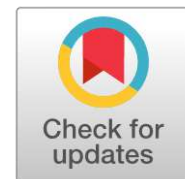# INNOVATION APPROACHES TO INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN EUROPE – THE IMPACT OF SECOND CHANCE SCHOOLS

Elena Blagoeva

New Bulgarian University, Sofia, Bulgaria

Abstract

This article presents research and findings related to the Second Chance Schools - an innovative approach which is gaining strength and popularity in recent years but is almost unknown in Bulgaria. The documentary research, the analysis of interviews of the various actors and the online surveys during the project revealed a set of characteristics of Second Chance Schools common to most countries in Europe. The study reveals that in the countries where the SCS approach has been applied, early school leavers' rates are going down.

Keywords: education management, inclusive education, Second Chance education, Second Chance Schools

Elena Blagoeva has a PhD in Cultural Studies and a specialization in European Integration (College of Bruge) and International Project Management (Open Society Institute). Her research interests and experience are in the areas of EU education policy, education management and international project management. She has been a national consultant in projects concerning education for the Council of Ministers, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Ministry of Regional Development, Bulgaria and is an expert-evaluator in the Erasmus-Mundus program (EACEA, Belgium). She has 20 years of experience as director of the International Department and a lecturer at New Bulgarian Universrity, Sofia, Bulgaria. Prof. Blagoeva is an author of three monographs and many articles devoted to the management of education, internationalization of HE, and intercultural competences.

E-mail: ehazarbasanova@nbu.bg   https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8063-6433

The first principle enshrined in the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission, 2017) is the right of all citizens to access quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning. This is because education nowadays increasingly depends not only on access to and competitiveness on the labour market, but also on the personal fulfilment and well-being of every citizen. The vision that the EU has, and the Member States share, for European societies and economies require a population actively engaged with society and prepared to adapt to the changing labour market. Each member of this society must possess knowledge and skills enabling them to find their creative and fulfilling place, regardless of (and thanks to) the challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The main factor for such preparation is quality education that is adequate to the changes. Increasingly, it is not about the "triangle of knowledge" but about the "square of knowledge" - education, research, innovation and benefits for society.

A good education is not an end in itself. Its benefits find expression in all other spheres of public life and related policies - in the social sphere, civil society, employment, economy, culture, security, etc. It requires carrying out educational reforms in a broad context - joint cross-sectoral discussions on the relationship of different policies with education policy, using good practices from other policies and their adaptation in education. Final decisions on the development of educational systems are within the competence of EU member states alone, as the principle of subsidiarity is observed. The European Commission sees the role of EU-level action as helping institutions and decision-makers from member states to make informed choices. Especially the smaller or larger gaps between the acquired education and the new requirements should be dealt with. In the future, talent will be a much more critical factor in production than capital. This will lead to an increasing division of the market into a "low-educated and therefore low-paid" share and a "highly educated, therefore high-paid" share (Schwab, 2015). Studies by the European Commission (European Commission, 2017a) show that by 2025 half of occupations will require a high level of qualification, 90% will require digital skills and 65% of children starting school today will be employed in occupations that do not exist yet.

But while the EU and countries are trying to provide increasingly high-quality and adequate education for young people, at the same time around one in ten young adults leave school or training early, without qualification or diploma. The EU-level target for

2030 in this regard is less than 9% (Council of the EU, 2021). In 2021, 9.7 % of 18–24-year-olds in the EU had completed at most a lower secondary education, considered to be early school leavers (ESL). Across EU Member States, the highest shares were found in Romania (15.3 %), followed by Spain and Italy with around 13 %. In Bulgaria, the statistical data shows 12% ESL (Figure 1). "Educational poverty" threatens them in their later life and can lead to lack of fulfilment and exclusion (Eurostat, 2022). The situation with people neither in employment nor in education and training (NEETs) is even worse (Figure 2 and Figure 3).

Figure 1.

Early school leavers aged 18-24 in 2021
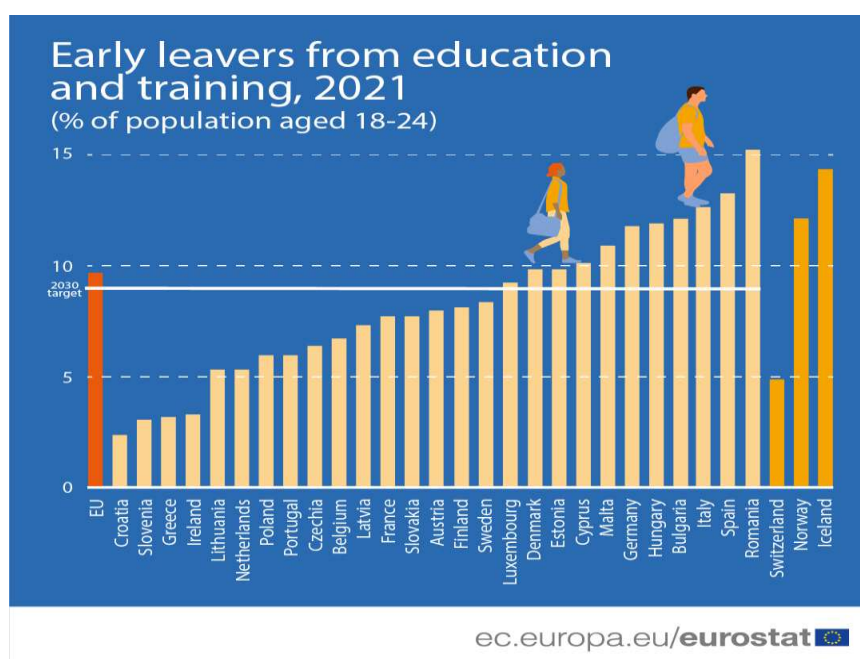
Source: Eurostat, 23.05.2022

Special efforts are ongoing in many European countries to address these challenges and promote inclusive education from at least two decades. Inclusive education is a complex phenomenon. European countries have implemented various policies and initiatives to address ESL and NEETs challenges. However, the problem not only exists, but is growing in some countries. This article presents research and findings related to an innovative approach – Second Chance Schools - which is not widespread in Europe, but has gained strength and popularity in recent years. The study is conducted in the frame of Erasmus Plus project - S2CENE - STRENGTHENING SECOND CHANCE NETWORKS IN EUROPE – with the help of the participating institutions from Portugal, France, Croatia and Bulgaria.

Inclusive Education - The Current State

Different countries are facing different challenges, but still we can list some common issues associated with inclusive education in Europe:

1. *Diversity of Education Systems:* Europe comprises countries with diverse education systems, policies, and practices. This diversity can pose challenges for implementing a standardized approach to inclusive education across the continent.

2. *Resource Allocation:* Adequate funding and resource allocation are crucial for the successful implementation of inclusive education. Many European countries face financial constraints, which can affect the provision of necessary support services and accommodations for students with diverse needs.

3. *Teacher Training:* Teachers play a pivotal role in inclusive education, but there may be variations in the training and preparation they receive. Insufficient training in inclusive pedagogy and strategies can hinder the ability of educators to meet the diverse needs of students.

4. *Attitudes and Awareness:* Attitudes toward diversity and inclusion vary across European societies. Stereotypes and stigmas associated with disabilities or other differences may persist, impacting the acceptance and integration of students with diverse needs.

5. *Infrastructure and Accessibility*: Physical infrastructure and accessibility can be significant barriers. Some schools may lack the necessary facilities or may not be designed to accommodate students with physical disabilities, limiting their access to education.

6. *Policy Implementation*: While some European countries have inclusive education policies in place, effective implementation can be a challenge. This includes issues related to monitoring, evaluation, and adapting policies to the evolving needs of students.

7. *Language and Cultural Diversity*: Europe is characterized by linguistic and cultural diversity. Ensuring that educational materials are accessible and culturally relevant for all students, including those from minority or immigrant backgrounds, can be a complex task.

8. *Individualized Support*: Providing individualized support for students with diverse needs is a cornerstone of inclusive education. However, the capacity to offer personalized assistance may be limited due to large class sizes or a lack of specialized personnel.

9. *Transition Planning*: Preparing students with diverse needs for transitions, such as moving from primary to secondary education or entering the workforce, requires careful planning. Insufficient support during these critical periods can impact the overall success of inclusive education initiatives.

Across the EU Member States there are wide variations in 2022 when looking at the NEET rates for the age group that is targeted (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2). The lowest rates are already below the target of 9.0 % and could be found in the Netherlands, Sweden, Malta, Luxembourg, Denmark, Portugal, Slovenia, Germany and Ireland; this is also the case in Iceland and Norway. Fifteen countries still have high rates, with the most worrying situation in Italy, Greece, Romania, Cyprus, Bulgaria and Croatia.

Figure 2.

Share of the population aged 15 to 34 who are NEETs

TIME	2020	2021	2022
GEO (Labels)			
European Union - 27 countries (from 2020)	15,2	14,3	12,8
Euro area – 20 countries (from 2023)	15,5	14,3	12,8
Belgium	13,4	11,5	10,6
Bulgaria	19,2	18,3	16,5
Czechia	14,3	14,1	14,0
Denmark	10,8	9,1	8,8
Germany	10,8	10,9	10,0
Estonia	13,9	12,2	10,5
Ireland	15,2	11,1	10,3
Greece	21,3	20,5	17,4
Spain	18,8	15,6	13,9
France	15,1	13,7	12,8
Croatia	16,1	16,2	14,4
Italy	25,1	24,4	20,8
Cyprus	15,1	15,1	14,4
Latvia	12,9	13,8	13,0
Lithuania	13,3	12,8	10,7

Luxembourg	8,2	8,9	7,3
Hungary	16,7	12,1	10,9
Malta	10,1	9,4	7,4
Netherlands	6,8	5,3	5,4
Austria	10,6	10,7	9,7
Poland	13,8	13,8	11,7
Portugal	11,6	10,2	8,9
Romania	17,8	21,4	20,3
Slovenia	9,5	8,4	8,7
Slovakia	17,7	15,0	13,6
Finland	11,0	9,9	10,3
Sweden	7,6	6,4	5,8
Iceland	8,3	7,9	6,3
Norway	7,8	8,4	7,7

Source: Eurostat 14.09.2023

Figure 3.

NEETs aged 15-29 – comparison.

Young people (aged 15-29) neither in employment nor in education and training, 2012 and 2022 (%)
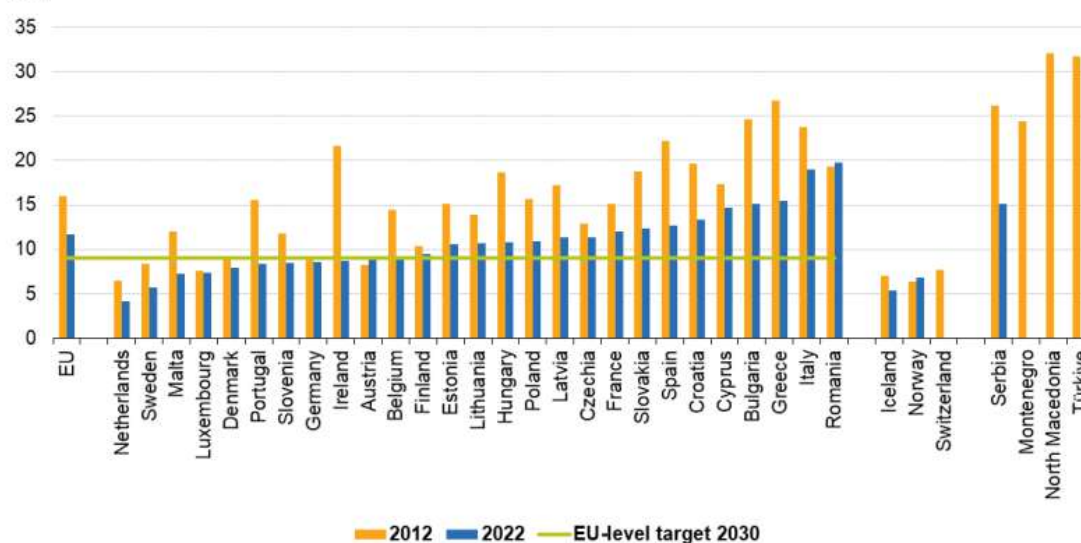
Note: Breaks in series.

Source: Eurostat 22.05.2023

All this data requires a continuous and fast adaptation and shift of societal and market paradigms. More than ever, the investment on the continuous capacity building and training of adults, is seen as strategic to assure social inclusion, equal opportunities and justice among European citizens at different levels. Considering this, Member-States

need to keep investing in establishing, maintaining and reinforcing networks specifically dedicated to adult education, essential for the structure of a systematic, relevant and consistent offer of services and supports for personal development and social, cultural and professional inclusion of adults. Early school leaving is a complex issue influenced by interconnected factors related to background, personal experiences, family problems, social and economic context, etc. Moreover, general education systems are often not able to deal with the complex situations affecting specific groups of young people. On the other side, the higher percentage of persons, who are in the category of NEETs suggests a worrying tendency that leaving formal education in most cases is not a temporary life situation, but can transform into a long-term pattern, which negatively affects the whole educational and employment pathway of the given individual. The Commission Staff Working Paper on early school leaving emphasizes on the direct link between early school leaving status and challenges to be employed (European Commission, 2011).

The "Second Chance Schools" Concept

The approach presented here is so called "Second Chance Schools (SCS)"/ "Second Chance Education (SCE)". Despite the different forms through which it manifests itself, it is an innovative approach that considers the specific characteristics of the target group and uses a holistic method to address the negative consequences. Second Chance Schools are a European compensatory policy measure, particularly aimed at accompanying young people who leave early the education and training system, created by the EC White Paper "Teaching and learning - towards a learning society" in 1995. The initiative was followed by a pilot project that gave rise to an E2C network, present in several European countries. SCS in Europe were defined, in the founding document, as a supporting and supplementary measure to "provide youngsters excluded from the education system, or about to be, with the best training arid best support arrangements to give them self-confidence, developing skills and qualifications to enter further training or the job market" (European Commission, 1995).

Later on (supported by a number of documents at EU level), second chance schools became part of educational and training systems across Europe as a specialized social and educational policy measure, providing a wide spectre of learning and support intervention aiming to contribute for fighting, in particular, teenagers' and young adults'

social exclusion; reconnecting drop-out learners with educational and training systems; promoting a positive attitude of teenagers and young adults towards learning; promoting the development of the "whole person" with impact on the acquisition of basic and key-competences, on strengthening the personality and on accessing the labour market. (CEDEFOP Report, 2016, 2016a)

As it is stated by the European Commission (2014), measures to prevent or compensate for ESL must tackle the loss of intrinsic motivation, stemming from feelings of inadequacy, failure and low self-esteem. Successful measures must be personally valued by the potential participants and give learners a sense of empowerment and control over their learning. The challenge lies in realizing these objectives within mainstream initial education, which is widely focused on the cognitive development of learners and on the acquisition of knowledge. The 21st century society and learners demand a broader approach that considers the individual. This means that it is important to define and provide learning approaches that consider the cognitive development, physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing of the learner. This will only be possible if the learning system assumes and integrate the concept of "whole community approach". The motivations of young adults aged 18-29 can differ from those of school age learners. Their motivation to re-engage is influenced by the personal development that has taken place since leaving school, and the impact of having experienced the negative consequences of leaving early, for example through reduced employment prospects. The engagement of the whole community is also one of the most relevant features of the Second Chance Schools, characterized for being embedded in the local community, making possible to reach and engage young adults from the local area. Another characteristic is the prominent role for multi-professional working, which can't be found within most mainstream schools thus providing support to students beyond the regular school day. The SCS approach bring together expertise from different sectors such as health, employment, housing, legal aid and social support, with the school serving as a point for the delivery of this support to participants – many of whom have complex needs and experience problems outside of a school setting.

In 2019 the European Commission published a report presenting findings of an evaluation exercise covering 37 countries with the aim to map the development of policies and practice on reducing Early School Leaving, as a result of the Council

Recommendation on Policies to Reduce Early School Leaving (2011) and associated EU policy instruments to the development of policy, practice and research on ESL across Europe. Although the study shows largely positive overall picture, the analysis of the evidence further shows that much more needs to be done to continue tackling the multi-faceted and evolving range of challenges contributing to the early school leaving phenomenon (European Commission, 2019).

Our study of some national policies confirms these findings:

In Portugal, up to 2006, the rate of ESL (early school leaving) was considerable high, nearly 40%. The next 12 years different modes of adult education and training with specific aims and target groups have been undertaken without considerable results – up to 2018 25% of young people, up to the age of 29, do not complete secondary education, 23% of young people are unemployed. This situation resulted in a new law, Despacho 6954/2019, which institutionalized second chance education measure in the Portuguese education system (Diário da República, 2019). Nowadays, Second Chance Schools are now part of the public policy of education, integrating a wider framework of measures. There are около 20 chance schools in Portugal and several other initiatives with the same objective are being developed throughout the country. E2O Portugal, the National Network of Initiatives and Second Chance Schools, created in 2018 to support the launch of new projects and ensure their follow-up and monitoring, was formalized as an association last year. And the NEETs in Portugal in 2022 are under the EU average.

In Bulgaria the term "Second Chance Schools" is unknown, although the problem has been embedded in the broader topic of reducing early school leaving. The basic normative documents for adult education and training are Pre-School and School Education Act, Vocational Education and Training Act, Higher Education Act, Crafts Act, Community Culture Centres Act and many bylaws. The Bulgarian Strategy for reducing the share of early school leavers 2013-2020 recognized the need for comprehensive policies and measures to ensure the successful transition of students between different levels of education, provide flexible and effective opportunities for people who have left education to acquire key competences or participate in various forms of training, and enable the outcomes of formal education and informal learning to be recognized and validated (Ministry of Education and Science – Bulgaria, 2013). Unfortunately, the results are not satisfactory, and the dropout rate is almost constant.

The study reveals that in the countries where the SCS approach has been applied, the rates are going down – Spain, France, Portugal, Poland, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Ireland, The Czech Republic, The Netherlands, etc.

Main characteristics of Second Chance Schools

The documentary research, the analysis of interviews of the various actors and the online surveys during the project revealed a set of characteristics of second chance schools common to most countries in Europe, in the different observed dimensions:

Mission and objectives of Second Chance Schools

The second chance schools have been shaping and adjusting their mission and objectives addressing the social and professional needs of young people, in three main directions:

- Fighting against social exclusion of general population, in particular teenagers and young adults.
- Reconnecting a wide range of target groups (young early leavers, low qualified young NEET, youngsters in different vulnerable situations) with education and training systems and forming a positive attitude of learners toward learning and social engagement.
- Promoting the development of the "whole person" with impact on strengthening the personality, acquisition of key-competences, developing professional skills, facilitating their transition to the labour market.

Methods and Approaches to Learning

The basic principle of second chance schools is to work on an experimental basis, testing new solutions and building with young people new ways of learning that are closer to their interests and needs as you cannot get different results by continuing to do the same thing as in general schools.

Early leaving is often a traumatic experience of progressive disengagement from school, perceived by young people as an unsafe space. Second chance schools research actively for innovative and creative methods and techniques able to enthuse young early leavers to reengage in education and training. Second chance schools are therefore socio-

educational projects of innovation in education, drawing inspiration from multiple references, models and experiences, around the world. Cooperation with similar initiatives and participation in training and mobility projects help them to find the most appropriate approaches and methodologies for working with their target groups.

These schools adopt a strategy of methodological diversity, searching for the proper tools and processes to mobilize and involve young people marked by heavy experiences of failure. The pedagogical dispositive used by second chance schools promote the participation of young people in their learning processes. Most of the activities in which young people participate do not have the traditional format of classes organized by teachers for a class but are a wide range of individual and group activities. The second chance schools use a set of pedagogical tools that are alternative to the traditional school model: interdisciplinary artistic projects, performances, writing of narratives and poems, intergenerational community projects, sharing circles, assemblies, practical training in work context, study visits programs, youth exchanges (namely initiatives promoted by other European SCSs), virtual learning environments, study itineraries, life stories, games, research and knowledge building processes, workshops, debates, tutorials, simulations and role-playing, group work, projects, and many others.

Second chance schools actively promote the autonomy of young people, organizing the appropriate conditions and providing the necessary resources. Teaching principles include self-activity, student participation in the formation of learning objectives, individualized learning, and critical reflection. Emphasis is placed on the application of project-based learning whereby students explore real-world problems and acquire knowledge and understanding through inter-disciplinary inquiry and study, and social interaction. Student assessment is descriptive. Student's educational progress is being judged against the student's own starting point. The student's progress is analysed on two dimensions: 1) educational achievement (degree of improvement), and 2) engagement (level of active participation).

The adopted methods are also tools for training of trainers, demanding study, reflection, continuous questioning and cooperative work, search for the most appropriate solutions and monitoring and reformulating the carried-out experiences and the strategies used.

The most commonly identified innovation and success factors in the experience of the SCSs

- Individual and personalized approach to education and training programs;
- Holistic approach, by valuing and developing different skills (vocational, scientific, artistic, social participation, personal and social competences)
- Experiential and interdisciplinary approach to learning;
- Learning by doing approach;
- Rich and interactive communication processes between young people and educators/staff, participating together in common activities.
- Tutoring and mentoring techniques;
- Flexibility of the learning models and adaptable educational content;
- Innovative methods (project-based learning, inclusive education, workshops, practical exercises, professional internships, sports, etc.).
- Schools are safe and affectionate spaces of close and horizontal relationships.
- Educational environments close to young people and their life contexts and experiences.

Role of Teachers and Educational Professionals

Second Chance Schools are learning organizations and communities of practice, where a shared learning culture between young people and professionals is collectively built. These schools have multidisciplinary teams of professionals, teachers, vocational trainers, artists, psychology and social education professionals, youth and community mediators, operational and administrative assistants, security, and maintenance. Only a multidisciplinary team makes it possible to find integrated answers to complex problems and provide a stimulating educational environment for young people.

Educators put students in the centre of the learning process, facilitating their role, listening more, talking less, learning to be at the service of young people's learning and development processes. Trainers support their individual training plans, guaranteeing, in any case, compliance with the training standards essential for their certification. They are in a position that is both discreet and very demanding, approaching young people in a creative and flexible way, changing plans whenever necessary and being available to participate in common activities. Second chance schools are also a "second" chance for

professionals, who relearn and reformulate their tasks and reinvent themselves as professionals.

The characteristics of the young people that attend this type of schools, demand from professionals a profile of great availability to establish relationships of trust and respect with the trainees, offering them references of stability and attention, which they do not find in their social and family environments of origin. Professionals also assume the role of tutors, concerned not only with the training of young people but also with their well-being, transforming the training space into a relationship space. Life does not stop at the school door, but it is the very subject of training. In this sense, Second Chance Schools demand multiple capacities and skills from professionals:

- Encouraging learner's self-activity;

- Promoting student participation in the definition of learning objectives and activities;

- Delivering individualized learning;

- Promoting critical reflection and thinking;

- Organizing inquiry-based learning;

- Engaging in social interactions, etc.

Second chance schools are very challenging educational environments, demanding a friendly, non-judgmental organizational culture that unconditionally accepts young people, offering a social space of belonging, a "second family", where young people find the time and opportunities they need to readjust, in a flexible environment with open doors. These schools are social spaces where young people feel respected and learn to respect, democratic organizations where young people's opinion counts and where they develop significant learning processes, accumulating positive experiences that build a new image of themselves and new possibilities for the future.

Attitudes Towards "Second Chance Schools" Concept in Bulgaria

In the framework of the project "S2CENE…" 12 meetings were held in Sofia, Sliven, Smolian, Varna, Targovishte and Radomir. The approach to organize the meetings regionally than centralised was more appropriate as the problems, challenges and

practice differ from region to region. The participants (teachers, school principals, NGOs, trade unions) were around 200 from these towns as well as from Montana, Vidin, Vratsa, Pomorie, Dupnitsa, etc. The main goals were to raise awareness about the specifics and the impact that SCSs as well as to discuss the possibilities to apply such approach or to include some of the methods in the existing institutions in Bulgaria.

The main topics were 1) The know-how of SCSs; 2) Difference of practice, requirements, methods and policy in Bulgaria compared to countries, which have implemented SCS concept; 3) Regulatory changes on government level necessary to implement SCSs approach on institutional level; 4) Capacity building for the SCS professionals compared to the professional characteristics of teachers and social workers that deal with ESL in Bulgaria.

It was useful for raising awareness as many facts were not known. The discussions were very active on the side of participants. They shared their opinion that any alternative methods are welcome, as the Bulgarian education system promotes ethno-cultural diversity, but this does not allow enough time to be devoted to independent work with children, who usually have difficulties in understanding the learning content or education is not a value in their culture/families. The participants also think that in the frame of the national system for teacher qualification, the training program for capacity building could be implemented. Pedagogical specialists indicate as the most important factors for dropping out the problematic behavior of children/students (63.5%), difficulties in working with parents (56.3%) and irregular attendance (51%). The next most important factor hindering the teams is the children's/students' insufficient knowledge of Bulgarian language (34.4%) and the parents' low educational and/or economic status (32.3%). The comparison reviled the situation in Bulgaria and some reasons for the lag in prevention of early school leaving.

A large part of ESL and NEETs in Bulgaria is of Roma origin. Although activities are carried out to support vulnerable children and families in the local communities, the main problem is the lack of command of the Bulgarian language. This requires, before starting to attract students to school or providing additional activities with students at risk of dropping out of school, to conduct additional training in the Bulgarian language. There is also a problem with a lack of enough Bulgarian language teachers and funding. Big

problem is also the attitude of parents from minority communities who are not motivated to cooperate with teachers. Working with the parents, additional extracurricular activities are offered to attract the children, but the results are not satisfactory. One of the leading reasons for pupils dropping out of the education system is the lack of commitment and support from the family. There is a need for additional approaches to change the attitude of Roma communities towards education and new forms of attracting and keeping children in school.

The participants were highly interested in the good practices, especially from Portugal SCSs. Any alternative methods are welcome, but there is no system that gives enough space for their implementation. They noted that this type of work requires a regulatory framework, which is lacking in Bulgaria. The policy is also different - the aspiration is drop-outs to return to regular schools. Some participants shared the view that once students dropped out of regular schools, for some of them it meant that those schools were not right for them. In this sense, directing efforts to bring them back to the same schools would not be effective. But this was not the majority opinion. Most of the participants stressed that creation of another type of school similar to SCS is a radical change and needs changes in legislation. All attendants were positive for establishing a Center where different good practices could be shared. Even if used sporadically and palliatively, different methods should be sought to change motivation and retention in the education system.

It is interesting to note that policymakers (especially from trade unions), who are working mainly on national level are sceptical to serious innovations that are offered to the system. The main argument behind this scepticism is the scarcity of resources and the fundamental challenges already in place, which require substantial funds. For example - the retention and training of teachers. They agree on the tremendous social impact of measures to bring young school leavers back to school. But they believe that the Bulgarian system for inclusive education works properly and to add a new concept or branding such as a Second Chance Schools approach might not be adequate to current realities.

Second Chance Education, while providing effective solution to systemic challenges, seems still not to be recognised as a viable solution for challenges faced in Bulgarian context. The issue of funding and availability of finances requires careful

selection of new measures to focus on and introduce in the Bulgarian system. Some of the participants shared a position that it is probably not feasible to think of creating new second chance education institutions but focus on further empowerment of existing public schools to enter in such a role. On the other hand, the participants consider decreasing the numbers of dropouts as priority task for Bulgarian schools as its social impact is important for the society and economy. So, all approaches and good practices from other European countries should be taken into consideration.

The final National Conference was organized together with the Centre of Creative Education and attracted 40 selected participants from all over Bulgaria – heads of schools, representatives of regional authorities of education, NGOs, and universities. The idea of the function of a Centre for Mobility, Training, and Research was presented. The creation of such a centre in Bulgaria would help to inform Bulgarian educational institutions about the best practices and achievements undertaken by the various countries, as well as would contribute to the exchange of information on joint project possibilities and other opportunities for cooperation related to the problem of early school leaving. The final decision was to launch the Center at 28 Secondary school "Aleko Konstantinov". The participants from 28 Secondary school "Aleko Konstantinov" shered that they will try to establish a pilot project for several classes at their school, which study process to be organized under the SCS model.

Findings and Recommendations

Second Chance Schools approach shows one way in which disadvantaged young people without basic skills and qualifications can be helped and reintegrated into society. The methods used can be a source of inspiration, both in preventing school-failure in the first place, and in giving a second chance to those for whom initial prevention has not been possible.

Those who have dropped out from school still have very much to offer. In appropriate circumstances, education establishments can unlock a wealth of resources, which our societies might otherwise cast aside. At a time of ageing populations, tighter labour markets and the acceptance that our knowledge society calls for higher levels of qualification, this is a message we cannot afford to ignore. The European "second chance" policy initiated more than 20 years ago has been reaffirmed over the years by a set of

subsequent European steering documents and initiatives on the ground that have confirmed the opportunity and need for this measure.

In addition to actively participating in the work of socio-professional integration of young people, second chance schools also contribute to the pedagogical and organizational renovation of the education and training systems and the expansion of education to the public sphere, reinforcing the community dimension of education. Second Chance Schools have been affirming the possibility of organizing effective training responses for more vulnerable audiences who are resistant to traditional training processes. A Second Chance Education stands out today as an inclusive and holistic education proposal, which includes but is not limited to the vocational education dimension. It embodies the belief that it is always possible to start over and overcome experiences of failure, so often traumatic, and is developed not in terms of opposition but in dialogue and mutual learning with regular education and training provisions.

The findings and conclusions from current research allow for proposing two groups of policy recommendations for further development and promotion of second chance education in Europe (Mesquita et. al. 2022). The first group is focused on recommendations for political support at the national level. The second line of recommendations tries to provide roadmap of actions at EU level.

Political support at national level

The national level is essential to provide material, human and expert resources for the functioning of the SCSs. Depending on the level at which decisions are made for school funding, attention should also be paid to the regional/local level. There should be a national strategy to address early leaving, as European policy documents consistently recommend, but there should be also a local (or regional) approach as the needs of young people are not the same everywhere as well as the needs of the labour market. Concrete recommendations for this level can be summarized as follows:

- To increase the visibility of the social problem of low qualifications and social exclusion of young people and of the available policy measures addressing it, such as second chance education and schools.

- To increase the visibility of second chance education, improve communication with national, regional and local authorities and involve them in different events and policy debates.

- To set up and strengthen national policies to reduce ESL and NEETs, supported by comprehensive strategies that include an articulated framework of prevention, intervention and compensation measures.

- To create and strengthen national networks of practices and cooperation between different relevant actors, including second chance initiatives and schools' networks.

- To support evidence-based policies, promoting research about the situation of young people and the impact of second chance education measures, involving universities and researchers.

- To develop a systematic measurement system based on key quality performance indicators to monitor the quality of second chance educational services at national level.

- To reinforce the access and availability of distinctive and quality training opportunities in second chance education and schools' provisions for early leavers.

Political support on behalf of EU Institutions

The European dimension has emerged as an essential vehicle for launching the idea and encouraging Member States to "joint learning" among themselves. Evidence suggests that many cities and local initiatives rely on EU support not just for funding, but also because it allows them to muster the goodwill, support and publicity needed to successfully take their projects forward. For second chance schools to succeed, it was vital that they were perceived as different and 'better' than mainstream schools, and the European dimension certainly played an important role in conveying this image. Networking between individual schools and their organizations at European level is important for improving quality of service through exchange of know-how and expertise. Furthermore, consolidating the "voice" of different players in the field would contribute to increased visibility and improved understanding by European institutions of the need to ensure sustainable support for second chance education in Europe. Some recommendations at this level could be:

- To keep the key target of reducing early leaving from education and training in the European agenda of education.

- To develop a systematic measurement system based on key quality performance indicators to monitor the quality of second chance educational services at EU level.

- To promote European cooperation and networking between second chance schools and practices, creating European Centres for Mobility, Research and Training and strengthening the European Network of Second Chance Schools, E2C Europe.

- To offer capacity building opportunities for organizations and professionals active in second chance education field;

- To promote the transfer of innovation developed in second chance education and schools to mainstream schools that could benefit from new approaches, such as learner-centred pedagogies, participation in decision-making processes, and inclusive approaches towards assessment and learner support.

The European institutions must support it, but they certainly cannot assume full responsibility in this matter. The main responsibility lies with the education authorities of the Member States, cities, schools and national and European associations and networks, who are encouraged to continue to work towards the inclusion of those who most need care and support.

Conclusion

A good education is not an end in itself. Its benefits are related to many other spheres of public life - social sphere, civil society, employment, economy, culture, etc. EU and member states are trying to provide increasingly high-quality and adequate education for young people, but still around one in ten young adults leave school or training early, without qualification or diploma. For at least two decades all European countries have implemented various policies and initiatives to address dropout and NEETs challenges and promote inclusive education. However, the problem not only exists, but is growing in some countries.

The reasons for early leaving differ from one country or region to another, and it is impossible to establish a single 'profile' of early leavers or a comprehensive list of causes leading to the high percentage of ESL and NEETs. Still, there are some common

characteristics of early school leavers like coming from: poor, socially disadvantaged and or low education backgrounds; minorities (such as Roma or other minority ethnic groups) or migrant backgrounds; belonging to vulnerable groups, such as youth from a public care background, teenage mothers and persons with physical and mental disabilities or other special educational needs (SEN). There are different constitutional, social, cultural, historical, and educational circumstances, local or regional specifics within each Member State, which should be taken into consideration. Establishment of SCSs should be pluralistic in terms of its links to the formal education system, regulations, management, etc. according to the possibilities in each country - inter alia school capacity, teacher recruitment formalities, specific aspects of the curriculum and institutional links/partnerships.

Second chance schools need to provide a different learning environment which responds to the specific needs of their learners, such as smaller learning groups, more teachers per student, more personalized and innovative teaching, flexible and multiple pathways and more elements of vocational training. Second chance programs have to be relevant to their students, have to be able to provide sufficient incentives to maintain learning and need to be flexible to students' varied needs. And they need to pass the crucial test of providing successful students with accreditation which is recognized on the labour market and allows them to continue education and training within mainstream education and training system.

As stated in European and national documents, in the learning society in which we live, social stratifications are increasingly based on the demarcation lines between those "who have" and those "who don't have" skills and qualifications. Dropping out of school has more lasting consequences than in previous decades. It can mark an individual for life and radically narrow the scope of his life projects.

The main locus of action to address school failure and social exclusion is the local authorities, schools, communities, and cities. The national contribution is essential to ensure the financial sustainability of local initiatives, and to recognize the effort invested and the qualifications that students acquire in these schemes. At national level, the debate on the prevention of school leaving and the generalization of good practices in combating school leaving must be intense and continuous, promptly undertaking changes and

reforms when results are not satisfactory. The European level can be of great value in networking these initiatives. In doing so, it helps to mobilize teachers and students and allows for the comparison of results, the identification of good practices and consistent feedback in the policy process at European level. The three levels therefore have an important role to play in combating school dropout and social exclusion.

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