

# **DEVELOPING INCLUSIVE SYSTEMS ACROSS THE EDUCATION, HEALTH AND SOCIAL SECTORS FOR EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING PREVENTION**

## SUMMARY

For early school leaving prevention, there is a need to go beyond Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1995) influential focus on systems in developmental psychology, to scrutinise system blockages and the inertia hindering inclusive systems. Based on a review of international policy and research, such system blockages to communication include a lack of opportunity for voices of socio-economically excluded students at risk of early school leaving, and for emotional and mental health support. Developing such inclusive systems also requires a priority of investment for promoting teachers' conflict resolution skills. For inclusive systems of care to challenge a system blockage of fragmentation, a focus is needed on developing cohesive multidisciplinary teams in and around schools rather than disparate services. For inclusive systems overcoming structures of exclusion requires alternatives to suspension and expulsion from school, as well as an attunement to issues of territory, and neutral spaces in a local community. The author of this paper recommends that the EU Commission, in conjunction with the EU Parliament, develop structural indicators for inclusive systems (at EU, national, regional, municipal and school levels), as part of meeting the EU2020 headline target for early school leaving prevention.

## INTRODUCTION

There is *still* a silence, a silence of exclusion, an avoidable silence, at the heart of many schools across Europe today. This silence is in relation to students' voices. This silence still exists despite Article 12 (1) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which declares: 'States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'. It is important to emphasise that students' councils are one aspect of a systemic response to including students' voices but it cannot be the only one. The individual student and not simply the aggregate of students needs to be heard and this is especially important for documenting the experiences of more vulnerable students on the margins, experiencing poverty and social exclusion, at risk of early school leaving. A more focused systemic response<sup>2</sup> to engaging with these students is needed to engage with their hidden voices. This requires children and young people's contextual voices to be heard, in specific areas, in specific schools – not just voices in general.

Educational issues in school affecting children and young people require their voices to be heard not as an optional extra but as a right. However, this excision of individual children and young people's voices from many educational matters directly affecting them is a dual silencing – it is a silencing not simply of students in general across many European school contexts but is one which impacts even further on those students experiencing socio-economic exclusion and being at risk of early school leaving. Their voices need to be systematically heard. Bridging this double gap for students' voices is an imperative as a dimension of reaching the EU2020 headline target for 10% early school leavers across the EU. An average of 11.2% of young people (aged 18-24) in the EU-28 were early leavers from education and training in 2014; among the EU Member

States, the proportion of early leavers in 2014 ranged from 2.7% in Croatia (but with low reliability) to 21.9% in Spain (Eurostat 2016)

In Iceland, Brigisdottir (2013) highlights a process of communication with those leaving school early. The students are interviewed individually by an Education Ministry official to find out why they are leaving school early. Yet this dialogue with students arguably comes too late in the process and needs systematic expression at a range of earlier stages as part of a Europe-wide prevention focus (Downes 2013). The absence of consideration of students' voices is a clear gap in the otherwise highly progressive EU Council and Commission Documents (2011) on Early School Leaving Prevention. Significantly, the EU Commission Thematic Working Group on early school leaving report (2013) is the first Commission document in relation to early school leaving prevention that places students' voices at the centre of a dialogical process with schools:

Ensure children and young people are at the centre of all policies aimed at reducing ESL. Ensure their voices are taken into account when developing and implementing such policies. (p.4)

It is notable also that children's voices are largely absent from US research. A key factor in this is the relative lack of influence of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in US contexts, including the CRC's commitment to consulting children on matters affecting their own welfare, as successive US governments have still not ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. In the words of Jean Paul Sartre, the French existentialist philosopher, 'bad faith is to pretend something is necessary that is in fact voluntary'. The exclusion of socio-economically marginalised students' voices from the education system is a choice made by education systems, it need not necessarily be so.

Socio-economically marginalised students' voices are one dimension of developing more inclusive systems in education for early school leaving prevention. They are part of a wider concern with overcoming system blockages in communication. Overcoming system blockages in communication to develop inclusive systems across education, health and social sectors will be considered for the following dimensions in this paper:

Inclusive systems as voice, as voices of socio-economically marginalised students, is one dimension of a system blockage in communication, where the voices of students do not become heard. Another aspect of a system blockage of communication in schools which needs to be addressed in inclusive school systems is to provide emotional support for students at risk of early school leaving (Downes 2010, 2011b). Inclusive school systems also need to provide systems of care. Systems of care require supportive and responsive communication approaches. This leads to the issue of the conflict resolution skills of teachers to help achieve this. In juxtaposing system blockages in education with inclusive systems, a number of other areas emerge for consideration. System blockage will be interpreted as fragmentation and structures of exclusion. The further issue of the system blockage of resistance is examined in a recent EU report (Downes 2014a) on parental involvement

for early school leaving prevention, where overcoming system blockage as resistance involves promotion of a democratic school culture through hearing the voices not only of socio-economically marginalised students but also of their parents. Challenging system blockage of fragmentation invites a focus on inclusive systems as systems of care through multidisciplinary teams in and around schools. Overcoming structures of exclusion for inclusive systems requires alternatives to suspension and expulsion from school. Before examining these aspects, the conceptual framework of system blockage requires further exposition.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: BEYOND BRONFENBRENNER'S SYSTEMS AND RUTTER'S RESILIENCE TO INCLUSIVE SYSTEMS AS OVERCOMING SYSTEM BLOCKAGE**

System habits resist change. The dominant paradigm for understanding systems in developmental psychology is Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1995) ecological systems theory. Yet this framework only belatedly acknowledged the vital issue of time and change through Bronfenbrenner's (1995) later addition of the chronosystem. However, even this revised system framework of Bronfenbrenner largely ignores the need for a heightened focus on system blockage, on system resistance to change, on overcoming system inertia. Bronfenbrenner (1979) neglected system blockages, diametric splits and displacement (Downes 2013, 2014)<sup>3</sup>. Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1995) framework minimised system change issues, power issues and system inertia (Downes 2014). A system blockage focus examines ways of overcoming system structures of exclusion, system level diametric splits in communication and structures (Downes 2012, 2013, 2014).

This idea of system blockage, alienation and displacement is developed in Downes (2014), *Access to education in Europe: A framework and agenda for system change* (Dordrecht: Springer). It seeks a post-Bronfenbrennerian paradigm that examines structures of exclusion in inert systems and a movement towards more fluid inclusive systems. The question for current purposes is to identify key features of system blockages across education, health and social sectors that need to be addressed for a holistic early school leaving prevention strategy in Europe. It is these system blockages that are hindering the development of inclusive systems. To ensure that policies and strategies do not only remain on paper for the EU2020 headline target of early school leaving reduction, a system implementation focus for early school leaving prevention needs to be adopted. To build relational systemic structures of inclusion to meet students' needs for early school leaving prevention, systemic structures of exclusion must be identified and challenged. Systems of care in education must be developed.

A focus on inclusive systems seeks to go beyond Rutter's (1985) resilience framework as this is too individualistic. Rutter's (1985, 2012) recognition of the role of social supports and schools for resilience is not a systemic focus on integrated agencies as systems of care. Even a broadening of the concept of resilience beyond the individual, to accentuate the role of the environment in an interactive process (Ungar 2012) or to a systems focus on fostering resilience is not enough. There is a need to shift from a reactive resilience

framework to a proactive prevention and early intervention approach. An active conception of inclusive systems and barriers to this through system blockage is required.<sup>4</sup>

This introductory account in this paper to overcoming system blockage for early school leaving prevention does not purport to be a systematic overview but is rather to be treated as a precursor to such an overview, highlighting the need for such a systemic response to documenting and engaging with the experiences of those students who are at risk of early school leaving. These illustrative examples are drawn both from quantitative and qualitative research internationally.

## INCLUSIVE SYSTEMS TO HEAR STUDENTS' VOICES REGARDING CONFLICT WITH TEACHERS

The issue of authoritarian teaching that creates a classroom and organizational culture in school based on fear is a pervasive example in international research of a system blockage; more relational approaches are needed for inclusive systems in education for early school leaving prevention. The World Health Organisation's (2012) research on young people's well-being recommended modifications to school systems that appear to have merit as including establishing a caring atmosphere that promotes autonomy, providing positive feedback, not publicly humiliating students who perform poorly, identifying and promoting young people's special interests and skills to acknowledge that schools value the diversity they bring.

Pyhältö et al.'s (2010) research in Finland, in a sample of 518 9<sup>th</sup> grade students, across 6 schools highlighted 'unjustified and authoritarian behaviour [by teachers] that undermined pupil's agency was considered as a source of burden, anxiety, and anger' (p.215). This is echoed by Cefai & Cooper (2010), in a review of qualitative research in Malta:

the autocratic and rigid behaviour management approach adopted by many teachers in their response to misbehaviour. Their blaming and punitive approach was seen in many cases as leading to an exacerbation of the problem...It looks...that perceived victimisation by teachers was more prevalent and had more impact than victimisation and bullying by peers. (p.188)

Magri's (2009) study of girls aged 12-16 in the Inner Harbour of Valetta and Northern regions of Malta further illustrates this theme of alienation through authoritarian teaching:

*"I remember very clearly phrases from my teacher such as; 'you should really be in the B class', or 'this is above your level'. I felt incompetent compared to the other students and was very much aware of how happier I was in my previous class."*

*"Disastrous, because they expect everything the way they want it. I cannot take it when they start shouting. They start shouting as soon as you utter a word".*

*"It's not the subject that I don't like, it's the teacher... she starts shouting in your face" (p.75).*

It is well-recognised in the workplace that if a boss or manager criticizes an employee in front of other colleagues that this is embarrassing, demotivating and disrespectful to that employee. Adults tend not to tolerate such treatment. Why would we expect children and young people to tolerate criticism and humiliation in front of their peers by some teachers in school? What would we expect them to do except desire to leave such an environment? Such poor communicative practices contribute to early school leaving. It may be argued that students' perceptions are only one perspective, but perceptions are important in their influence upon both motivation and behaviour.

The words of the following student, expressing a desire to leave school early, in Downes & Maunsell's (2007) Irish study, bear further reflection, "some [teachers] think they own the school". This student's response raises a fundamental issue: Who does own the school? Is it simply the teachers and principal? Where are students and parents to be situated in terms of power and ownership of school structures and processes? It is also frequently overlooked that criticism or public embarrassment from a teacher is not simply a comment upon a child from an individual, it is a comment upon them from an agent of the state (at least in state-funded schools) – this is an additional power wielded by the teacher as an exercise of the State's power over its children as subjects.

Key results observed in TALIS (OECD 2009) include that one teacher in four in most countries loses at least 30% of the lesson time, and some lose more than half, in disruptions and administrative tasks – and this is closely associated with the disciplinary climate in the classroom, which varies more among individual teachers than among schools. Again this highlights a pervasive systemic problem in relation to support for teachers regarding classroom management approaches and conflict resolution skills.

Acknowledged subsequently in the Council Recommendation (2011), the Commission Proposal for a Council Recommendation in relation to early school leaving states:

Targeted teacher training helps them to deal with diversity in the classroom, to support pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and to solve difficult teaching situations (p. 12).

In Downes (2013), a review of this issue concludes:

There is an emerging European and international consensus – not only that teachers need more support regarding conflict resolution skills, classroom management techniques and assistance in fostering a positive classroom and school climate – but that these are key protective factors in prevention of early school leaving. (p.356)

The Roman Emperor, Caligula's words, 'Let them hate so long as they fear', aptly express the mentality of the authoritarian teacher. However, the fear

resides also in such a teacher. The authoritarian teacher projects his or her own insecurity and fear of the students onto the students. Yet the issue is less one of blaming individual teachers and rather one of recognising that such old-style authoritarian teachers are not coping, are using outdated coping strategies and require support through professional development.

Obviously this is not to understate the immensely positive influence many teachers have on students to help keep them in the system when they might be at risk of early school leaving. For example, a number of US longitudinal studies provide evidence that a teacher's report, in research responses, of a supportive relationship with a student has positive effects on elementary students' behavioural and academic adjustment (Curby, Rimm-Kaufman, & Ponitz, 2009; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007; Valiente, Lemery-Chalfant, Swanson, & Reiser, 2008).

On these issues of system blockage in communication in school, whether through marginalization of marginalized students' voices or through authoritarian teaching styles, the question arises as to how the EU Parliament and Commission can contribute? A number of avenues for reform in this area need to be considered. These include:

- An EU Parliament or Commission Quality Mark for Children and Young People's Voices to be heard and Democratic Communication to take place in school
- Ensure a transparent process for documenting students experiences in school across different age groups (both later primary and post-primary), with a focus on those at highest risk of early school leaving and specific local area contexts. This process needs to include questionnaires, focus groups including open questions to allow students' stories to be heard.
- The EU Commission or Parliament could link with municipalities to implement these processes – they must be external to the school for honest responses from pupils and students
- Part of an EU Commission or Parliament Quality Mark for Children and Young People's Voices to be heard and Democratic Communication to take place in school could be not only at an individual school level but also at a national level – here the focus needs to be on the quality of teacher pre-service training and professional development engagement in conflict resolution skills for teachers.

It is important when challenging habitual systemic practices to recognize that:

The danger exists that it is precisely those teachers who may be most resistant to professional development for conflict resolution skills who need them most; this applies *a fortiori* if there is no specific requirement or incentive provided to do so... It is important to emphasise that it is not a matter of shifting blame from student to teacher; it is about going beyond an individual blame type of focus to a systemic one (Downes 2013, p.354).

## INCLUSIVE SYSTEMS AS EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

A further feature of inclusive systems for students is the provision of emotional support in and around schools. A holistic approach to early school leaving prevention is needed through a focus on mental health, the emotions and multidisciplinary teams in and around schools. Poverty impacts on mental health, and mental health impacts on early school leaving. This is clear from even a brief overview of international research on this issue.

Mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, disruptive behaviour disorders, eating disorders, or post-traumatic stress disorder, can negatively impact on a child's school success, as well as general well-being (Kessler 2009; World Health Organization 2003). Children living in low-income families are especially vulnerable to mental health difficulties (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2009).

Quiroga et al.'s (2013) study of 493 high-risk French-speaking adolescents living in Montreal, Canada, is apposite. They found that depression symptoms at the beginning of secondary school are related to higher levels of early school leaving mainly by being associated with pessimistic views about the likelihood of reaching the desired school outcomes; student negative self-beliefs are in turn related to lower self-reported academic performance and predict a higher risk of early school leaving. Quiroga et al. (2013) conclude that interventions that target student mental health and negative self-perceptions are likely to improve early school leaving prevention. Their review highlights that a significant number of adolescents showing serious emotional distress and depression symptoms are at risk of school failure and dropping out of school (Quiroga, Janosz, Lyons, & Morin, 2012; Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, Epstein, & Sumi, 2005).

Even apart from poverty related depression, emotional distress contributes to early school leaving. The Irish Parliament and Senate Report on early school leaving (2010) provides case studies of those who left school early due to the trauma factors of rape, bereavement, or sexual abuse. Wider engagement processes than those which class teachers can offer are required to reach withdrawn children. The emotional support needs of withdrawn students, who are at risk of early school leaving, may be missed by teachers compared with those students displaying and externalising problems through aggression (Doll 1996; Downes 2004). In the words of student respondents in Downes & Maunsell (2007):

- *"Why do you think some people are dying? Because there is no one to talk to"*
- *"we should do more personal development"*
- *"girls slit their wrists"*
- *"girls take tablets and slice their wrists"*
- *"girls sleeping around to hurt themselves, other ways instead of slitting wrists"*

System level supports need to be put in place in a consistent fashion across the EU for children and young people who have experienced emotional trauma such as bereavement, rape and sexual abuse, which thereby hinders their capacity to stay in the school system. Such emotional support provision in



and around schools also requires firm addressing of another issue regarding emotional needs, namely, bullying. Pervasive teasing and bullying in a school may lead to disengagement and avoidance of school, distraction and inattentiveness in the classroom, and, ultimately, poorer academic performance (Downes 2004; Juvonen, Wang, & Espinoza, 2011; Lacey & Cornell, 2011).

It is notable that bullying affecting non-attendance at school and a heightened risk of early school leaving may not only be at the level of direct bullying of the individual but also in terms of an atmosphere or school climate of teasing and bullying. Cornell et al. (2013) highlight a basic conclusion from their study, that the prevalence of teasing and bullying in high schools deserves serious consideration by educators in addressing the problem of early school leaving. In a sample of 276 high schools, the level of teasing and bullying reported by both ninth-grade students and teachers was predictive of cumulative leaving counts over the 4 years until the cohort reached 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Cornell et al. (2013) conclude that notably, the increased dropout count that was associated with the Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying was quite similar to the increases that were associated with poverty and academic failure. They note that early school leaving prevention programmes often focus too narrowly on changes in individual students, without considering broader peer and school influences.

Though neglected by the OECD reports (2007, 2010) on the ten steps to equity in education (Downes 2010, 2011b), there has been a growing awareness in recent years of the need for a holistic approach to early school leaving prevention that includes a focus on mental health and the emotional dimensions. Such a holistic approach requires a policy and practice response that builds bridges between the health, social and education sectors and systems. This requires a significant change to how the system operates as many of these sectors still tend to operate largely in isolation from each other across many European countries. Different support levels are needed for all, some and individual intensive chronic levels of need for emotional and mental health support. Suldo et al., (2010) discuss the kinds of support needed for the provision of:

a continuum of tiered intervention services, including prevention and universal intervention (e.g., school wide positive behavioral supports, school climate promotion), targeted interventions for students at risk (e.g., social skills and anger management groups, classroom management strategies), and intensive individualized interventions with community support (e.g., therapy, implementation of behavior intervention plans) in schools. (p.354)

In the words of Graham Greene's novel, 'The power and the glory', 'Hope is an instinct that only the reasoning human mind can kill, animals never know despair'. It is not too much to ask of an education, health and social system that it help give children and young people experiencing poverty and/or trauma the necessary forms of emotional support to foster hope – a hope needed even more so in an era of so-called austerity.

What can the EU Parliament do to ensure that students at risk of early school leaving have access to adequate emotional and family support services linked

with schools? Can the *availability* of emotional and family support services be linked to a Quality Mark framework for systems of care offered by the EU Commission or Parliament?

## INCLUSIVE SYSTEMS AS SYSTEMS OF CARE – MULTIDISCIPLINARY TEAMS IN AND AROUND SCHOOLS

Systems of care need much further development across Europe as part of a challenge to system blockage of fragmentation; thus, a policy focus is needed to go beyond multiple agencies. The *Alliances for Inclusion* report (Edwards & Downes 2013) reviewed the enabling conditions for the effectiveness of multidisciplinary teams and cross-sectoral approaches for early school leaving prevention, building on 16 examples from 10 European countries. This review concludes that there is a need to minimise fragmentation across diverse services ‘passing on bits of the child’ and family (Edwards & Downes 2013). There is a need to avoid diffusion of responsibility for children and young people across diverse services through a more coordinated focus on multidisciplinary teams. The multi-faceted nature of risk requires a multi-faceted response that needs to go beyond referrals to disparate services resulting in this phenomenon of ‘passing on bits of the child’ (Edwards & Downes 2013). If possible, to limit fragmentation and provide a focus on shared goals a maximum of two agencies should be involved; to achieve this, agencies may need to be restructured for greater focus (Downes 2013b). This systemic shift is from multiple agencies to cohesive multidisciplinary teams, providing systems of care for early school leaving prevention.

An aspect of such cross-sectoral working includes the need for an increased level of focus on developing multidisciplinary teams to work in and around schools to prevent young people leaving the education system prematurely. Even if common strategic goals centred on the needs of vulnerable children and young people can be identified across professional boundaries, it is still far from evident that habitual systemic practices in schools and agencies working with children and young people are open to change and reform. For genuine interprofessional collaboration for early school leaving prevention, for example, between schools and multidisciplinary teams of outreach care workers, therapists/counsellors, nurses, speech and language therapists, social workers, occupational therapists, policy-led co-location is not sufficient; efforts are needed to support inter-professional collaborations and overcome resistance (Edwards & Downes 2013). A focus is needed on expanding the multi-disciplinarity of existing teams (two agencies or one team) in a local area, bridging (mental) health and education expertise.

Each family with children at risk of early school leaving or related risks needs to have one ‘lead professional’ to link them with others (Edwards & Downes 2013a). These multidisciplinary teams can facilitate a continuum of interventions – all, some, and intensive individual work for those with chronic levels of need. They offer the flexibility to move up and down the level of intensity required for working with a given child and his/her family for early school leaving prevention. Key aspects of such teams are to offer interventions addressing forms of emotional support, speech and language, as well as proactive outreach to support families in chronic need in their

homes (Downes 2011). As part of a prevention and early intervention focus, these multidisciplinary teams must engage directly with children, young people and their families' problems affecting early school leaving, for example, non-attendance, trauma, bullying, mental health difficulties, language development, parental support, sleep deficits, substance misuse, suspension/expulsion, conflict with teachers. A key issue here is that the team operates through a framework of shared goals and outcomes (Downes 2011). There is a need also for local discretion and a subsidiarity principle that allows the local community based team in and around schools to prioritise which children and their families are priorities for intervention, as well as to place trust in their professional judgment as to *how* this intervention will be carried out. For such multidisciplinary work, there is a need to focus on direct delivery and to minimise 'committee sitting' (Downes 2013a). At EU and national levels, strategic direction can be given for funding such local multidisciplinary teams in relation to *what* issues and needs of children and their families are to be addressed. Whereas the *how* question at direct delivery level is devolved and local, the *what* question needs a certain amount of central direction to ensure that a strategic approach to key issues concerning the prevention of early school leaving is taken across diverse contexts.

## OVERCOMING SYSTEM BLOCKAGE: STRUCTURES OF EXCLUSION

A further dimension of system blockage can be described as structures of exclusion, as diametric split structures operating within education systems (Downes 2012, 2013), building on an amplification of Foucault's (1972) early concerns with the fundamental structure of exclusion in the wider society. Inclusive systems provide alternatives to suspension and expulsion; this is a realm relevant also for multidisciplinary teams in and around schools.

Alternatives to suspension and expulsion are needed to stop diametrically opposing strategic approaches. It is a systemic absurdity to have, on the one hand, a range of State actors and services seeking to keep students in the school system, supplemented by an EU2020 headline target for early school leaving prevention and then, on the other hand, to have a system of schooling where students can be suspended or expelled from school. This diametric splitting at systemic level which occurs in many EU countries must be challenged in a systemic fashion. Such a challenge recognises that some students' psychological needs and behaviours may require them to be removed from the class for a period of time, but the purpose of this is not to support their removal from the school.

Suspension rates themselves are predictive of early school leaving rates (T. Lee, Cornell, Gregory & Fan, 2011). An English study by Rennison *et al.*, (2005) found that young people in the NEET [Not in Education, Employment or Training] group were over three times more likely previously to have been excluded from school than young people overall. The Irish post-primary figure of 5% for suspension, applied to the total population of 332,407 students equates to well over 16,000 students suspended from post-primary schools in 2005/6 (ERC/NEWB 2010).

A notable study on this issue is Markussen et al.'s (2011) longitudinal study following a sample of 9,749 Norwegian students over a five-year period, out of compulsory education (which ends at age 16) and through upper secondary education (age 16 to 19). Markussen et al (2011) found that students with high scores on an index measuring seriously deviant behaviour were in fact less likely to leave early than students with relatively lower scores on this index. This last finding is explained by the extra resources, support and attention these students are provided with, making it less likely that they will leave. In other words, system level supports for inclusion can minimise early school leaving for those at highest risk. They can serve to dismantle system structures of exclusion which lead to early school leaving.

### **OVERCOMING THE SYSTEM BLOCKAGE OF FRAGMENTATION: ANTICIPATING TERRITORIALITY AND 'NOT NOT DOING' SERVICES**

Local rivalries across municipalities and schools are an obstacle to the sharing of good practice. Such local rivalries across agencies occur especially in a recession – in order to claim resources and credit for gains in the outcomes of the people they are seeking to assist. Considerable progress may be achieved by addressing local rivalries and conflicts among schools, agencies and municipalities. Territoriality as a dimension of system fragmentation can be described in terms of a 'not not doing' approach; a service may not be actually doing anything on a particular issue yet perceives itself as working, in principle, on this issue – and this precludes others from entering this 'territory' as it is seen as the domain of the first service. A system stasis and fragmentation occurs and children's needs fall through the gaps. The 'not not doing' approach prevents other services from engaging with such important issues.

Another dimension of territoriality is that of physical spaces and whether they are perceived as neutral locations for different parts of a fractured community. The physical location of key community services, such as multidisciplinary teams, need to be in a neutral community space (Downes & Maunsell 2007). Neutral spaces are for 'people like us' but many services and spaces are perceived by local groups as foreign or alien to their community, simply based on their location outside a neutral community space. Such community divisions regarding space can occur not only due to ethnicity or social class divisions. These divisions can also occur within areas of high social exclusion, where territories may be divided due to historical community conflicts, or due to drug dealers' current or historical territories (Downes & Maunsell 2007), or even without an obvious overt cause of the diametric splits in territory affecting areas (Conquergood 1994).

### **CONCLUSION**

Key reasons for early school leaving observed on the systemic level are communication problems, trauma and mental health issues, suspension and exclusion, structural fragmentation, and lack of neutral spaces, and roles for parental involvement. A systematic approach to evaluation and transparency is required across the education, health and social sectors in Europe to examine whether a strategic approach is being adopted to promote inclusive systems

for early school leaving prevention. Based on the issues discussed above, it is being proposed that a range of structural indicators for system inclusion be developed. Structural indicators provide a focus on *prevention* – court cases are too late, they do not tend to prevent early school leaving from occurring.

Structural indicators (SIs) are generally framed as potentially verifiable yes/no answers, they address whether or not key structures, mechanisms or principles are in place in a system. As relatively enduring features or key conditions of a system, they are, however, potentially malleable. They offer a scrutiny of the State or institutional effort being expended and can be developed for education systems by analogy with the UN right to health (Downes 2014, see also UN Rapporteur 2006). They are more practical and flexible than needing to go to court to enforce.

It is being recommended that the EU Commission, in conjunction with the EU Parliament, develop structural indicators for inclusive systems (at EU, national, regional, municipality and school levels) for early school leaving prevention. The following indicators, though not exhaustive, are illustrative of key issues for system reform towards inclusive systems:

- Are alternatives to suspension/expulsion in place? (Yes/No)
- Is Teacher Professional Development available in conflict resolution skills? (Yes/No)
- Is Teacher Professional Development in conflict resolution skills mandatory? (Yes/No)
- Are Teacher Pre-service modules on conflict resolution skills compulsory? (Yes/No)
- Are qualified emotional counselling support services available to students? (Yes/No)
- Are multidisciplinary teams linked with schools to engage with students with complex needs at high risk of early school leaving, including with their families? (Yes/No)
- Do open-ended surveys on the experiences of school of students of different ages take place on a regular basis, organised by an agency independent of the school? (Yes/No)

Based on the recent EU report on parental involvement and family support for early school leaving prevention (Downes 2014a), further relevant structural indicators for inclusive systems for early school leaving prevention include:

- Are there opportunities for parents to respond individually and in groups to the findings of the student surveys as part of input to school policy? (Yes/No)
- Does the municipality or other local agency have a clear role to mediate dialogue between school and parents on policy issues? (Yes/No)
- Is parental involvement built into the contracts of teachers? (Yes/No)

The silences of many actual and potential early school leavers bear resonance with the words of Saul Bellow, in his novel, *Seize the day*, ‘the great weight of the unspoken left them little to talk about’. The blockage of these systemic silences must be addressed to foster inclusive systems across education, health and social sectors to retain all of our children and young people in dynamic, progressive school environments.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 This paper is based on the presentation, *Developing inclusive systems across Education, Health and Social sectors for early school leaving prevention*, given to the Working Group on the Quality of Childhood at the European Parliament (QoC), 48th Session, hosted by MEP Julie Ward on September 9, 2014.



- 2 A systemic response includes European, national, regional, municipal and local school/support services system levels, for strategic policy and practices. A system, for current purposes, means an organized, purposeful dynamic structure of relations as a complex whole, that consists of interrelated and interdependent elements (components, entities, factors, members, roles, relationships, spaces, meanings, symbols, processes etc.). These elements continually influence one another, whether directly or indirectly, to maintain their activity and the existence of the system and subsystems.
- 3 Bronfenbrenner (1979) developed a static concentric model of systems which ignored structural anthropologist Lévi-Strauss' (1962, 1963, 1973) cross-cultural observations that concentric systems operate as part of a wider framework of interactions with diametric systems, at least in social structures and mythological systems. A diametric spatial structure is one where a circle is split in half by a line which is its diameter, or where a square or rectangle is similarly divided into two equal halves. In a concentric spatial structure, one circle is inscribed in another larger circle (or square); in pure form, the circles share a common central point. A framework of contrasts and interactions between concentric and diametric systems has been developed in Downes (e.g., 2012, 2013, 2014), going beyond Lévi-Strauss. A key contrast is that whereas concentric systems involve assumed connection, diametric systems are based on assumed separation and as dynamic processes of splitting. The inner and outer poles of concentric structures are more fundamentally attached to each other than diametric structures. Both concentric poles coexist in the same space so that the outer circle overlaps the space of the inner one. The outer circle surrounds and contains the inner circle. The opposite that is within the outer circle i.e., the inner circle or shape cannot detach itself from being within this outer shape. And though the outer circle or shape can move in the direction of greater detachment from the inner circle, it cannot fully detach itself from the inner circle (even if the inner circle becomes an increasingly smaller proportion of the outer). Full detachment could conceivably occur only by destroying the very concentric nature of the whole opposition itself. In contrast, diametric oppositional realms *are both basically detached and can be further smoothly detached* from the other. A concentric relation assumes connection between its parts and any separation is on the basis of assumed connection, whereas diametric opposition assumes separation and any connection between the parts is on the basis of this assumed separation (Downes 2012, 2014). The assumed separation in diametric systems of splitting brings not only system blockage but also displacement from the connective concentric relational systems.
- 4 It is argued elsewhere that structural features of inclusive systems in education involve contrast between concentric relational spaces of assumed connection and diametric oppositional spaces of assumed separation (Downes 2014). It is the latter that constitute system blockage (Downes 2014). The substantive content of inclusive systems includes aspects such as, for example, a warm and supportive school climate, proactive supports to meet the emotional needs of children and young people experiencing vulnerability, trauma or adversity and strategies for bullying prevention and early school leaving prevention. Additionally, inclusive school systems are relatively open spaces for parental engagement, students' voices and for interprofessional collaboration in a system of care.