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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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The Experience of Second-chance Schools in Two Mediterranean Cities: Catania and Athens

Sandra Chistolini
Università Roma Tre (Italy)

Abstract

The White Paper on “Teaching and Learning” (Cresson, 1995) promoted second-chance schools to provide training for young people excluded from the traditional school system, using appropriate tools and teaching methods. Universal access to lifelong education and training was the key to employment and integration into society. This research analysed two situations in Southern Europe, in Italy and Greece to understand the success of opportunities given to young people to reach a higher qualification. A questionnaire gathered data to consider social conditions of teaching and learning. The two schools are examples of best practices in different contexts. Cultural and linguistic identities determine the proposal, which was universal in inspiration and specific in application.

The Cresson White Paper

In the White Paper *Teaching and learning: towards the learning society*, proposed by Edith Cresson, Commissioner for research, education and training in 1995, five priority objectives were put forward:

- recognise skills acquired over a lifetime.
- bring schools and businesses closer together
- combat social exclusion through teaching and training
- proficiency in three Community languages
- treat capital investment and investments in training on an equal basis

These objectives have gradually led to concrete, original experimentation, pushed by the European Commission. Six States have set up second-chance schools, which, thanks to instruments and teaching systems adapted to various situations, are meant to train young people, excluded from the traditional school system. The White Paper stressed the necessity of giving everyone access to education and training throughout life, a fundamental point for the employment and social insertion of European citizens. The growth in know-how and skills over the span of a lifetime has become today's challenge and each person is seriously concerned about being capable of facing growing social complexity with skills suited to the changes in progress.

From the point of view of concrete actions, the first five objectives in the White Paper talked about creating formulas for the *recognition of skills*, meaning that the skills acquired at any time and throughout the European Union must be recognised to everyone. It talked about skills acquired throughout life and certificates received by

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passing a valid test in the various professional sectors and recognised by the experts concerned.

For the second objective, *bringing schools and businesses closer together*, the increase of apprentice mobility for professional training is supported. The Commission has promoted exchanges between schools, universities and the professional sector through training and exchange activities. The European charter for apprentices intervened on obstacles to transnational mobility and defined training and quality criteria.

The third objective and the one of specific interest to us for the study developed here, concerns *combat exclusion*. It was translated into some “second-chance school” pilot projects, launched in some European cities with high scholastic dispersion. In general, a second-chance school is supposed to utilise teaching tools and multimedia techniques in training young people, who also risked social exclusion, having been excluded from the traditional school system.

Initiatives have also been promoted for the fourth objective, understood as *proficiency in three Community languages*, and projects have been launched in support of the early learning of languages, multi-language teaching, mutual understanding and the quality of the material. The desire behind this was to launch a true European strategy for multilingualism.

In order to reply to the fifth objective concerning the equality of capital investments and investments in training, studies useful towards identifying accounting and fiscal devices were carried out as well as an in-depth analysis of the cost structure for education and training. The various experiments were periodically evaluated and the exchange of experiences among the member States aids awareness in the training process for access to know-how and skills in the European area.

Combat exclusion

In the White Paper, the fight against exclusion was met with the offer of a second opportunity for training to be created in schools themselves. In large urban areas, the number of young people excluded from the school system is sometimes considerable and schools located in districts particularly hard hit by dispersion are reoriented towards learning solutions that allow such young people to re-enter the training route. These schools try to improve access to know-how by employing motivated, responsible teachers, willing to increase the teaching schedule, adjust themselves to apprenticeships in companies, use multimedia materials, and work in classes with fewer students. In this situation, the school carries out the role of activity centre in a context in which social and family figures are often absent, or almost.

The White Paper proposed complementary European financial development for these situations, using the Socrates or Leonardo programmes, and called for access to national and regional funding. Another suggestion was the development of cooperation and partnerships with the economic sector. A possible form was that of a business sponsoring the school, with, perhaps, a promise to hire, if the skills were recognised as being satisfactory. Families were also supposed to be directly involved in the running of the

new training project. Recourse to new teaching methods, information and multimedia technologies were considered essential to the success of the venture.

Construct a Europe of knowledge and ward off social exclusion

The Lisbon Treaty of 2000 laid down the transition towards a competitive, dynamic economy, based on knowledge as the strategic objective of the Union. It spoke of a plan for global European action based on digital economy and fight against illiteracy, taking advantage, too, of new technologies. The reference model was supposed to modernise European society by investing in persons and through the building up of an active social state. The major social problems to be faced immediately were: unemployment, social exclusion and poverty.

For this the Treaty addressed the European educational and training systems, in order that they adapt to the needs of the society for knowledge and the necessity of improving the level and quality of employment, hereby paying special attention to groups at more risk of exclusion, such as: young people, unemployed adults and employed people, whose skills are obsolete due to the speedy changes. The new approach ought to have three chief components: development of local centres of learning, promotion of new basic skills, particularly in information technologies, and more transparent qualifications.

Starting from declarations in the European seat, emphasis can be made on the status of the question, by returning to the statistics on the scholastic dispersion of persons aged 18 to 24 under conditions of social exclusions, in Europe on the whole and in the two Countries in our study: Italy and Greece. As can be seen in table 1, in 1995 the two European countries started from a condition of exclusions that placed Italy in a rather critical position compared to the European average and Greece.

Initial European model

Starting from 1995, the Commission has sustained the development of second-chance schools by ensuring financial support to the cities involved. The preparation phase concerned the formulation of projects and the organisation of European seminars in order to develop a network of schools. The experimentation period lasted from 1997 to 1999. The schools concerned were chosen through direct government consultation. Pilot projects were started up in Marseille (France), Halle and Köln (Germany), Leeds (United Kingdom), Bilbao and Barcelona (Spain), Hämeenlinna (Finland), Norrköping (Sweden), Catania (Italy), Athens (Greece), Seixal (Portugal), Heerlen (The Netherlands) and Svendborg (Denmark).

The start-up was gradual and execution was progressive. Some pilot projects were concluded, others entered into the city structurally, hereby maintaining the function of hindering scholastic dispersion and having young people over 18, without school qualifications useful for professional insertion, reach higher levels of training. Among the first pilot projects, the second-chance schools in Catania and Athens Peristeri constitute situations of structural, permanent inclusion in the two cities in Italy and Greece. In 2007, they continued to offer training programs for professional reinsertion and social participation.

Scholastic dispersion in Italy and Greece

In 2006, we can see that progress in reducing scholastic dispersion was recorded, although Italy continued to maintain a relatively high rate of dispersion: ca. 21% compared to 15% in Europe and 16% in Greece.

Table 1 – Percentage of persons aged 18 to 24, who left school (early school-leavers)

States	1995	2000	2006
EU 27 States	-	17.6	15.2
EU 25 States	-	17.3	15.0
EU 15 States	26.2	19.5	16.9
Italy	32.8	25.3	20.8
Greece	22.4	18.2	15.9

Source: Eurostat, last update on 29.02.2008

In March 2000, in conformity with the constitutional regulations, the European Council invited the member States to start up the necessary programs within their jurisdictions, in order to achieve the objective of a reduction (50% within 2010) of the number of young people, aged 18 to 24, who have only finished to lowest level of secondary school and who are neither continuing their studies nor undertaking another kind of training. Halving the number of persons in dispersion means considerably reduced the rate recorded in 2006.

The benchmark for Italy, relative to this rate of dispersion, is a 10% reduction of early school-leavers within 2010. The percentage is calculated on the portion of young people aged 18 to 24, who have achieved a maximum school qualification of ISCED 2 (first level secondary school) and have not participated in educational/training activities compared to all young people aged 18 to 24 (*early school-leavers*). Figure 1 shows the situation in Italy in 2006, with maximum dispersion rates of 30.4% in Sicily.

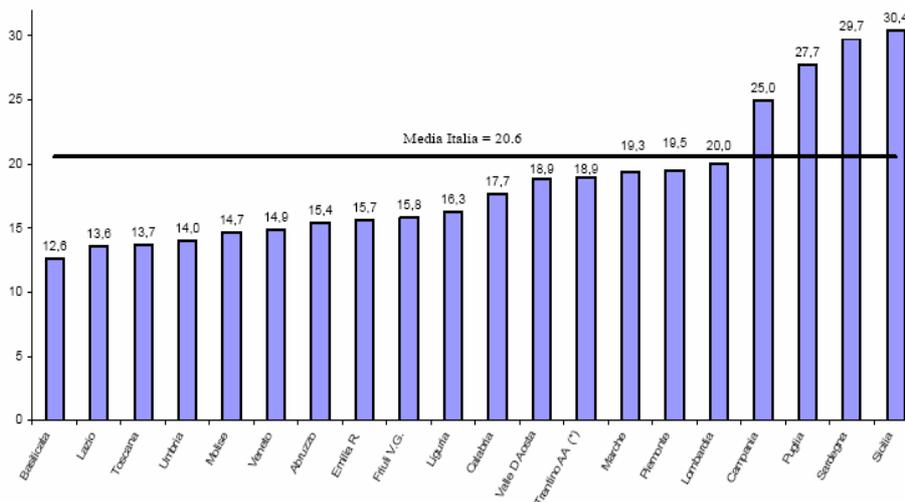


Figure 1 – Persons aged 18-24 with only middle school qualifications and no longer in training, by region in Italy (per 100 peers) – Year 2006

(*) The overall data of Trentino Alto Adige is the result of two profoundly different situations, relative to Trento and Bolzano. Bolzano, in particular, has an incidence of *early school-leavers* of 27.6%, while Trento shows the minimum rate of 9.5%.

Source: Istat – Survey on the Work Force and Sistan December 2006.

Different research on scholastic dispersion was carried out in Greece. The data from 2000-2001 mention a dispersion of 14% during the first year of *gymnasium* (secondary school). In order to reach the objective fixed by the Lisbon Conference, Greece still has to decrease by 4 percentage points. This target seems rather difficult, because, from 2000 to 2007, the decrease in dispersion was slow.

The Greek Ministry of Education chiefly operates towards prevention of the phenomenon. An example would be the education intervention addressed to gypsies, which considerably reduced dispersion thanks to the starting up of remedial classes and the activation of intercultural education. The institution of second-chance schools falls within this kind of intervention from the Greek Ministry. It allows many young people, who left their studies early, to return to school and attain a qualification useful towards finding a job.

Second chance schools in Italy and Greece

The explorative research done on second-chance schools in Italy and Greece was carried out in the two cities of Catania and Athens, Peristeri, in 2007. A questionnaire, addressed to the students, was worked up for a survey. The intention of the survey was to listen to what young people thought about this educational chance. Compilation of the questionnaires is still in progress. The information to be thought over might be improved through the data collected in the questionnaires. From 1998-99 until 2007, only one second-chance school has been in operation in Italy. It is located inside the Comprehensive School F. Petrarca, located on the outskirts of Catania. It receives ministerial funding and carries out training for adults, according to the project promoted by the initiative of Commissioner Cresson.

Local, regional and municipal governments should participate in the expenses, but this does not always occur on a regular basis. Funding is awaited for training the trainers, transport and hiring expert personnel, such as a psychologist and social worker. From its inception, the school was meant to reply to the serious situation of social exclusions of residents of the area, i.e. lack of services, economic and social hardship, and scholastic dispersion. One could say that, after about ten years, the school has done a lot to prevent the phenomenon and almost totally eliminate it.

The school in Catania is currently offering training, structured as follows:

- basic education (Italian, history, geography, English, mathematics, physics, social studies, multimedia, psychology)
- professional training (workshops)
- on the job training (in a company)
- common activities (cultural, athletic, recreational).

The students are all Italians, aged 16 to 22, 99% of whom have completed compulsory school and hold middle school certification. The Centre 2YOU has been in operation

since 2006. It supports the well-being and consequent training success of the young people, wards off social unease and scholastic abandon and keeps the risk of juvenile deviation at bay. The second-chance school in Catania actively collaborates with the Centre 2YOU by offering a further study possibility and professional insertion to young people in difficulty as well as implementing the 12-year educational obligation.

In Greece, the situation of the second-chance schools is much more varied and well-organised. The first school was opened in 2000 in Athens, Peristeri, a rather industrialised municipality, still in operation. The number of schools has steadily increased and reached a total of 48 units. The schools are financed by the European Fund, 75%, and the Hellenic State, 25%. In Greece, persons over 18 years of age and who have not completed the nine years of compulsory education may attend the second-chance schools.

The Peristeri school accepts persons aged about 30 and offers them useful training for acquiring the skills and qualifications required to be introduced into the working world, by providing, above all, cultural preparation through multidisciplinary studies. The Peristeri school adopts the theory of *Literacy studies* and the concept of multi-literacy, understood as the acquisition of basic scientific competency in:

- linguistics (*literacy*) in modern Greek and English;
- arithmetic (*numeracy*) for mathematics;
- computer science (*information technology, computer literacy*) for new technologies.

Added to the above literacy are skills in physical sciences and multimedia social communications.

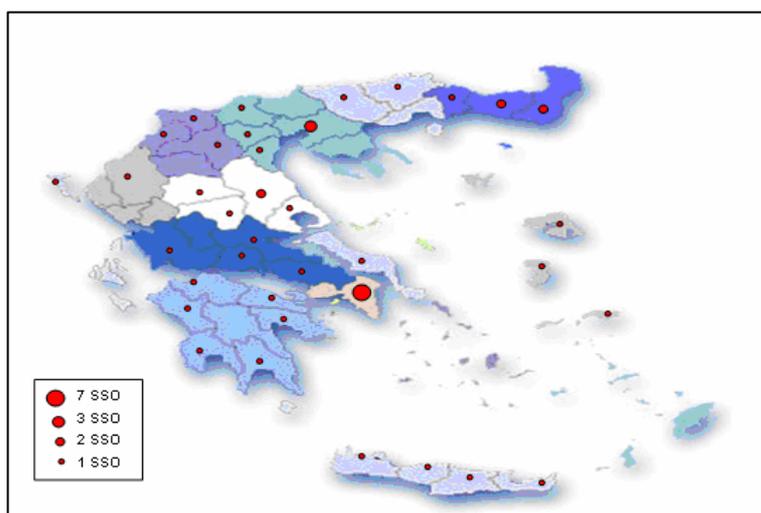


Figure 2. Second-chance schools in Greece

Source: Fragkià A., *La dispersione scolastica e le Scuole della seconda opportunità*, unpublished Master's thesis, Università Roma Tre, Master in Pedagogia per la persona, l'organizzazione, la società, Rome, 2006-07, p. 106.

While the school in Catania is chiefly engaged in stemming juvenile unemployment, the school in Peristeri follows the philosophy of *learn to learn*, which culturally prepares young people, so that they are able to take initiatives according to their own interests and experience. A lot of the work in Catania is through workshops and unpaid work experience in companies, whereas Peristeri focuses training on didactics for projects, referring to the various branches of teaching.

One could say that the two schools are good examples of two social actions that use important aspects noted in the White Paper of 1995 to an advantage: training towards a profession (Catania) and scientific training (Peristeri). Both training types are indispensable towards building up a democratic society, in which everyone can study throughout life and acquire the know-how necessary for managing the intricacy of rapidly changing information.

From the point of view of international exchange, one hopes that a cultural network of communication shall develop between the two Schools in the Mediterranean region, so as to render experiences a mutual patrimony, to be divulged at the moment it is produced.

The legacy of second-chance schools

The experience of the second-chance schools developed new methods that are useful in allowing early school-leavers to reinsert themselves into learning throughout their lives. The more the educational system moves towards different options, the more the adult population will manage to return to training routes, be active participants in their surroundings and contribute significantly to themselves and others.

The European social fund and Community initiative, EQUAL, are two new instruments oriented towards averting social exclusion and ensuring equal opportunities for accessing training and employment. Parallel to this, the Grundvig action, within the Community framework Socrates, and the Leonardo program for professional training promote exchanges and the dissemination of new ideas and experiences in order to reply to the objectives of Lisbon for 2010.

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