

THRIVE

Training Hope and Resilience In Vulnerable Early school leavers

Trauma-Informed Practices in Second Chance Education in Europe

Key findings report

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Key findings

Trauma is a significant issue in second chance education settings

Trauma was identified as a significant issue in second chance education settings. Second chance educators felt that trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) were highly prevalent amongst learners in second chance education settings. Early school leavers (ESLs) also reported significant negative experiences in mainstream education, whilst behavioural, psychological, emotional and mental health difficulties were also identified as significant barriers to positive outcomes for learners in second chance education.

Trauma-informed approaches are important

Given the likely exposure of ESLs to negative school experiences and multiple personal, familial and environmental challenges, approaches which redress trauma and marginalisation may be effective in reengaging young people in education and promoting positive personal and educational outcomes, development and growth.

Educators reported a strong awareness of trauma.

Relationship building and strengths-focused approaches were highlighted as important practices

The vast majority of educators felt they had a good understanding of trauma and traumatic stress, as well as its impact on development and learning. Supportive relationships and individualised, strengths-focused approaches were highlighted as crucial in reengaging ESLs in education. These practices were also highly valued by ESLs themselves who reported positive experiences and a sense of belonging in second chance education settings.

Tailored trauma-informed training and support for second chance educators are needed

Educators highlighted a need for further training in trauma-informed practices. Educators also reported significant experiences of stress and distress as a result of their work and supported self-care was identified as an area for capacity development. Additional resources and greater opportunities for collaboration were also recommended.

Background

Introduction

THRIVE (*Training Hope and Resilience in Vulnerable Early school leavers*) is a new cross-European research programme aimed at developing trauma-informed training supports for second chance educators.

Early school leaving can be defined as non-participation in school before a young person reaches age 16 or before completing three years post-primary education (European Commission, 2017). Early school leaving can lead to serious negative outcomes for the individual and is a significant and complex challenge for educational and political systems. Alternative educational pathways which re-engage out-of-school youth in learning and enable successful labour market engagement are important in overcoming the detrimental effects for the person and society as a whole (Aron, 2006).

Research suggests that early school leavers (ESLs) are more likely to have experienced trauma and or adverse circumstances in childhood (Borg et al., 2015). Therefore it is important for second chance educational programmes to develop approaches which redress trauma and marginalisation. Trauma-informed approaches may be effective in promoting re-engagement in education and positive outcomes for vulnerable young people.

The THRIVE research team involves a consortium of researchers from five partner European countries:

- *Austria* -
- *Ireland* - Institute of Child Education and Psychology (ICEP) Europe and Kildare West Wicklow Education and Training Board (KWETB)
- *Italy* - CESIE
- *Malta* - University of Malta, Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health
- *Romania* - Association for Education & Sustainable Development (AESD)

Examining trauma-informed practices in second chance education

Study overview

The **THRIVE** study involved a cross-European exploration of the use of trauma-informed practices in second chance education settings, as well as the challenges and barriers to meeting the needs of ESLs.

A mixed methods, inquiry-based evaluation was undertaken in five countries:

- Austria
- Italy;
- Ireland;
- Malta; and
- Romania



Study aims

- To assess educators' awareness and understanding of trauma;
- Explore the use of trauma-sensitive practices and strategies;
- Examine second chance educators' exposure to trauma and sense of efficacy in responding the needs of ESLs;
- Explore educators' and ESLs' experiences and the supports that are helpful to ESLs.

The quantitative study

An online questionnaire was used to gather information from second chance educators, including:

- demographic characteristics.
- trauma awareness,
- trauma-informed practices.

This was translated into Italian, German and Romanian

The qualitative study

Focus groups were held in each participating country with educators and ESLs. These explored key stakeholders' experiences of education and 'what works' for ESLs.

Key findings

The quantative study

In total, **273** educators took part in the online survey.

Table 1: Participant demographics. Numbers are frequencies (%).

	<i>Austria</i> <i>n = 32</i>	<i>Ireland</i> <i>n = 120</i>	<i>Italy</i> <i>n = 35</i>	<i>Malta</i> <i>n = 62</i>	<i>Romania</i> <i>n = 24</i>
Female	19 (59)	82 (68)	25 (71)	48 (77)	17 (71)
Male	13 (41)	38 (32)	10 (29)	14 (23)	7 (29)
Age (yrs)					
< 25 – 34	Missing	9 (8)	5 (14)	15 (24)	4 (17)
35 – 44		36 (30)	7 (20)	26 (42)	17 (71)
45 – 54		49 (41)	15 (43)	17 (27)	3 (13)
55+		26 (22)	8 (23)	4 (7)	0

Findings



The majority of participants felt they had a good understanding of what trauma and traumatic stress and how trauma can impact learning and development in young people. However, educators in Ireland and Malta reported lower confidence in their knowledge of the physiological and biological implications of trauma.



The majority of educators across all participating countries agreed there were trauma-sensitive practices in place in second chance education settings. Whilst, educator self-efficacy score in relation to student engagement and classroom management were also, on average, high. However, there were perceived gaps in training and supports available to educators working with trauma exposed learners, particularly in Ireland and Malta.



Educators' scores in relation to secondary traumatic stress were, on average, low. Suggesting that educators held positive perceptions of their work and were not experiencing compassion fatigue.

Key findings

The qualitative study

Focus groups were held in each participating country to explore the thoughts and experiences of key stakeholders in relation to trauma and the supports that are helpful to ESLs. The qualitative study also explored challenges and barriers that stakeholders' experience in respect of addressing trauma in second chance education settings. In total, 45 educators and 25 learners participated in the focus groups.

Key themes

Trauma awareness and trauma-sensitive practices

Trauma was understood as being prevalent amongst ESLs and as having significant implications for learner engagement in second chance education settings. Educators also felt that emotional needs needed to be met, in order to promote learning and educational attainment:

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

Educators emphasised the importance of using flexible, adaptive approaches which focused on relationship building with students, and which were trauma-sensitive. Learners also highly valued these practices:

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

"Everyone here treats you equally. They treat you with respect" (Learner, Ireland)

Priorities and needs of educators

Working in second chance education and, in particular, responding to challenging behaviour and mental health difficulties in learners, was cited as a major challenge. Despite, educators' commitment to their work, the experience of distress and stress as a result of their work was also highlighted:

"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).

Educators highlighted a need for further training, particularly in relation to mental health, challenging behaviour and specific learning difficulties. Additional time for collaboration and capacity development, and greater resourcing of second chance education were also perceived as important by participating educators.

Discussion

This research explored trauma-informed practices in second chance education settings in Europe. The findings highlight widespread awareness of trauma amongst educational practitioners. Distinct differences between second chance education settings and mainstream school were described. Educators emphasised the importance of using sensitive, supportive and collaborative teaching practices, creating a sense of safety and belonging for learners and a person-oriented, strengths focused approach for engaging with ESLs. Building trust and positive relationships with learners was highlighted as important in promoting positive outcomes for learners in second chance education. These findings are important. A sense of support and belonging are important sources of resilience and can help to promote positive outcomes in marginalised young people (Leitch, 2017).

However, re-engaging ESLs in education is a difficult process (Polidana et al., 2013) and educators also experienced significant challenges. Stress and frustration were highlighted and training supports which support self-care was an important avenue for further development. A lack of resources and collaboration with external services were also identified as challenges for second chance educators.

Key lessons

- ESLs and learners in second chance education may have elevated exposure to adverse childhood experiences and trauma
- Trauma-sensitive practices which strengthen educator' awareness of trauma and promote positive relationships, a sense of security and strengths-oriented approaches can help to promote positive outcomes for vulnerable young people.
- The findings point to a dearth of training for second chance educators and indicate that educators may benefit from supports that build capacity in relation to student well-being and educator self-care.
- Collaboration was also identified as an area where capacity development is needed. Partnership working can increase opportunities for preventative support and intervention for vulnerable young people.

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