings of isolation and disengagement from school. This social dynamic can significantly impact their motivation to continue their education.

Finally, addressing mental health and well-being issues is essential, as many students face anxiety, depression, or other challenges that can affect their academic performance. Schools often lack the necessary resources to provide adequate mental health support, which can exacerbate dropout rates.

Overcoming these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes targeted support services, community engagement, and a focus on creating inclusive and supportive educational environments. By addressing these obstacles, Portugal can work towards significantly reducing early school leaving and fostering a culture of educational persistence.

3.5 Policy Implications and Recommendations

Addressing early leaving from education and training (ELET) in Portugal requires a comprehensive policy approach that considers various factors influencing dropout rates. A thorough policy analysis indicates that current strategies should be enhanced by focusing on the integration of educational support services, mental health resources, and community engagement. Policymakers should prioritize data collection to better understand the specific needs of at-risk students and to evaluate the effectiveness of existing programs. This evidence-based approach will enable targeted interventions and resource allocation.

Implementing best practices and interventions is critical to successfully combating ELET. Programs that have demonstrated success, such as mentorship initiatives and flexible educational pathways, should be expanded and adapted to local contexts. Collaborative partnerships between schools, NGOs, and private sectors can foster holistic support for students. For example, integrating vocational training with academic programs can provide students with practical skills while keeping them engaged in their education. Additionally, initiatives that promote inclusive environments and address social exclusion can significantly improve retention rates.

Looking ahead, future directions for research and action must focus on understanding the long-term impact of ELET on individuals and society. Longitudinal studies should be conducted to track the outcomes of students who have left the education system early, examining their employment prospects, mental health, and overall well-being. Furthermore, research should explore the effectiveness of various interventions across different regions and demographic groups, identifying what works best in specific contexts. Engaging students, families, and communities in the research process will also provide valuable insights and foster a sense of ownership over educational outcomes.

In conclusion, addressing ELET in Portugal requires a multifaceted approach that combines policy analysis, the implementation of best practices, and a commitment to ongoing research. By focusing on these areas, Portugal can create a more inclusive and

supportive educational landscape that reduces dropout rates and promotes the success of all students.

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5. Results from interviews with teachers

Introduction

In Portugal, 28 teachers participated in this study, reflecting their commitment to enhancing educational practices. The teachers expressed great enthusiasm for participating, as they believe that addressing early school leaving is a critical issue in education. Their involvement not only underscores the importance of collaboration in improving student outcomes but also highlights their dedication to fostering a supportive learning environment for all students.

What school level do you teach at?

Based on the survey conducted among 28 participants regarding their teaching affiliations, the following counts of responses related to different educational levels were recorded:

- **Ensino Básico** (students from 10 to 15 years old): 10 teachers
- **Ensino Secundário Geral** (students +15 years old): 16 teachers
- **Ensino Secundário Profissional** (VET – students +15 years old): 5 teachers
- **Ensino Básico** and **Ensino Secundário Geral**: 5 teachers
- **Ensino Secundário Geral** and **Ensino Secundário Profissional**: 3 teachers
- **Ensino Básico** and **Ensino Secundário Profissional**: 3 teachers

This distribution reflects the diverse educational framework in Portugal, with varying emphasis on basic and secondary education levels. The findings underscore the need for tailored support and resources for each educational tier to enhance overall educational outcomes and reduce early school leaving rates.

How long have you been working as a teacher?

The ages reported varied, most teachers reported years of experience between **1** and **40** years. This group have an average teaching experience of around **25** years.

In your opinion, what are the main risk factors for dropping out of school?

The responses highlight a multitude of interconnected risk factors that contribute to early school leaving in Portugal:

1. **Financial Constraints:** A significant number of participants pointed to financial difficulties as a primary factor. Families struggling with economic instability often lack the resources necessary for their children's educational needs.
2. **Family Support and Dynamics:** Many responses indicated the absence of familial support, with references to dysfunctional family structures and a lack of encouragement for academic pursuits. This absence can lead to a lack of motivation and interest in education.
3. **Low Expectations and Self-Esteem:** Respondents noted that students often have low expectations for their futures, which is compounded by negative self-concepts and low self-esteem. This is prevalent among students from both disadvantaged and overly pressured backgrounds, impacting their resilience and commitment to education.
4. **Lack of Interest and Engagement:** A recurring theme is the lack of interest in school, often driven by unengaging teaching methods and curricula that do not resonate with students. The traditional educational model fails to address the needs and interests of diverse learners.
5. **Educational System Limitations:** The Portuguese education system is seen as inadequately equipped to handle cases where students do not conform to its

standards. This includes a failure to support students who are struggling or who come from less privileged backgrounds.

6. **Socioeconomic and Cultural Factors:** Broader socioeconomic issues, such as poverty and social inequality, coupled with cultural expectations and discrimination, create an environment that hinders educational attainment. Immigrant students, in particular, may face unique challenges related to cultural conflict and integration.
7. **Health and Well-being Issues:** Problems such as mental health issues, including anxiety and stress, are highlighted as barriers to success. These can be exacerbated by bullying and a lack of social support networks.
8. **Academic Struggles and Repeated Failures:** Many students experience academic difficulties, including repeated failures and lack of basic knowledge, which can lead to disinterest and eventual dropout.
9. **Peer Influence and Bullying:** Negative peer relationships and bullying also play a critical role in students' decisions to leave school. The emotional maturity of students can be adversely affected in such environments.
10. **Inadequate Curriculum Responses:** There is a concern that the curriculum does not adequately address the varying aptitudes and interests of students, leading to disengagement and dropout.

Do you have any kind of assessment to detect students at risk of dropping out of school? If so, please indicate.

The responses from the 28 teachers reveal a predominant lack of formal assessments specifically designed to identify students at risk of dropping out of school. Here are the key points from their answers:

1. **No Formal Assessment:** A significant number of teachers (19 out of 28) indicated that they do not have any formal assessment tools in place to detect at-risk students. Their approaches are largely informal and based on personal observation and interactions with students.
2. **Informal Observations:** Some teachers mentioned they use informal methods to assess students, focusing on:
 - Classroom behavior and participation.
 - Engagement with the learning process.
 - Signs of struggle or disengagement among students.
3. **Collaborative Sharing:** A few teachers noted that during team meetings or “*Conselhos de Turma*,” they share observations and concerns about specific students, which can help in identifying those who may need additional support.
4. **Academic and Socioeconomic Evaluation:** While formal assessments are lacking, some teachers reported considering factors such as:
 - Academic performance and attendance.
 - Behavioral assessments, including interactions with peers and teachers.
 - Socioeconomic background, as well as participation in extracurricular activities.
5. **Identifying Key Indicators:** Teachers highlighted certain indicators that could signal at-risk students, including:
 - High absenteeism rates.
 - Poor academic performance.

- Lack of family support or involvement.

6. **Need for Communication:** Teachers emphasized the importance of communication with family members, school directors, and educational support services to address students' needs effectively.

Does the transition between different levels of education pose challenges for students? If so, name a few.

Yes, for sure the transitions between different levels of education often present significant challenges for students. Teachers highlighted several key issues:

1. **Increased Difficulty and Complexity:** As students move from basic education to secondary education, they encounter a notable increase in the complexity of subjects and the level of difficulty. This heightened demand often requires more advanced study habits and greater time commitment.
2. **Skills Gap:** Many students lack the foundational skills necessary for success at higher levels of education. Issues such as insufficient development of logical reasoning, abstract thinking, and effective study methods can hinder their ability to adapt.
3. **New Environments and Expectations:** Transitioning to a new school or classroom introduces students to different peers, teachers, and expectations, which can be overwhelming. This shift can create anxiety and stress, particularly as students must adjust to new social dynamics and academic requirements.
4. **Autonomy and Responsibility:** Students face increased autonomy and responsibility for their learning, which can be a double-edged sword. While it encourages independence, it can also lead to challenges in managing their time and commitments effectively.

5. **Absence of Support:** A lack of adequate support and guidance during these transitions can exacerbate feelings of anxiety and overwhelm. Many students may struggle without the proper tools and resources to navigate the changes successfully.
6. **Pressure to Perform:** The expectations placed on students increase significantly, including preparation for standardized tests and exams. This pressure can contribute to stress and impact their motivation and focus.

Do you think that teaching practices and the evaluation of teaching play an important role in maintaining student engagement/motivation and therefore reducing school dropout? If so, how/to what extent?

Teachers generally agree that effective teaching practices and evaluation methods play a crucial role in maintaining student engagement and motivation, which can ultimately help reduce school dropout rates. Here are the main points drawn from their responses:

1. **Clear and Engaging Instruction:** Teachers emphasize the importance of delivering lessons in a clear, rigorous, and appealing manner. Utilizing a variety of resources beyond traditional textbooks, such as technology, can enhance student interest and participation.
2. **Active Learning Methods:** Engaging students through active learning methods—such as collaborative projects, problem-based learning, and discussions—can significantly increase motivation. Teachers noted that incorporating technology and educational apps can make lessons more dynamic and interactive.
3. **Diverse Assessment Approaches:** A range of evaluation methods that provide constructive feedback is crucial. Formative assessments help students understand their progress and areas needing improvement, which can boost their confidence and encourage persistence.

4. **Individualization:** Tailoring teaching practices to meet the diverse needs and learning styles of students is essential. This individualized approach helps maintain interest and engagement, particularly for those who may struggle with traditional methods.
5. **Supportive Environment:** Creating a supportive classroom environment where students feel valued and recognized for their efforts can foster motivation. Encouragement and praise for improvements, regardless of the ultimate performance level, can help students stay committed.
6. **Challenges Related to Family Engagement:** Several teachers noted that while teaching practices and evaluations are important, they are often influenced by external factors, particularly family engagement and attitudes toward education. A supportive home environment can significantly impact a student's motivation and success.
7. **Constructive Feedback:** Regular, constructive feedback allows students to self-regulate their learning and fosters a sense of ownership over their educational journey. This can lead to improved motivation and reduced dropout rates.

Do you think that communication with families is important in reducing school dropout? Yes/No, Please justify your answer.

The consensus among teachers is that communication with families is essential in mitigating school dropout rates. Here are the key points from their responses:

1. **Role of Family Support:** Families play a crucial role in motivating students and emphasizing the importance of education. Without family involvement, students may lack the necessary support to succeed academically.

2. **Early Identification of Issues:** Regular communication allows families to be informed about their children's progress, attendance, and behavior. This helps in identifying potential issues early, enabling timely interventions.
3. **Contextual Understanding:** Understanding the family context is vital. Many students come from dysfunctional families, and addressing these circumstances is important for providing adequate support.
4. **Collaboration Between School and Home:** Effective communication fosters a partnership between the school and families. This collaboration helps align expectations and creates a supportive environment for students.
5. **Empowerment and Responsibility:** Families should be held accountable for their role in their children's education. Engaging them can empower parents to take an active role in their child's schooling.
6. **Identification of Needs:** Regular communication can help identify the specific needs of students, allowing schools to tailor their approaches accordingly.
7. **Building a Support Network:** Involving families creates a network of support that can promote student engagement and motivation, thereby reducing dropout rates.

From your point of view, who are the most vulnerable students (e.g. mental health, family financial need, minorities, learning difficulties, ...)?

From the responses gathered, the following groups of students are identified as the most vulnerable:

1. **Financial Hardship:** Students from low-income families face significant challenges that impact their education, including lack of resources and support.

2. **Dysfunctional Family Backgrounds:** Those from disorganized families, where issues such as domestic violence, substance abuse, or relationship conflicts occur, are particularly at risk.
3. **Learning Difficulties:** Students with learning disabilities or difficulties often struggle academically, making them more susceptible to disengagement and dropout.
4. **Mental Health Issues:** Students experiencing mental health challenges, such as anxiety, depression, or trauma from violence and bullying, are vulnerable to academic struggles and social isolation.
5. **Minority Status:** Students belonging to ethnic, racial, or cultural minorities may encounter additional barriers, including discrimination and a lack of support.
6. **Lack of Family Support:** Students without adequate familial guidance or supervision often face greater risks of underachievement and dropout.
7. **Social Instability:** Those affected by factors like familial health problems or inconsistent home environments are also seen as vulnerable.
8. **Underestimation of Potential:** Many vulnerable students are affected by low expectations from both family and society, which can lead to a lack of motivation and engagement in their education.

In terms of school drop-outs, what are the main challenges you face as a teacher in your school?

Teachers encounter various challenges when addressing school dropout rates, including:

1. **Understanding Student Needs:** Recognizing the underlying reasons for a student's potential dropout, such as mental health issues or familial circumstances, is crucial for effective intervention.

2. **Motivating Students:** Many teachers struggle to engage and motivate students, especially those who may not see the value of education for their future careers.
3. **Time Constraints:** Limited time to work individually with students makes it difficult to provide the necessary support for those at risk of dropping out.
4. **Complex Nature of Dropout Issues:** The responsibility of addressing dropout rates often feels overwhelming, as it is not solely a school issue but involves broader societal factors. Teachers may feel they are compromising their educational integrity by having to cater to administrative expectations rather than focusing on real-life preparation for students.
5. **Lack of Family Support:** Effective communication with families is often challenging, and many parents are unable or unwilling to engage in their child's education, making it difficult to implement solutions.
6. **Support for Mental Health:** Teachers report difficulties in addressing mental health issues among students, noting that the absence of professional support staff like psychologists in schools hampers their ability to help.
7. **Resource Limitations:** There is often a lack of resources and personalized support within schools to accommodate students with different needs, including those with learning difficulties.
8. **Building Positive Self-Concepts:** Helping students develop a positive self-image and encouraging resilience against failure are vital but challenging tasks for educators.
9. **Creating an Inclusive Environment:** Striving to maintain an inclusive and engaging classroom atmosphere for all students, especially those from varying backgrounds and with differing levels of motivation, can be difficult, particularly in larger classes.

10. **Addressing Disinterest:** Teachers frequently confront the challenge of convincing disinterested students of the importance of education for their personal and professional growth.
11. **Technological Integration:** Keeping up with technological advancements and effectively incorporating them into the learning process is essential but can also be a challenge.
12. **Collaborative Efforts:** Collaborating with various stakeholders (teachers, educational psychologists, families) is necessary to effectively minimize dropout rates, but often proves difficult due to lack of participation or awareness of issues among families.

Would you like to share any ideas that teachers/school authorities can use to reduce school dropout?

To effectively combat school dropout rates, teachers and school authorities can consider the following strategies:

1. **Accountability for All Involved:** It is crucial for all stakeholders—teachers, parents, and students—to take responsibility in addressing dropout rates. A focus on developing competencies rather than merely facilitating minimum educational requirements will lead to qualitative improvements in education.
2. **Language Support for Immigrant Students:** Students from Portuguese-speaking African countries (PALOP) who struggle with the European Portuguese language should have the legal right to attend classes designed to improve their language skills. This will enhance communication in classrooms and provide them with equitable opportunities for success in the educational system.
3. **Increased Psychological Support:** Hiring clinical psychologists in schools with more than 400 students (two in schools with over 800) can help address rising behavioral

and emotional issues among students. These professionals can work with identified cases from the beginning of the school year and provide support for both students and teachers facing classroom management challenges.

4. **Alternative Curricula:** Schools should consider implementing alternative curricula for at-risk students to better meet their unique needs, potentially reducing the likelihood of dropping out.
5. **Parental Engagement Initiatives:** Conducting direct actions in meetings with parents, involving school management or community members (such as psychologists), can foster a collaborative approach to support students at risk of dropping out.
6. **Peer Mentorship Programs:** Establishing mentorship programs where older or more advanced students support younger or new students can promote academic, social, and emotional growth. This sense of belonging can enhance motivation and connection to the school community.
7. **Career Exploration Activities:** Incorporating activities or subjects that allow students to explore various professions can help them prepare for adulthood in a healthy way and understand the value of education in achieving their career goals.
8. **Teacher Training:** Providing training to teachers on the use of new teaching tools can keep students engaged and motivated. Additionally, training on emotional management and relationship-building can help educators create a supportive classroom environment.
9. **Tutoring Programs:** Assigning tutors to students at risk of dropping out can provide personalized support and guidance.
10. **Online Study Support Teams:** Creating teams of teachers to offer online study assistance can help students who may struggle to attend in-person classes.

11. **Flexibility in Curriculum:** Schools should have the flexibility to design different curricula for students with specific needs. This tailored approach can help address the unique challenges faced by these students.

12. **Smaller Class Sizes:** Reducing class sizes can allow teachers to better perceive and respond to individual student situations, ultimately creating a more supportive learning environment.

By implementing these ideas, teachers and school authorities can create a more inclusive and supportive educational experience, which can significantly reduce school dropout rates.

6. Results from interviews with stakeholders

Introduction

Five participants from Portugal contributed to the survey for the Erasmus+ stAI project on preventing early school leaving with AI. Their backgrounds are very different, like president of the municipality, director of a teachers training, Digital Ambassador of the Portuguese Ministry of Education or National Education Council. All the participants have a huge experience in their field, together, they offer diverse perspectives on tackling early school leaving.

To what extent do you believe school dropout is a topic to explore further and a problem to tackle in (country)?

- a) to what extent is school dropout a topic to further explore. Likert scale, from 1 (not at all) to 5

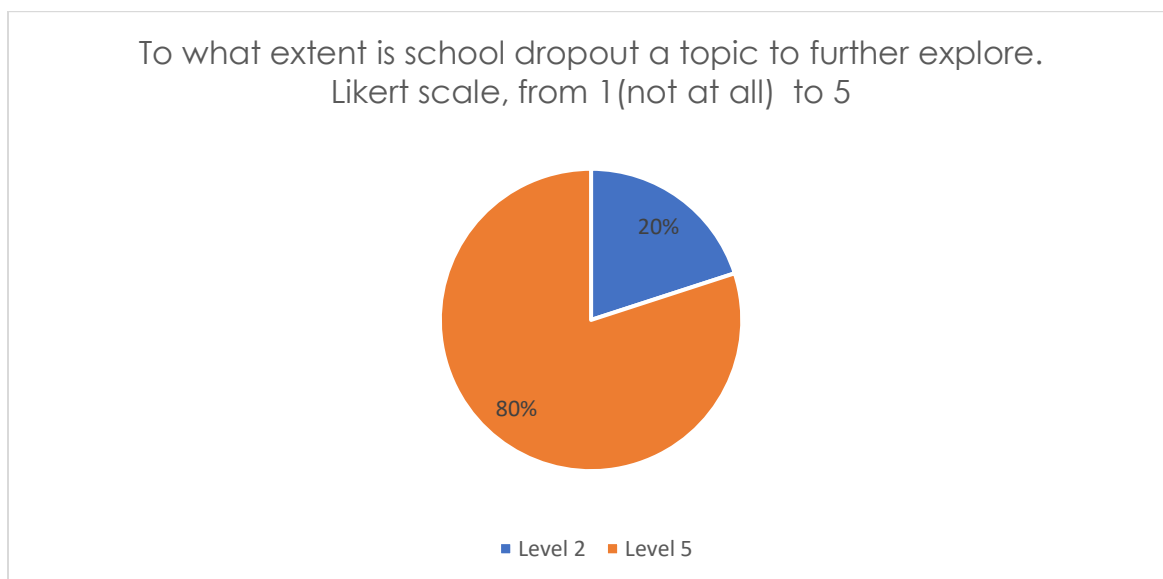


Figure 2 - Opinion about the relevance of further explore the ELEC in school, according this expert's opinion

As we can see, 4 in 5 of the participants in this study, gives the maximum relevance (5) to this topic.

To what extent is school dropout a problem to relevant. Likert scale, from 1(not at all) to 5

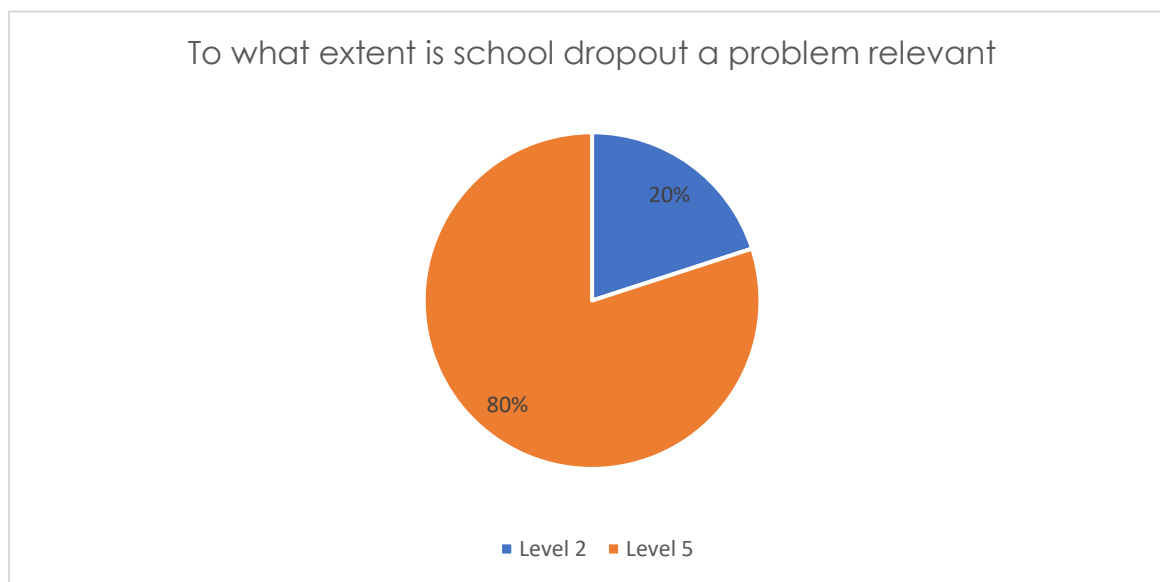


Figure 3 - Opinion about the relevance of the ELEC in school, according this expert's opinion

Again, we have the same results, thus emphasizing the idea that this is an aspect that we need to improve in our schools, in our particular case, in Portugal

In your opinion, what are the primary causes/main risk factors of school dropout in (state/district)? Who are the most vulnerable students (please, also indicate the level: primary, medium or secondary school) in this regard?

The primary causes of school dropout in Portugal are largely due to socioeconomic, academic, and personal factors. Poverty, lack of parental involvement, and low academic achievement are key risks, with students from low-income families, those with learning disabilities, or those facing health or personal issues like teen pregnancy being the most vulnerable.

At the primary level, children from low-income or migrant families are at risk. In middle school, academic difficulties and frequent family moves are major factors. In secondary school, students needing to work, with behavioral issues, or facing repeated failures are

most likely to drop out. Dropout tends to be more common in secondary education, where challenges accumulate.

What challenges do schools face in implementing prevention actions for dropouts?

Schools in Portugal face several challenges in implementing dropout prevention actions. Key issues include limited resources, such as funding and staffing, which hinder early identification of at-risk students and the implementation of support systems like mentoring and tutoring programs. Engaging families and communities is also difficult, with limited parental involvement and community support being common barriers.

Further obstacles include the need for adaptable curricula, differentiated pedagogy, and addressing specific student needs such as mental health issues, learning disabilities, and language barriers. Schools also struggle with creating a more holistic approach through better coordination with social services and community organizations. Teachers require more professional development and motivation to adopt new teaching practices.

Are there still existing policies/programs to prevent and combat dropout in your educational system?

All the participants in this study say a big YES.

Are there still existing policies/programs to prevent and combat dropout in your educational system? If yes, how effective do you believe current policies/programs are? In your opinion, what policy changes could be made to better address dropout rates?

In Portugal, there are existing policies and programs aimed at preventing and combating school dropout, but their effectiveness varies. Many stakeholders believe that current efforts have improved compared to past initiatives, yet there is still significant room for progress. Policies such as the TEIP program (for schools in disadvantaged areas) have shown some success, but challenges remain in fully addressing the issue.

One major concern is the lack of adequate funding and resources, especially in low-income areas. Schools often struggle with insufficient staff and support systems, making it difficult to provide early interventions and individualized attention to at-risk students. Many respondents highlight the need for comprehensive support services, including mental health care and professional development for teachers, as key areas for improvement.

Another important aspect is fostering better links with the community and engaging families more effectively in the educational process. Building stronger partnerships between schools and local organizations could help create a more holistic approach to student well-being and success. Additionally, culturally responsive curricula and language support programs are seen as essential in promoting equity and inclusivity, particularly for students from minority or migrant backgrounds.

Policy changes that could better address dropout rates include increasing funding, enhancing community partnerships, reducing standardized testing pressures, and implementing data-driven decision-making processes. Legislative advocacy for long-term, sustainable funding is also crucial to ensure that dropout prevention programs can be consistently applied and adapted to the needs of each school. Creating spaces for reflection and sharing best practices, particularly between successful TEIP schools and others, could further strengthen the overall approach to combating dropout.

Are there still existing policies/programs to prevent and combat dropout in your educational system? If yes, can you mention one at the regional or local level?

In Portugal, various national-level policies and programs are in place to prevent and combat school dropout, such as the TEIP3 Programme, which is implemented in 146 school groupings located in economically and socially disadvantaged areas. This program aims to reduce early school leaving, absenteeism, indiscipline, and promote educational success, particularly in regions marked by poverty and social exclusion.

At the regional and local levels, specific initiatives also exist. For example, the PIEF (Integrated Education and Training Program) groups provide targeted support, though they face challenges due to resource limitations. Other notable initiatives include the MAIA Project and the National Programme for the Promotion of School Success, which focus on improving student outcomes and reducing dropout rates. In TEIP schools, tailored measures have been developed to address both school failure and early dropout, offering practical, localized solutions to these issues.

Regarding data: Data to measure dropout rate: What data do you use to measure and track dropout rates? (state/district)

Regarding data to measure and track dropout rates in schools, various metrics and statistics are utilized. This includes overall dropout rates at different educational levels, which provide a broad overview of student retention. In our schools, internal evaluations are conducted to assess dropout rates effectively. Additionally, specific tools such as RIPA (*Registro de Identificação dos Problemas de Aprendizagem* - Record of Identification of Learning Problems) and REPA (*Registo de Eventos e Performance Académica* - Registration of Events and Academic Performance) are employed to gather detailed information.

Other important data points include the number of student retentions, attendance records, the frequency of disciplinary actions taken against students, and the implementation of monitoring and support plans. Collectively, these data sources help schools identify at-risk students and develop strategies to improve retention.

Regarding data: Data to predict early school leaving: What student data is collected at schools (e.g., students' characteristics, behaviour, performance)? Is it possible to access it? Is this data standardized at the national/local level? Do schools collect data about the main risk factors?

In addressing the question of data collected to predict early school leaving, schools typically gather various types of student data, which include:

- **Demographic Information:** This encompasses students' socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and family backgrounds, providing context for understanding individual challenges.
- **Local Studies and Reports:** Educational research and local reports contribute insights into the causes of dropout rates, offering a more nuanced understanding of the issue.

While schools generally collect this information, there is uncertainty about whether it is standardized at the local or national level. Most schools seem to focus on addressing individual student needs rather than relying solely on standardized data.

Additionally, schools are proactive in collecting data related to the main risk factors for early school leaving. For example, TEIP schools use success rate maps and maintain databases to track both academic success and dropout rates. The Multidisciplinary Support Teams for Inclusive Education play a crucial role in this process, as current educational policies emphasize the importance of inclusive practices and the responsibility of teachers to understand their students' unique circumstances to ensure that no student is left behind.

Are there technological tools currently used to prevent and/or reduce dropout rates? Can you describe them?

Technological tools used to prevent and reduce dropout rates include early warning systems that identify at-risk students, learning management systems (LMS) for personalized learning, and student information systems that manage comprehensive student data. Communication tools enhance interaction among teachers, students, and parents, while data analytics support informed decision-making for interventions. Online tutoring and mentoring platforms offer personalized academic help, and mobile apps

provide flexible learning options. Gamification tools boost engagement, and social and emotional learning (SEL) tools develop essential emotional skills. However, awareness of these technologies varies among educators, and there's a mandate for a Digital Action Plan for School Development (PADDE) in educational institutions.

How do you envision the role of technology and data analytics in future dropout prevention efforts?

In future dropout prevention efforts, technology and data analytics will be crucial in providing real-time insights and personalized interventions. Advanced data analytics will help schools accurately predict at-risk students, allowing for timely support. Enhanced communication tools will strengthen engagement among students, parents, and educators, while personalized learning platforms will address individual needs, making education more accessible. Additionally, integrating social and emotional learning tools and gamification strategies will create a supportive environment that fosters engagement and reduces dropout rates. Educators will benefit from training in active methodologies that utilize digital technologies, further improving student success and inclusion. Overall, leveraging technology could significantly transform how schools support students, ensuring more succeed in their educational journeys.

Do you think there is a role for AI in this context (e.g., integrating AI to prevent and/or reduce dropout rates)? If yes, how do you recommend using AI?

Yes, AI can significantly contribute to preventing and reducing dropout rates in educational settings. It offers advanced predictive analytics that can analyze vast amounts of data to identify at-risk students early, predict potential dropouts, and recommend tailored interventions. By personalizing learning experiences based on individual needs and preferences, AI enhances student engagement and academic performance. Additionally, AI-powered chatbots and virtual tutors can provide real-time academic support and emotional counseling, ensuring that students receive ongoing guidance.

Moreover, AI can optimize resource allocation and support data-driven decision-making, allowing schools to implement timely and effective strategies for engaging students. This technology also has the potential to transform educators' competencies by altering teaching strategies and facilitating the identification of alternative pathways for student success.

For successful implementation, there must be strong coordination between experts in education and AI to ensure that the technology effectively addresses the needs of all students. By carefully integrating AI into educational systems, schools can create a more supportive and proactive environment that keeps students engaged and on track to graduate.

What long-term strategies do you believe will be most effective in preventing, reducing and combating dropout rates?

Long-term strategies for preventing and combating dropout rates emphasize the importance of equitable access to quality education and comprehensive support services that address academic, emotional, and social needs. These strategies involve providing holistic support, including mental health services and academic counseling, while actively engaging families and communities in the educational process. Early childhood education is crucial for ensuring children are ready to learn, and the curriculum should be relevant to students' lives and career aspirations. Professional development for educators is necessary to adopt effective and culturally responsive teaching methods. Creating a positive school climate and fostering strong community partnerships will further enhance support for students. Additionally, leveraging technology and data analytics for early intervention, offering flexible learning options, and preparing students for careers and college are essential components. Advocating for policy reforms and securing sustainable funding will also contribute to effective dropout prevention efforts. By integrating these strategies, schools can cultivate an environment where all students receive the support they need to succeed academically and stay engaged in their education.