



SOS-network

– Social Inclusion of Students/Learners with Special Needs into mainstream VET and the labour market

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Report

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We shall overcome. Barriers to education: drop outs or push outs

They are labeled in many different ways. Officially, in the EU Commission language, they are called Early School Leavers (ESL). In the English speaking countries they are called NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) or even Drop Outs. What they have in common is that they do not fit easily into mainstream education. Or perhaps that mainstream education does not fit their needs. This contributions aims at unfolding these issues.

The SOS-Network (SOcial inclusion of Students with special needs into mainstream VET and world of work) aims at contributing to social inclusion of young people with special educational needs and social disadvantages into mainstream VET, labour market and society. It intends to develop and introduce new concepts for approaching the issue of social inclusion, and to provide teachers, trainers and others working with these young people in learning or job-related activities.

VET providers all over Europe experience the problem of students leaving education or training without completing it. The non-completion rates are staggering, in some cases more than 50%. Some of these early school leavers struggle with social, mental or learning problems, and many end up being not in education, employment or training (NEET). This is unacceptable in societies with demographic challenges and economic and social problems.

Interventions are often remedial, as they often aim at solving problems which are already prevalent and urgent, whereas an emphasis on more preventive measures such as innovative learning methods are more rare as they are often more difficult to measure or legitimise. Moreover, mentors, coaches, and guidance teachers working in this preventive mode may be seen as playing the role of the Trojan Horse in the very (VET)institutions of which they are an integral part (Plant, 2005).

Examples, however, of such preventive and proactive approaches are found in the material, as mentioned below.



Barriers

The SOS Network has identified a number of barriers to education. The project website (<http://www.sosnetwork.eu/cases> and in particular <http://www.sosnetwork.eu/barrier>) presents a wealth of cases to illustrate such barriers and how to overcome some of them. The cases, the barriers, and how to overcome them present different kinds of approaches to students/learners with special needs in different learning environments. Each case is written in a standard format which provides access to other resources, and to methods and tools which are applicable in different learning environments.

The material has been gathered and processed as part of the SOS Network project by the project partners. It shows a wealth of experiences, approaches, and methods in dealing with social inclusion of students with special needs into mainstream VET, with perhaps less emphasis on the inclusion of such persons into the world of work. The cases and barriers cover all the participating SOS Network countries, they have been slightly edited for linguistic purposes, and they build on a number of different understandings and definitions of 'special needs'. In many cases, the overall concept seems to have been to deal with students who have been labelled with a diagnose. This is mirrored below, where e.g. students with ADHD or Asperger's syndrome are highlighted as examples in order to create a common understanding, and with the view to arrive at common definitions, if possible.

The barriers in the SOS Network material are listed in alphabetical order: they range from (A) Absence of self esteem to (W) Wheelchair use, covering among others ADHD, Asperger's syndrome, Dyslexia, and Social Phobia. Any one of these challenges may create difficulties in terms of educational completion. It is a recognised fact that education is a key element in relation to active citizenship, lifelong learning, job security, social inclusion, violence, criminal behaviour, and a range of other societal factors. With this backdrop all European States have introduced a number of educational policies with the aim to focus on educational retention, educational completion, second chance education, outreach youth guidance services, lifelong learning initiatives, programmes for recognition of prior learning, extensive use of distance learning methods, youth guarantee schemes, mentoring and coaching programmes, and suchlike measures.

Laudable as all these initiatives may be, they have a particular focus, both in policy terms and on a practical level, in terms of the emphasis on individual deficits and difficulties. In most cases, the individual, rather than the educational institution, is



seen as the problem (see examples on ADHD, Asperger's, etc, below). This is reflected in the labeling of people who do not take part in formal education or leave educational institutions. They are called Early School Leavers (ESL) in the EU Commission language, or NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) in English speaking countries. One common label is educational Drop Outs. What these individuals have in common is that they do not fit easily into mainstream education. Or, rather, that mainstream education does not fit their needs. The latter sentence highlights the point that they may in fact be push-outs, rather than drop outs. How is the problem viewed? That is the question. Is it viewed as an individual problem, or as an institutional/societal problem? 'What is the problem represented to be?' asks Bacchi (2009) in her discourse analysis. This is important, as the framing and conceptualising of the problem at hand also determines the strategies and interventions to solve the problem. In this case, the problem is represented as an individual lack of self esteem, stamina, personal clout, social capital, or personal drive and motivation. Conversely, this list of deficits may be viewed as symptoms of institutional difficulties or deficits, or of societal difficulties or deficits. This is an alternative representation of the problem, and it calls for alternative answers.

On this point, Jørgensen (2011), writes:

'The focus in research on individuals' backgrounds, though, might support a problematic, but common conception of drop out as a result of individual deficits. This focus might lead to measures focusing narrowly on *'youth-at-risk'*, rather than considering the broader social dynamics that are involved in producing drop-out. These include processes of exclusion from the social communities of students and the selection processes involved in the students' transitions through various educational pathways. In addition, the search for discrete causal factors behind dropout might obscure the complex and contingent processes that result in dropout. Dropout might be triggered by specific events, but is generally a result of an accumulative process that often has started early in basic school.

The strong political interest in reducing the dropout rate in VET programmes has primarily focused on the students who drop out in order to find out what characterises this group. This effort is meant to make it easier to interpret the signs when a student is not faring well and to take measures to increase the support for a student to complete his or her course. However, it also means that dropping out is put down to the



students' deficits and problems: their lacking discipline and skills or their messy family circumstances. As a result, the effort to reduce the dropout rate is focused on compensatory measures to support the "weak", "vulnerable" or "deviant" students. This means that the dropout problem is becoming individualised and attributed to the students, who are to be helped through special measures. This is particularly evident in VET schools, where countless special measures have been implemented to support this group of students: mentors, coaches, advisers, counsellors and social pedagogical measures. However this can prevent the dropout problem from being attributed to and dealt with in other areas: teaching, class sizes, teachers' competence, education policy, shortage of placements – or the social deprivation and problems that are documented to increase the risk of drop out. A shift from placing the dropout problem with the individual students to placing it with the educational system is particularly relevant in the case of the VET programmes. Their structure has certain inherent characteristics which increase the risk of students dropping out. The first of such characteristics is that VET programmes are based on training in companies, and the availability of placements greatly depends on the state of the economy.'

Clearly, this emphasises the need for critically examining the concepts behind the concept of 'drop outs', or rather 'push outs'. With this backdrop, we now turn to two specific examples of barriers: Asperger's, and ADHD. These have been chosen as specific examples, as they both are commonly mentioned in the SOS project materials.

ADHD and Asperger's

Many of the early school leavers face various challenges that can all be considered as barriers to education. These barriers can e.g. be medical diagnosis such as Asperger's, ADHD or anxiety as well as social problems poor upbringing, lack of positive role models, or low self esteem. It can also be barriers like poor literacy and/or numerical skills or barriers related to integration problems. Often such barriers are a mix of various factors. Significantly, most of the labels carry heavy deficit-model thinking, based on a psychiatric diagnose. For example, *ADHD* (Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) is labeled as exactly that: a disorder. It represents a range of inter-related problems: not being able to focus, being overactive, and not being able control behavior, is often a combination of these. ADHD usually begins in childhood, but may continue into the adult years. It is the most commonly diagnosed



behavioral disorder in children. ADHD is diagnosed much more often in boys than in girls. Several of the SOS Network cases deal with ADHD and related barriers to education.

Symptoms of ADHD fall into three groups:

- Not being able to focus (inattentiveness)
- Being extremely active (hyperactivity)
- Not being able to control behavior (impulsivity)

Inattentive Symptoms

- Fails to give close attention to details or makes careless mistakes
- Has difficulty keeping attention during tasks
- Does not seem to listen when spoken to directly
- Does not follow through on instructions and fails to finish chores and tasks
- Has problems organizing tasks and activities
- Avoids or dislikes tasks that require sustained mental effort such as schoolwork
- Often loses assignments, pencils, books, or tools needed for tasks or activities
- Is easily distracted
- Is often forgetful in daily activities

Hyperactivity Symptoms

- Fidgets with hands or feet or squirms in seat
- Leaves seat when remaining seated is expected
- Runs about or climbs in inappropriate situations
- Has problems playing or working quietly
- Is often "on the go," acts as if "driven by a motor"
- Talks excessively

Impulsivity Symptoms

- Blurts out answers before questions have been completed
- Has difficulty awaiting turn
- Interrupts or intrudes on others (butts into conversations or games)

Asperger's



One further example of a complex mix of barriers to education is found in people who have been diagnosed with *Asperger's syndrome*. As is the case with the above-mentioned ADHD, it is based on a deficit and problem orientation, whereas, for some people, it is a positive asset to have these 'symptoms'. Bill Gates of Microsoft is one such outstanding example. Several of the SOS Network cases deal with Asperger's and related barriers to education. Common symptoms of Asperger's include:

- Problems with social skills: difficulties interacting with others and awkward in social situations. Generally do not make friends easily. Difficulties initiating and maintaining conversation.
- Eccentric or repetitive behaviors: May develop odd, repetitive movements, such as hand wringing or finger twisting.
- Unusual preoccupations or rituals: May develop rituals that he or she refuses to alter, such as getting dressed in a specific order.
- Communication difficulties: May not make eye contact when speaking with someone. May have trouble using facial expressions and gestures, and understanding body language. Tend to have problems understanding language in context and are very literal in their use of language.
- Limited range of interests: May develop an intense, almost obsessive, interest in a few areas, such as sports schedules, weather, or maps.
- Coordination problems: May seem clumsy or have awkward movements.
- Skilled or talented: May be exceptionally talented or skilled in a particular area, such as music or math.

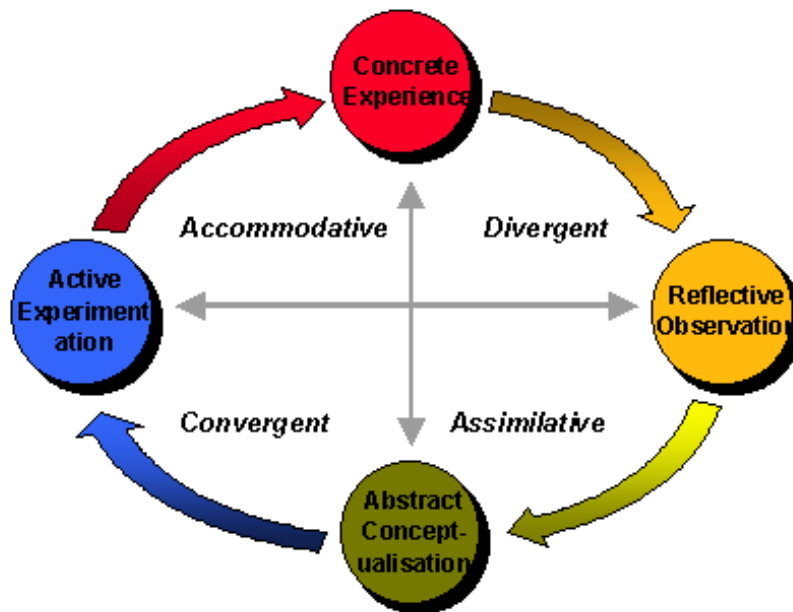
Clearly, such difficulties will create a number of barriers to education, and to coping with life in general. With this backdrop, we now turn to the learning aspects of the complexity of barriers to (VET) education, with a view to various learning styles.

Learning

A view on Learning may explain some of the push-out factors which may lead to educational drop out. Inspired by Piaget, Illeris (2006), and Kolb (1984) have illustrated different types or styles of learning:

Fig 2: Learning styles (based on illustration from:
<http://www.learningandteaching.info/learning/experience.htm>)

Leads to four kinds of knowledge:



Learning is here viewed from different perspectives: Accommodative vs Assimilative, Divergent vs Convergent (as depicted in Fig 2, above). The point being made here is that practitioners of creative disciplines, such as the arts, tend to be found in the *Divergent* quadrant; scientists and mathematicians are in the *Assimilative* quadrant; applied scientists and lawyers are in the *Convergent* quadrant; professionals who have to operate more intuitively, such as teachers, are in the *Accommodative* quadrant. Let us unfold the different learning styles:

The Divergent Learning Style

A person with this type of learning style is best at using *concrete experience* and *reflective observation*. Enjoys brainstorming and small group discussions. Likes to gather information and has broad interests. Has a tendency to watch events rather than participate in them. Is able to empathize with others' feelings but may have difficulty drawing conclusions from quantitative or technical aspects of a situation.



Learning skills to develop include:

Making decisions

Setting goals

Taking Risks

The Assimilative Learning Style

A person with this type of learning style is best at using *reflective observation* and *abstract conceptualization*. Has a talent for creating theoretical models, and enjoys inductive reasoning and distilling varied observations into logical explanations. However, may be overly cautious about experimenting and miss opportunities for learning.

Skills to develop include:

Seeking/exploring opportunities

Influencing others

Being personally involved

The Convergent Learning Style

A person with this type of learning style is best at using *abstract conceptualization* and *active experimentation*. Has the ability to find practical applications for ideas, concepts and theories. Enjoys situations where there is a single or best answer to a problem. May prefer to deal with technical issues rather than people issues.

Skills to develop include:



Listening with an open mind

Gathering information

Imagining the implications of situations

The Accommodative Learning Style

A person with this type of learning style is best at using *active experimentation* and *concrete experience*. Learns primarily from hands-on experience. Likely to be involved in planning and participating in new and challenging experiences. Tends to act on intuition rather than careful analysis. Quick to reject solutions that don't work out and improvise. May concentrate on the urgent aspects of a situation, sacrificing longterm understanding.

Skills to develop include:

Organizing information

Building conceptual models

Testing theories and ideas

Where does this leave many of VET learners, who often learn best by active experiments and concrete experience, but are often met by the opposite learning approaches in VET schools? It may leave such learners in the pool of Early School Leavers, as they may have been pushed out by the learning approaches of the school. A more fruitful learning position has been suggested by Lave & Wenger (1991) with their introduction of the concept of 'Situated Learning' i.e. legitimate peripheral participation which leaves plenty of room for active experiments and concrete experience.



In addition to difficulties with applying different learning styles in the specific VET context as outlined above, students also may face institutional and societal barriers. It is to these that we now turn.

Drop out or push out

Clearly, this above-mentioned list of problems may create a range of barriers to education. Most of these focus on individual barriers, as mentioned. Such barriers however, could be seen as part of a wider perspective to which we now turn, where drop-out factors and push-out factors are seen in relation to internal and external factors, thus pointing to the links between individual and societal factors, as depicted in Figure 1 below:

Fig 1: Factors: Barriers to education

Factors	Drop out	Push out
Internal	<i>Individual deficits</i>	Learning environment deficits
External	Social/family deficits	Societal deficits

Individual deficits are highlighted in the figure above as they are often in focus when dealing with barriers to education. This tends to leave other aspects with less focus and attention. They may, however, be of equal importance, and together these factors may result in societal exclusion and marginalisation of people who leave school for whatever reason (Levitas, 1998). The excluded, the drop outs, the early school leavers, the push outs, however, are heterogeneous, not a group. What, if anything, they have in common is their confusion, their frustration, their disillusionment, their low self-esteem and their alienation. Add those who are disadvantaged by age, sex, class, ethnicity, religious background, employment status, illiteracy, rurality and



refugee status. Watts (1999) has three explanations of social exclusion mechanisms, of which barriers to education is one aspect: the economic explanation, the moral one, and one which focuses on lack of cultural capital. Plant & Jensen (2008) link these issues to one of the helping interventions in VET, career guidance:

Economic

Social exclusion is one of the results of economic competition in the global market place. Capital, and thus workplaces, will move to the most profitable parts of the world. This is why production, and increasingly, computer-based services such as call-centres, are moving out of USA and Europe, and to low-income countries such as India, Malaysia, and China. Only the highly skilled and flexible core of the workforce will remain in the high-income countries. The result is that the less skilled and the less flexible are gradually peeled off from the onion of the labour market. They are marginalised and excluded. A way out of this is the strategy of upskilling the labour force in a lifelong learning perspective. What is needed is ‘Education, education and education’. *Guidance* has a pivotal role to play in this strategy, in helping people to access training and education, to unfold their potential, to get their real competences recognised and accredited, and to follow them along on their lifelong learning path through supportive and outreaching guidance. The interest in recognising in- or non-formal competencies is part and parcel of this strategy. ‘Guidance, guidance and guidance’ is the mantra.

Moral

It is people’s own fault that they are excluded. They are too dependent on the welfare state, morally irresponsible, and antisocial. With over-generous benefits, idleness is encouraged among the unemployed and making it economically viable for young women to become single parents. The solution is rolling back the welfare state, and controlling crime by tightening up the criminal justice system: ‘Three strikes and you are out’ – or rather in. In jail. The role of *guidance*, in this picture, is seen in the increasing emphasis on planning: personal action plans, individual action plans, etc., all with a view to to encourage people to make (socially acceptable) plans for the future.

Cultural capital

People lack the networks, the links to society, and the cultural capital to make use of the many support services that are in fact available to the public. Guidance is one such help to be found – if you know how and where to find it. But some people do not have the language and the knowledge to break the codes of the system. What they need is enlightenment, more than mere information. In this perspective, *Guidance* is one of the important helping features to help the marginalised out of the darkness in



which they live, and into the light of the inclusive society. This may be done through outreach guidance services, community-based or in the workplaces for at-risk low-paid and low-skilled workers. And for those who have been pushed out of education.

Examples

Guidance, as outlined above, may play a role in overcoming barriers to education. Within the VET schools themselves, however, a number of other activities aim at supporting students who experience barriers. Examples of such approaches are found in the SOS catalogue on *innovative, inclusive learning based on active experiments and concrete experience, i.e. accommodative and divergent learning, including quite a number of coaching and counselling interventions*. Such examples include:

- A neglected young man with emotional and behavioural difficulties benefitted from coaching <http://www.sosnetwork.eu/cases/neglected-person-emotional-and-behavioural-difficulties>
- A young man with cannabis-related problems benefitted from work place experiences, mentoring, and coaching <http://www.sosnetwork.eu/cases/invest-save-young-people>
- A handicapped young man benefitted from work experience and talks with a psychologist <http://www.sosnetwork.eu/cases/handicapped-hand>
- An autistic young man benefitted from work experience, supervision, and mentoring <http://www.sosnetwork.eu/cases/autistic-student-attending-regular-lessons>
- A young man with dyslexia benefitted a course with more time for learning, establishing relations to fellow students, and with a focus on practical work rather than on academic disciplines <http://www.sosnetwork.eu/cases/reading-tutor-fighting-dyslexia>
- A young man with learning difficulties benefitted from Waterhole Pedagogy, which combines practice-oriented, and holistic action-learning approaches with teaching differentiation, including many conversations and interviews <http://www.sosnetwork.eu/cases/waterhole-pedagogy-green-academy>
- A mentoring scheme for bilingual women benefitted this group who meet every second week for an hour to discuss the challenges of the study, academic content, etc. <http://www.sosnetwork.eu/cases/mentoring-bi-lingual-women>

Lessons to be learned from the SOS Network

Many of the SOS Network cases incorporate mentoring, coaching, and guidance approaches. This is significant, as these types of activities may be viewed as either supplementary to mainstream teaching and learning methods, or as an integrated part



of the VET learning environment. Thus, there seems to be a need for both, as well as for coordination between these approaches:

- innovative, inclusive learning based on active experiments and concrete experience, i.e. accommodative and divergent learning
- mentoring, coaching, and guidance approaches
- and coordination between the two sets of approaches in order align the efforts to create a more inclusive learning environment.

The problem of students leaving education or training without completing it will not go away overnight. And some of these early school leavers struggle with social, mental or learning problems. Many end up being not in education, employment or training. Europe may risk losing a generation in terms of VET. The SOS Network and the resources which it has produced aim at combatting this intolerable situation.

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