



THRIVE

Training Hope and Resilience In Vulnerable Early school leavers

Trauma Informed Practices in Second Chance Education

Consolidated Report

JULY 2019

Prepared by: University of Malta





Introduction

Early school leaving has been found to have negative outcomes on both the individual and society as a whole. On an individual level, this has been linked to lower levels of wellbeing, and less satisfaction with one's work, health and standard of living, whilst on a broader scale, educational dropout can also place a significant burden on wider society and impact the national economy (Borg, et al., 2015; Scabo, 2018). Research suggests that children and young people who have experienced trauma due to personal or family problems, as well as those who come from disadvantaged socioeconomic situations have a higher risk of educational dropout (Borg, et al., 2015). Therefore, it is important to develop a deeper understanding of the educational services available for early school leavers, primarily the second chance education system, both from educators' and students' points of view. This report highlights and draws comparisons between the key findings from research carried out in Ireland, Austria, Italy, Malta and Romania regarding the trauma informed practices in second chance education as part of the ERASMUS+ project *Training Hope, Wellbeing, and Resilience in Vulnerable Early School Leavers (THRIVE)* (2018-2020). This includes educators' awareness and understanding of the impact of trauma on education, their sense of efficacy and challenges faced, as well as the perspectives and experiences of students enrolled in a second chance education programme.

A mixed methodology, including both quantitative and qualitative methods, was used.

Quantitative Study

Instrument

An online questionnaire that was put together by the THRIVE team was used to gather quantitative data from educators who work in second chance education. This included demographic data, trauma-informed practice and training, secondary traumatic stress and educators' sense of efficacy. This was translated into German, Italian and Romanian.

Sample

Two hundred and seventy three educators who worked in different types of second chance organisations participated in this study across five countries; Ireland (120), Austria (32), Italy (35), Malta (62) and Romania (24) (Table 1). The majority of second chance educators across all five participating countries were female, with Austria presenting the highest number of male second chance educators, at 40.6% (Table 2).



Table 1. Number of participants from each country

	Ireland	Austria	Italy	Malta	Romania	Total
No. of participants	120	32	35	62	24	273

Table 2. Gender of participants

Gender of participants										
	Ireland		Austria		Italy		Malta		Romania	
	<i>n</i>	%								
Female	82	68.3%	19	59.4%	25	71.4%	48	77.4%	17	70.8%
Male	38	31.7%	13	40.6%	10	28.6%	14	22.6%	7	29.2%

The majority of respondents from each country were over 35 years of age, whilst Malta had the highest proportion of younger educators aged 25-34, at 24.2% (Table 3).

Table 3. Age groups of participants

Age groups of participants					
	Ireland	Austria	Italy	Malta	Romania
25 – 34	7.5%	<i>Missing</i>	14.3%	24.2%	16.7%
35 - 44	30.0%	<i>Missing</i>	20.0%	41.9%	70.8%
45 - 54	40.8%	<i>Missing</i>	42.9%	27.4%	12.5%
55 +	21.7%	<i>Missing</i>	22.9%	6.5%	0.0%

The results indicated some differences in the level of academic or professional training obtained by the participating educators. In Ireland, 21.7% had completed a first degree, whilst almost half of the respondents (48.3%) had completed further education or a high degree. Similarly, in Malta, 59.0% of participants had completed undergraduate degrees whilst 13.1% attained a Masters degree. In Italy, 68.6% of participant had completed an undergraduate degree and 28.6% had completed a higher degree. In Austria, the majority attained a degree (65.6%). However, in Romania, 83.3% of participants had received specific teacher training, whilst only 12.5% had completed an undergraduate degree and 4% had a completed a higher degree (Table 4).



Table 4. Level of education of participants

Level of education					
	Ireland	Austria	Italy	Malta	Romania
Professional/Technical qualification	7.5%	12.5%	2.8%	26.2%	0.0%
Teacher training	15.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	83.3%
Degree	21.7%	65.6%	68.6%	59.0%	12.5%
Further / Higher Degree	48.3%	9.4%	28.6%	13.1%	4.2%
Other	6.7%	12.5%	0.0%	1.6%	0.0%

FINDINGS

Whilst 61.7% of participants in Ireland reported having received specialist training in second chance education, only 37.3% of educators in Malta had received specialist training, 25.7% of educators in Italy, 25% of educators in Austria and none of the educators in Romania. This could potentially indicate different approaches to second chance education across the different countries (Table 5).

Table 5. Specialist training in second chance education of participants

Specialist training in second chance education					
	Ireland	Austria	Italy	Malta	Romania
Yes	61.7%	25.0%	25.7%	37.3%	0.0%
No	38.3%	75.0%	74.3%	62.7%	100.0%

The majority of the participants in each country reported having a good understanding of what trauma and traumatic stress are (Table 6).

Table 6. Percentage of responses on educators' understanding of what trauma and traumatic stress are.

Understanding of what trauma and traumatic stress are					
	Ireland	Austria	Italy	Malta	Romania
Strongly agree	23.5%	6.3%	31.4%	29.0%	83.3%



Agree	62.2%	75.0%	54.3%	62.9%	16.7%
Neutral	9.2%	15.6%	11.4%	8.1%	0.0%
Disagree	5.0%	3.1%	2.9%	0.0%	0.0%
Strongly disagree	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Similarly, most participants in all participating countries reported having a good understanding of how trauma affects the brain and body, the relationship of trauma with mental health, and how trauma may affect learning and students' relationships. However, 31.7% of participants in Ireland and 16.3% of participants in Malta did not agree that they have a good understanding of how trauma affects the brain and body. These results perhaps indicate less confidence in the knowledge of the physiological and biological implications of traumatic stress, in comparison to other outcomes. (Tables 7-10).

Table 7. Understanding of how traumatic stress affects the brain and body

Understanding of how traumatic stress affects the brain and body					
	Ireland	Austria	Italy	Malta	Romania
Strongly agree	15.0%	12.5%	54.3%	22.6%	95.8%
Agree	53.3%	43.8%	42.9%	60.7%	4.2%
Neutral	20.0%	43.8%	2.8%	13.1%	0.0%
Disagree	11.7%	0.0%	0.0%	1.6%	0.0%
Strongly disagree	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.6%	0.0%

Table 8. Understanding of relationship between mental health and trauma

Understanding of the relationship between mental health and trauma					
	Ireland	Austria	Italy	Malta	Romania
Strongly agree	24.6%	9.1%	48.6%	19.4%	95.8%
Agree	51.7%	81.8%	42.9%	62.9%	4.2%
Neutral	16.9%	9.1%	5.7%	14.5%	0.0%
Disagree	6.8%	0.0%	2.8%	1.6%	0.0%
Strongly disagree	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.6%	0.0%

Table 9. Understanding of how trauma affects learning and development

Understanding of how trauma affects learning and development					
	Ireland	Austria	Italy	Malta	Romania
Strongly agree	25.4%	40.6%	<i>Missing</i>	30.6%	100.0%
Agree	51.7%	53.1%	<i>Missing</i>	53.2%	0.0%
Neutral	17.8%	6.3%	<i>Missing</i>	14.5%	0.0%
Disagree	5.1%	0.0%	<i>Missing</i>	1.6%	0.0%
Strongly disagree	0.0%	0.0%	<i>Missing</i>	0.0%	0.0%

Table 10. Understanding of how trauma affects students' relationships

Understanding of how trauma can affect students' relationships					
	Ireland	Austria	Italy	Malta	Romania
Strongly agree	29.7%	37.5%	54.3%	36.0%	100.0%
Agree	51.7%	53.1%	37.1%	54.1%	0.0%
Neutral	13.6%	9.4%	8.6%	8.2%	0.0%
Disagree	5.1%	0.0%	0.0%	1.6%	0.0%
Strongly disagree	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Most educators across all participating countries indicated that their organisations collected information on students' personal strengths, cultural background, and social support within their family and community. However, 25% of Austrian participants and almost one fourth (24%) of Irish participants did not agree that their organisation collected information on students' history of trauma including abuse, neglect, loss, and domestic or community violence. It is also interesting to note that a substantial number of participants in each country (more than 80% in Romania) ticked neutral suggesting perhaps that they did not know the answer to this question (Table 11).



Table 11. Percentage of responses on organisation's approach to information collection about students' history of trauma

We collect information on students' history of trauma					
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Ireland	11%	35%	30%	16%	8%
Austria	12.5%	34.4%	28.1%	12.5%	12.5%
Italy	51.4%	31.4%	17.2%	0.0%	0.0%
Malta	18.0%	50.8%	26.2%	4.9%	0.0%
Romania	16.7%	0.0%	83.3%	0.0%	0.0%

All of the participants in Romania (100%) agreed that their place of work offered support when working with students who experienced trauma, compared with 57.1% of participants in Italy, 45% in Ireland and 35.5% of participants in Malta (Table 12).

Table 12. Perception of staff supervision by country

My work offers staff supervision (if needed) when working with students who have experienced trauma					
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Ireland	23.3%	21.7%	8.3%	20.8%	25.8%
Austria	12.5%	46.9%	21.9%	12.5%	6.3%
Italy	20.0%	37.1%	37.1%	5.7%	0.0%
Malta	11.3%	24.2%	21.0%	24.2%	19.4%
Romania	16.6%	83.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

The scores of participants on the Pro QoL 5 Secondary Traumatic Stress subscale in Ireland indicated a low-to-moderate level of secondary stress with a score of 22.2 on the Pro_QoL 5 STS (Professional Quality of Life 5 Secondary Traumatic Stress subscale; max score = 50) whilst the score of participants in Malta was slightly lower at 21.02, suggesting that these participants have positive perceptions of their work environment. Participants in Austria, Italy and Romania mostly reported 'never' or 'rarely' on statements measuring secondary stress.

Educators in Ireland have a high sense of self-efficacy, as indicated on the TSES (Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale; max score = 9) with a score of 6.46 on Efficacy in Student Engagement and 7.27 on Efficacy in Classroom



Management. Educators in Malta scored 6.95 on Efficacy in Student Engagement and 6.19 on Efficacy in Classroom Management. Participants in Italy, Romania and Austria mostly reported '5 – some' and upwards to '9 – quite a bit' on statements measuring teachers' self-efficacy. However, around 21% of educators in Ireland reported lower confidence in their ability to respond effectively to disruptive behaviour in the classroom and establish effective rules, and 83% of educators in Romania felt they could only do very little to assist families in helping their children do well in school.

Qualitative Study

Methodology

Focus groups were held in each participating country to collect qualitative data. In each county, separate focus groups were conducted with a group of educators working in second chance education, and with a group of early school leavers.

Educators who participated in the focus groups were given the opportunity to express their opinions and discuss their experiences of working within second chance education. This included questions relating to their understanding of trauma and trauma-informed practice, their priorities and needs as educators working with early school leavers, and ideas for future approaches and areas of improvement.

In all, 45 second chance educators Ireland, Italy, Malta and Romania participated in 8 separate focus groups. The following table shows the number of participants by country (Table 13).

Table 13. Educator participants by country

	Ireland	Austria	Italy	Malta	Romania	Total
No. of participants	17	<i>Missing</i>	11	13	4	45

In all, 25 students attending second chance schools/organisations from Ireland, Italy, Malta and Romania participated in 4 separate focus groups, one in each country. The following table shows the number of participants by country (Table 14).



Table 14. Student participants by country

	Ireland	Austria	Italy	Malta	Romania	Total
No. of participants	6	<i>Missing</i>	6	7	6	25

Findings

Second Chance Educators

Theme	Sub-Theme
Understanding of trauma and trauma-informed practice	Awareness
	Training and education
	Relational, flexible and practice based approach
Priorities and needs of educators working with early school leavers	Challenges
	Secondary trauma
Ideas for future approaches and areas of improvement	

1. Understanding of trauma and trauma-informed practice

Awareness

In Ireland, educators understood that trauma has an inevitable impact on the ability of young people to prosper within mainstream education, and that negative experiences within school could, in themselves, lead to trauma due to marginalisation and being labelled by peers. This can cause further issues such as anxiety and low self-esteem. They also noted that trauma can manifest itself as challenging and aggressive behaviour at school, and that early school leavers had an increased risk of engaging in antisocial behaviour and substance abuse.

*“And you know, once they are like marked in their schools, one of the bold kids or one of the disruptive ones, it’s very difficult for them to shed that.”
(Educator, Ireland)*

The participating educators in Malta felt that they had a good understanding of the impact of trauma on early school leavers. Most notably, they believed that the experience of trauma made it hard for students to concentrate during



lessons, and therefore lessons were normally kept to a maximum of 30 to 45 minutes. Consistent with comments made by the educators in Ireland, they also described finding it hard to earn the trust of students who have experienced trauma, and stressed the importance of building trust and strong connections with them. Similarly, educators in Romania noted that these students tend to be withdrawn and unable to communicate openly. They also felt that forming a strong, familial bond with these students was an effective way of working with them. Similarly, educators in Italy are aware that the students they teach often experienced extremely hard family and socio-economic conditions and it is therefore important to act as a guide for their students by showing empathy and understanding whilst also setting rules and giving them instructions. In Austria, educators believed that trauma can influence students' overall psychological, social and physiological development, and has direct impact on their academic success, relationships with others, and their own individual welfare. Educators were also aware that the students' primary needs had to be fulfilled before they were able to concentrate on their education.

*“If their needs are not met... they are not going to do well at school”
(Educator, Malta)*

Training and education

Some of the educators in Malta had previously received training in mental health and mindfulness, both of which they found useful in order to work in a more effective manner with their students. Similarly, some of the educators in Italy had worked as professional psychologists before they transitioned into teaching, and they believed that this helped them in forming good relationships with early school leavers. In Austria, most of the participating educators had previous training on the influence of trauma on the brain and students' development. They felt that it was important for all educators working within this sector to have awareness of the influence of trauma and the obstacles that second chance students may experience due to this. The educators in Romania described a lack of specific training on trauma-sensitive topics, and felt that those who had a more in-depth understanding of trauma, such as through their own experiences, were more able to empathise with students. Educators in Ireland also expressed the need for further targeted training in relation to working with these students.

Training in student mental health and dealing with social media were also highlighted. They perceived some of the previous training which they had attended as not being specific enough in terms of working with vulnerable young people. Formalised “on the job” training was also mentioned as a potential resource for second chance educators.



Relational, flexible and practice based approach

Educators in Malta emphasised the importance of not having a ‘mainstream mentality’ when working within second chance education, and acknowledged that the way in which formal education works is not necessarily the best approach when working with students who have experienced trauma. In particular, being patient, flexible, adaptive, having a good sense of humour and not taking things personally were mentioned as key ways in which educators worked most effectively with students. Educators in Ireland also considered personal qualities such as being warm, patient and non-judgemental as vital in order to successfully engage with early school leavers. Similarly, in Austria, taking on a flexible approach was one of the ways in which educators worked with their students and they described working using a multi-method, multi-disciplinary way with early school leavers.

*“Not having a mainstream mentality. If you’re here you start afresh.”
(Educator, Malta)*

Educators in Italy echoed this, describing teaching in second chance education as being unpredictable due to the psychological difficulties experienced by students, and stating that it is not possible to teach early school leavers in the same way they would teach in a mainstream classroom since communication must be executed in a different way in order to interact effectively with this cohort. They also believe that educators must understand that students’ emotional outbursts of anger or breaking the rules could be manifestations of the trauma they are experiencing and should therefore be interpreted by educators in a way to help students.

*“[It is not possible to] be teachers and conduct a regular class, because you really need to communicate differently with young people who suffer”
(Educator, Italy)*

Educators who worked in a particular alternative learning programme in Malta also emphasised the importance of taking a youth-centered approach by tailoring the programme to each individual case, rather than working according to a strict syllabus that must be followed by all students. Similarly, in Ireland, educators noted the importance of taking a personal, learner-centered approach, treating students fairly and respectfully, and showing a keen interest in their students by understanding what they have been through and responding to their needs in a sensitive manner. In Austria, educators advocated looking at the individuals as a whole, including their physical and mental health and their social environment.



“They’re coming into a warm safe space... and we’re building relationships with them from the minute they walk in the door” (Educator, Ireland)

Educators in Italy described the most effective strategy they use is the ability to act as a guide for their students by setting rules and giving instructions whilst still displaying empathy and understanding, as well as being strong role models. This was felt especially important since it was noted that students often lacked strong family members who could guide them. In Romania, educators felt they became almost like ‘surrogate parents’ to the early school leavers who had been through family-related traumas.

Similarly, educators in Malta noted the importance of teaching this cohort of students any practical skills which they require, such as personal hygiene, as well as teaching students the tools that would enhance their future job prospects and the skills required to cope outside of school and be resilient in the face of trauma. In Ireland, educators felt a sense of duty towards helping to strengthen the students’ wellbeing, changing their life prospects for the better and giving them a sense of purpose.

Educators in Malta importantly noted that, as opposed to mainstream education, success in second chance settings does not focus solely on academic achievements, but also on control of behaviour and lack of behaviour problems and delinquency displayed by students.

2. Priorities and needs of educators working with early school leavers

Challenges

Working within second chance education brings about different challenges for educators. Educators in Ireland noted the challenging behaviour and lack of motivation shown by students, as well as aggressive outbursts by students as some of the main challenges faced. They also observed that students were often faced with chaotic lives outside of school and lacked family support. This was echoed by the participants in Malta who stated that one of the main challenges in their work is working in collaboration with students’ families, who may at times have been the source of the trauma experienced by students.

“That’s what you’re up against. When you say to the parent, ‘Oh he had weed on him’ or ‘there was a smell off his coat’, they go ‘Oh that was mine’ (Educator, Ireland)



In Romania, educators found it difficult to motivate their students to keep attending school and to do their work, as well as enabling their students to express themselves openly and to help them understand and cope with the trauma they have experienced. They felt that specific training on a trauma-sensitive approach and communication with early school leavers would be beneficial. Educators in Italy also felt that for communication with early school leavers to be effective, it must be done in a different way to that in mainstream schools and that the experience of teaching in second chance education is unpredictable when compared with that in other schools.

In addition to this, educators in Austria felt that more comprehensive assessment and monitoring tools to observe early school leavers is required.

Secondary trauma

Educators across the participating countries experienced secondary trauma in several ways. Despite the enthusiasm voiced by participants when talking about their work, educators in Malta experienced fatigue and burnout. Consistent with educators in Ireland, they also felt mentally drained due to the challenging nature of their work and the students with whom they work.

Some educators also felt that their job came with an element of personal risk since students were known to act violently at times.

“At 2.15 everyday I say thanks God nothing happened to me. I come here and I love coming here, I love these kids, but there is an element of risk, I don’t come here for them to hurt me.” (Educator, Malta)

Both in Ireland and in Italy, educators felt that the trauma experienced by their students impacted them, and often thought about the problems they experienced at work while they were at home, at times even affecting the quality of time with their own families. They also found it challenging to find a balance between displaying empathy with their students whilst also staying detached and protecting themselves.

“It often affects the quality of my time once I get back home to my family because I am focused on their pain.” (Educator, Italy)

Because of the closeness of the relationship between educators and students, educators in Romania stated that they experienced their students’ successes and difficulties at a deep level, almost to the same degree as their own children’s successes and difficulties.



Additionally, educators in Ireland and in Malta voiced concerns about the premises and facilities available, as well as inadequate resourcing and funding of their respective alternative learning programmes.

“Because the funding that we get is per capita, so 16 kids, can you imagine what funding we get?” (Educator, Malta)

3. Ideas for future approaches and areas of improvement

In Malta, educators noted a number of areas of improvement in second chance education. They felt that more training, specifically on mental health, specific learning difficulties and behaviour modification would be useful, as well as more time for staff team building to allow staff members to strengthen their relationships and to help buffer against the fatigue experienced at work.

More understanding and support from those in charge, more funding, better premises and making more efficient use of staff members' skills could benefit both the educators and the early school leavers. Educators also stated that more continuity between the services available to those who have experienced trauma as well as an effort to reduce the stigma often faced by those attending alternative learning programmes would be beneficial for early school leavers.

Furthermore, educators in Malta and Ireland believe that the introduction of more supervision for staff and formalised support from mentors and colleagues would greatly benefit those working within second chance education.

In Italy, educators felt that the way mainstream schools and second chance settings are organised do not always take into account the needs of young people, especially those who have experienced trauma. For example, this can be seen in the way teachers are asked to teach lessons, rather than to actively engage with young people through effective communication. They also felt that teachers do not receive enough training related to psychology, communication and the ability to understand the different needs of the students in the schools.

This was also highlighted by teachers in Ireland and Romania, who felt the need for more specific training, guidance and protocol to offer more clear procedures when working within second chance education. They also stated that enhanced communication between educators, including joint workshops on relevant topics, presentations by experts in the field and seminars held by educators from different countries would be useful.

Educators in Austria felt that more mentoring with a focus on young people's personal development and multiple and complex needs is required. More



cooperation with counselling services within the school could also be beneficial, and programmes should take more long-term outcomes into consideration.

Early School Leavers

Themes
Previous negative experiences in mainstream school
A more meaningful and relevant education in second chance education
More caring, respectful and supportive educator-students relationships
Ideas for future approaches and areas of improvement in service provision

1. Previous negative experiences in mainstream school

Students in Malta mentioned two primary reasons for leaving mainstream education; either by exclusion or by choice. Some students mentioned being sent to an alternative learning programme by their previous head of school due to repeated misbehaviour whilst others left mainstream education by choice, due to perceiving the alternative learning programme as a better option. Similarly, students in Italy and Romania chose to attend similar programmes due to perceiving it as being easier than mainstream education and better able to cater for their needs and future plans. Some students felt that teachers in mainstream education placed too many demands on them whilst they also experienced stigma for being different due to behavioural issues.

“Because we were naughty, the head sent us here” (Student, Malta)

Students in Ireland found it difficult to adapt to mainstream education and felt that it was overly focused on academic achievements. This caused students to feel frustrated, stressed and pressured when they were unable to meet academic expectations. They also experienced a lack of support when they found the school work challenging, one of the reasons being due to the large class sizes. Interactions with and perceptions of teachers in mainstream education were generally negative, similar to students from the other participating countries. Furthermore, the stigma experienced whilst in mainstream education played a key role in students’ decision to drop out of school.

“School expects so much of you. Like they give you something to learn and they expect you to know it off by heart like 10 minutes later” (Student, Ireland)

2. A more meaningful and relevant education in second chance education



One of the main differences between mainstream education and second chance education noted by students in Malta and Italy is that there is more focus on practical skills that lead to clear employment, hands-on projects and less written tasks in second chance education. Furthermore, students in Romania felt that subjects taught in second chance education were easier to understand and this generally helped them to feel better both academically and personally.

Participants in Austria recognised the importance of their education in order to ensure their own personal and social development. The main difference noted between their current school and previous experiences in mainstream education is the person-centred approach at their current school, as well as the more flexible learning process, continuous support and counselling. Early school leavers in Ireland also preferred the person-centred approach adopted by educators in second chance education, which prioritised the needs of the individual students.

Since starting second chance education, students in Malta felt that they had developed new, meaningful friendships with peers and had acquired new personal skills with the help of their teachers, such as how to manage their emotions and nerves better. Similarly, students in Austria expressed the desire to experience trusting and respectful relationships with both their peers and their teachers, in order to increase their sense of belonging to the school. The second chance education setting was viewed as an opportunity to reduce the inequalities they felt due to their disadvantaged situations. This in turn enabled them to feel more optimistic about their future.

Students in Italy reported feeling more self-confident since starting second chance education. They felt that teachers treated them as adults and would have a conversation with them when they acted inappropriately. This contributed towards the students' sense of responsibility, and felt that they belonged to the group, similar to the opinions stated by students in Ireland. They stated that learning had become a fun activity for them since starting second chance education. Students in Ireland also perceived classwork as enjoyable in second chance education and reported looking forward to participating at school. Some students also felt that since starting second chance education they had matured as persons.

“I feel more comfortable even the actual people that are in the class. You don't feel intimidated or pressured... Everyone in here treats you equally. They treat you with respect.” (Student, Ireland)

When asked about what they expected to gain from second chance education, students in Malta mentioned new job prospects due to the practical skills they



were learning such as woodwork and welding. Students in Austria spoke positively about how teachers did not only focus on academic success, but also on each learner's individual needs, and how this setting focused on learners' strengths and how to create opportunities to turn weaknesses into strengths. This was echoed by students in Romania who felt that second chance education gave them the hope to gain the skills necessary for a good career and the ability to lead a normal life in future.

3. More caring, respectful and supportive educator-students relationships

Relationships with teachers in second chance education were described as more positive by students in all participating countries. In Romania, students felt that educators also displayed more empathy and involvement in their education, and they were also more available to listen to students.

Students in Malta spoke about the qualities displayed by their favourite teachers. These included a good sense of humour and the ability to take a joke, as well as an appreciation of teachers who are very patient with them. In Austria, students emphasised the importance for teachers to treat all students equally, allow students to openly express themselves and to be encouraging with them. Similarly, students in Romania described their favourite teachers as those who are patient and help them understand information the easiest, listened to them, were kinder, and helped them to overcome their issues. In Italy, students enjoyed the humble and non-judgemental attitude of their teachers who were always ready to listen whenever they were going through difficult moments.

Students in Malta spoke positively about being given more choices in second chance education, in comparison to their previous experience in mainstream schools. For example, teachers frequently allow students to choose what they are interested to learn in lessons. Similarly, students in Ireland enjoyed the use of non-didactic, collaborative and peer-led learning strategies in smaller class sizes.

“For example if we go in [to Home Economics] they ask us what do we feel like cooking” (Student, Malta)

In Austria, students felt positive about the learning environment in second chance education and felt that it was characterised by safety, dignity, respect, tolerance and freedom. Students in Ireland also stressed the importance of being treated respectfully and stated that they also feel supported, which contributes to their overall satisfaction with their current education.



4. Ideas for future approaches and areas of improvement in service provision

The participating students from all countries spoke positively about their experience in second chance education. However, students noted that certain aspects could be improved.

Students in Malta stated that they would prefer some of their teachers to use better ways of correcting them when they are misbehaving. Students in Austria wanted to be able to further their skills in resilience as well as recognising and controlling any emotions which they experience due to trauma. Students in Romania still felt some prejudice from certain teachers due to the fact that they came from different social backgrounds and expressed a desire for those teachers to be more understanding. In Italy, students mentioned wishing that persons external to the education setting would view their school as equal to other schools, and that they felt mistreated by students and teachers from mainstream schools.

Discussion and Recommendations

As demonstrated in the results section, there are distinct differences between mainstream schools and second chance education in the five participating countries. The experiences of educators working with early school leavers and students following alternative learning programmes are different and unique to those in the mainstream education system. Therefore, educators must have a good understanding and utilise a specific skill set that will allow them to effectively engage and communicate with this cohort.

The percentage of educators who have received specialist training in second chance education varies according to the country, with over 61% of educators in Ireland having received specialist training, in contrast to just 37.3% in Malta, 25.7% in Italy, 25.0% in Austria and 0.0% in Romania. In spite of this variation between countries, educators in all participating countries agreed that further specific training on mental health, specific learning difficulties, behaviour modification, communication, and understanding the different needs of students, would enable them to be more effective in their work. Furthermore, educators also indicated that more mentoring, formalised support and supervision for staff would be beneficial.

Between 80-100% of educators in all participating countries felt that they had a good understanding of what trauma and traumatic stress are. The educators who participated in the qualitative part of this study understood that trauma has an



inevitable impact on a young person's educational attainment, and described several ways in which they have observed trauma to affect the students with whom they work. Challenging and aggressive behaviour, finding it hard to concentrate, finding it hard to trust others and finding it hard to form strong relationships are some of the ways in which trauma can manifest itself at school. Some educators highlighted that young people whose basic, primary needs are not being met are unlikely to be able to concentrate on their education. Therefore, specific training on how to recognise the signs and work with young people who are manifesting their trauma in these ways is recommended.

Educators in all participating countries described the way of working in second chance education as being very different to that of mainstream education. In fact, having a 'mainstream mentality' when working in this sector may not be the best approach. According to the participating educators, young people who have experienced trauma greatly benefit from an environment that promotes flexibility, patience, humour, respect, and a lack of judgement. Educators also emphasised the importance of taking a person-centred approach whilst taking time to listen and respond to each individual's needs in a sensitive manner.

One of the main issues raised by educators in all participating countries was the importance of building trust and strong relationships with students, who are often withdrawn and unable to communicate openly. This was highlighted as one of the most effective ways of working with this cohort of students. Some educators described experiencing their students' successes and difficulties almost to the same extent as their own children's successes and difficulties. They also found it challenging to find the right balance between empathising with students whilst staying detached. In fact, although educators indicated relatively low levels of secondary stress in the quantitative part of this study, those in the qualitative part of this study stated that they often felt that the trauma experienced by their students impacts them, and that they often thought about these problems while they were at home, sometimes even to the extent that it negatively impacted the quality time spent with their family. Therefore, training on how to recognise and deal with secondary stress could benefit the wellbeing of educators working in this sector.

Educators felt that there were some areas for improvement within the sector. Apart from the need for further training, they felt that more funding, improved premises, better continuity between services, more cooperation with other services, and a focus on more long-term outcomes should be taken into consideration by those working within the second chance education sector. Crucially, an effort should be made to reduce the stigma associated with second



chance education, as this could further marginalise young people who come from disadvantaged socioeconomic situations and have experienced trauma.

The early school leavers who participated in this study also referred to the stigma they experienced from people outside the second chance education setting. However, students from all participating countries generally spoke very positively about their experience in second chance education and only spoke of a few ways in which their experience could be improved. Primarily, students stated that they would prefer some of their teachers to be more considerate of the ways in which they corrected misbehaving students, whilst others mentioned that they felt prejudice on the part of some teachers and expressed a desire for them to be more understanding.

In comparison to their previous experience in mainstream schools, students spoke very positively about their current experience in second chance education. They described mainstream education as being excessively focused on academic achievement and unable to cater for their specific needs. They felt that second chance education was a much better opportunity for their education. The flexible and more hands-on approach was much better suited to their individual needs, and they mentioned that learning had become a fun activity, which they looked forward to. They also described having more positive relationships with their teachers, who were generally more understanding and empathic towards their situation and more supportive. Furthermore, they could use the skills they were learning to find good employment, which enabled them to feel more positive and optimistic about their future.

Carmel Cefai, Rachel Spiteri, Mollie Rose O’Riordon
Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health
University of Malta
2nd August 2019