Mapping social inequality:

The spatial distribution of early school leavers in Malta.

by Jacqueline Gatt B.Ed. (Hons), M.Sc.

Early school leaving was declared by the European Commission (2010) to hamper economic and social development. The Commission stated that in order to obtain smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, the rate of early school leavers should be around or less than 10 per cent. At present, there is a great concern over this issue since Malta has one of the highest rates of early school leaving in Europe, and in the year 2010 the percentage of early school leavers was 36.9 (EUROSTAT, 2011), which as a percentage is still far away from the stipulated target of 10 percent. The objective of this study therefore was to discover significant trends and patterns that might explain the high rate of early school leavers in Malta, using Geographic Information Systems to map the data available from the National Statistics Office and focus on the spatial distribution of early school leavers and socio-economic inequalities in Malta. The software ArcGIS was used as a tool to capture, structure, manage, analyse and visualise the data so that trends, patterns and relationships could be investigated in more depth and displayed visually. This study utilised a quantitative methodology using secondary data (collected in the Census 2005) to create population maps that could display the socio-economic information on all districts in Malta.
Early school leavers were defined as those individuals aged between 18 to 24 years, with a minimum of lower secondary education and not in further education or training (EUROSTAT, 2010). This research shows that early school leaving can be considered as a consequence due to the number of diverse interrelated socio-economic inequalities concentrated in particular districts. These inequalities do not, in themselves necessarily determine whether young individuals stay in or leave school early; rather, they interrelate with each other to make early school leaving more likely. This research strongly supports the idea that the locations of residence, and the interplay of inequalities within, render early school leaving an option for some, but not for others. In Malta a strong correlation was reported between districts with high socio-economic inequalities and early school leavers. These findings are in line with research carried out by GHK (2005) and the Council of Europe (2011), which further reports that a disadvantaged socio-economic background negatively influences the decision to stay in school.

The Southern Harbour district, (as shown in Figure 1) especially the localities of Marsa, Valletta, Isla and Bormla were found to produce the highest rates of early school leavers and socio-economic inequalities in Malta. On the other hand, the localities with the lowest rates of early school leavers and socio-economic inequalities were Attard, Iklin, Balzan and Swieqi. Gozo was the only district not to follow this pattern, since it presented a weak correlation between socio-economic inequalities and early school leaving rates. Gozo (followed by the Southern Harbour district) with the highest rank of socio-economic inequalities and individuals who are at-risk-of-poverty, unemployed, with a low income and in need of social benefits from the government. This result encourages further research, since socio-economic background can be considered to
be a good variable for early school leaving in Malta, but not in Gozo. The smaller size, double insularity and the specific economic background of Gozo (NSRF, 2006) offers different challenges to school leavers and therefore it might have a different impact on the decision to further education than in Maltese students.

Figure 1: Map showing the percentage of early school leavers per district.

A strong North-South divide was also evident in Malta, with the Northern part experiencing less inequalities and better conditions (less people are unemployed, at-risk of poverty and have lower incomes), as opposed to the Southern localities. The aggregation of inequalities in certain districts (such as the Southern Harbour) creates zones (hotspots) of high interest. This research has, therefore, investigated the impact of the neighbourhood on the decision for early school leaving, otherwise referred to by Miller (1977) as the ‘Przeworski environmental effect’. Results indicate that districts with higher rates of professionals and more educated individuals have lower rates of early school leavers, whilst districts with less qualified individuals have higher
rates of early school leavers, even though schooling is offered equally to all students. In this way, economically advantaged individuals or families owning a higher cultural capital translate this capital into higher grades for their children (Bourdieu, 1977). As Sultana (1997, p.24) reports ‘the social origin of an individual determines social destinations despite the mediating factor of school’. Another important outcome reported in this research is the strong correlation which exists between employment and early school leaving (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Map showing the percentage of early school leavers in employment, unemployment and inactive.

The Maltese Islands reports one of the highest percentages of employed early school leavers in Europe. Therefore, the labour opportunities available support the high percentage of early school leavers registered. This does not imply that employment is the direct cause for such a high rate but it can be an incentive. A strong correlation is present in districts registering high rates of early school leavers and low-skilled jobs, or areas with higher concentrations of family owned businesses. This leads to a two-fold employment theory that states that more employment
availability can be an incentive for early school leaving, whilst, on the other hand, further education is not a definite necessity for employment (Mickelwright, 1990). The availability of work offered to early school leavers within family enterprises grants employment in high status jobs, not on the basis of meritocracy but on the inheritance of such positions. Therefore, such possibilities result in early school leavers attaining higher economic capital without investing in education (human capital) as a means to achieve this. Bourdieu (in Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) explains how people gain access to powerful positions through connection with others, as they have a higher social capital.

According to this research, employment and unemployment have the highest impact on the increase or decrease of early school leavers. The results discovered have important implications for policy making, in that addressing inequalities within the districts’ is vital if a decrease in early school leavers is desired in Malta as well. The National Commission for Sustainable Development (2006, p.53) states that ‘Early school leaving should be avoided at all costs’. Furthermore, the types of occupations available also explain the higher rate of male early school leavers. A high gender bias (in favour of males) exists in the labour market since more elementary occupations which require male employees are available. Higher percentages of younger males are in employment, and this may be due to the aspirations and expectations that the Maltese society has for its male and female population. Most women in paid work feel overwhelming guilt feelings imposed by the Church and the ideology of motherhood (Camilleri, 2004). Females, only account for a small percentage of full time job employment, and in January 2011 there were 1,431 unemployed women in Malta and Gozo, making Malta’s female employment rate the lowest in Europe (NSO, 2006). This lack of labour opportunity explains
why more females have progressed into further education. Furthermore, districts with higher rates of teenage pregnancy also have higher rates of female early school leavers. This shows that females are still limited when it comes to education and employment, especially when they have family responsibilities (Darmanin, 2006).

This research has offered a highlight of some of the most important spatial aspects surrounding early school leavers today. This work provides relevant information and reliable maps to support the outcomes reported. The spatial analysis maps designed and presented in this research have proved to be highly efficient in revealing patterns which further indicate the spatial distribution of socio-economic inequalities in relation with the spatial distribution of early school leavers, and highlight phenomena which persist in Malta’s districts. These maps therefore contribute to the body of existing knowledge on early school leavers, which can be used to understand better the districts’ socio-economic dynamics, and inform some measures that should be undertaken to achieve the Vision 2020.

The geographical analysis presented on socio-economic inequalities and early school leavers help identify more clearly districts which require further attention in terms of policy and investment in education. My discovery of associations between selected socio-economic variables and early school leavers in Malta can therefore help policy to make the required informed decisions. The arguments and findings reported might have many practical implications, and policies can be directed to specific geographical locations and young people mostly at-risk of early school leaving. Policy makers can eventually take more informed decisions, grounded on such clear visual representations.
References


Sultana, R. G. et al., 1997. Inside/Outside Schools towards a critical sociology of education in Malta. San Gwann, Malta: PEG.