



SYSTEMATIC

FAILURE,

PERSISTENCE

AND SUCCESS

A TALE OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS

*In Europe, around one in 10 students (18-24 years old) is an 'early school leaver'. For Malta, it is one in five. A fifth of our local student population is neither in school, nor in training, and with less than five SEC exams under their belt, Malta's public education investment (~6% GDP) is not seeing much fruit. **Cassi Camilleri** speaks to **Prof. Carmel Borg** about what is needed to abandon the antiquated system our communities are being marred by. Photography by **Elisa von Brockdorff**.*

There was once a time when a certificate meant a secure job. But that time is long gone. Education is increasingly expensive and time consuming. Many a time, graduates enter the job market with little to no experience, with most taking entry-level jobs that do not pay nearly enough to compensate for the work they put into their studies.

From this perspective, the high number of dropouts and poor update of tertiary education is unsurprising. It is a worldwide phenomenon. The premise is simple: why not get on the job ladder early and work your way up through dedication and experience?

In Malta, however, 20.4% of students become 'early school leavers,' meaning they finish their education with five 'O' levels or less under their belt. Does the same reasoning above still apply? Are the long-term effects of such a decision as negligible as some might think?


Prof. Carmel Borg and Dr Milosh Raykov (Faculty of Education, University of Malta) joined forces about a year ago to answer these questions. They looked into the effects of early school leaving on individuals' emotional, social, and financial wellbeing.


A pioneering study, Borg and Raykov's work was supported by the Observatory for Living with Dignity, one of five research entities within the Maltese President's Foundation for the Wellbeing

of Society. But this is not to say that the journey did not bring challenges with it—far from it. Hurdles were present from the word go. 'There is a dearth of research when it comes to the correlation between early school leaving and wellbeing,' says Borg, hence work had to start from scratch. Piles of data from copious surveys conducted by local and major European and International Institutions, needed to be sifted through and analysed. What's worse was that 'they were not even meant to study this correlation,' says Borg.

Despite the difficulties, however, the project has been going on for over a year and the first phase has been completed. Published in December 2015, the report outlines a series of emerging trends. Sadly, they are not positive.

STAY IN SCHOOL

The truth is that early school leavers are struggling. According to the study, the low incomes prevalent among this group are resulting in serious financial difficulties for families, even restricting access to important learning tools, such as computers and the Internet, for their own children. Money problems are just the tip of the iceberg. Negative emotions and a lack of optimism are widespread in their lives. They are less optimistic about their futures and experience exhausting time-pressures. They have little to no time to do things they actually enjoy, and as a result they feel less 



'EDUCATION IS SIMPLY THE SOUL OF A SOCIETY AS IT PASSES FROM ONE GENERATION TO ANOTHER'

GILBERT CHESTERTON

Prof. Carmel Borg and Dr Milosh Raykov

happy, less calm, and less peaceful. Feelings of social exclusion have also been reported, a direct result of their perception of a low social status.

This is 'a struggle which cannot be taken lightly,' says Borg, especially when looking at the state the current student population is in. By international standards, around 5–6% of pupils are doing exceptionally well. But a staggering 45% are doing very badly. This is a ticking time bomb of early school leavers just waiting to go off. What is even more worrying is that the majority of the people making up the 45% cohort are students from a lower socio-economic status. To have these staggering gaps across social strata in such a small country is 'ethically and morally unacceptable,' says Borg.

This is what has made education a personal mission for Borg. 'Those who know me well are aware that my agenda is focused on social justice, equity, and inclusion in education,' says Borg. 'I believe in social justice and I believe education is a very important instrument in achieving it.

The urgency is obvious but

the problems in our education system are multi-faceted.

In his famous TED talk titled 'Changing Education Paradigms,' Ken Robinson deconstructs current models, pointing out how we are trying to fit within an educational ideal conceived during the industrial revolution. Schools function like factories, Robinson explains, and this system is out of date. This kind of schooling is about conformity, not learning, and Borg agrees wholeheartedly. Different children have different needs and skills and most institutions, both in Malta and other countries, operate within a standardised curricular regime, streaming, and testing that ignore individual needs. 'How can you speak of inclusion, social diversity, and justice when you have an educational process that is largely informed by an anti-educational routine?' he asks.

Interviews with a number of former students, though not early school leavers by definition, reinforced the above. Now 22 years old, Adam* was frustrated in school because he felt classes were too easy for him and his teachers failed to challenge him. As

a result, he left when he was 16 as soon as a business opportunity arose. Twenty-one year-old Elisa* was not ready to make decisions about which subjects she wanted to pursue at the age of 11. She ended up making the wrong decisions then abandoning her course to start work at 19.

'Our schooling system is short-changing its pupils,' says Borg. And this statement refers to both early school leavers and the students who stay on. The bulk of our education system is devoted to exam preparation and regurgitating information. Even at University level, 'there is [generally] very little critical thinking,' Borg claims, with 'very little happening beyond accumulating knowledge'.

All this being said, early school leaving is not a problem to be placed squarely on the shoulders of educational institutions. The issues leading up to early school leaving are complex and lead down many avenues.

There can be personal reasons for leaving school such as chronic health issues and genuine learning difficulties which might have been inadequately addressed. One's community also

contributes. An economically or socially depressed community sees greater numbers of early school leavers. Family is another factor. Chronic intergenerational unemployment, very low expectation from parents—all these play a role in an individual's decision whether to stay on at school or not.

'Many times,' Borg says, 'all of these issues are present in their own right and combine, creating dropouts and early school leavers. There isn't just one reason.'

One more element contributes considerably to early school leaving.

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The economy. When economies do well, early school leaving rises. This might seem counterintuitive but it is not. A prospering economy is able to absorb many more people with low level skills and competencies because there are more jobs.

However, such early school leaving levels cannot be sustained. Eventually, skill gaps emerge which need to be filled by foreigners. The currently booming e-gaming industry in Malta is the perfect example. Struggling to find local talent, foreigners are brought in to take up the new roles. But this is a band aid, a temporary solution. A powerful economy cannot grow and prosper on low skill, low income, and precarious jobs.

A RAY OF HOPE

Malta's current status with regards to early school leaving is far from enviable, but it is not all bad. As a result of Borg and Raykov's work, long-term, steadfast solutions are being proposed. The approach is three-pronged

involving preventative, intervention, and compensatory measures.

Preventative measures see professionals in communities working directly with families. This would help deal with problems like chronic intergenerational unemployment and very low family expectations. Such ▶



ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

The research undertaken by Prof. Carmel Borg and Dr Milosh Raykov is multidimensional in nature, trying to shed light on the social, economic, and emotional wellbeing of early school leavers. It attempts to answer the following questions: What are the work experiences, job characteristics and social status of early school leavers? How does the decision to leave school early affect happiness levels and quality of life? And what is the impact of early school leaving on mental and physical health?

The work also has a wider scope, determining the economic repercussions of early school leaving and how that would affect not only an individual's living conditions but also the country as a whole. Can a country and its economy progress with high levels of early school leaving?



conditions can be countered by high quality day care and preschool. As children grow older, schools need to remain relevant. This means that vocational education will have to occupy a prominent position within secondary education to cater for people who want to work in more practical fields. The needs of high academic achievers need to be met through alternative programmes within mainstream schooling.

Intervention measures come into play when an individual risks leaving school. These students, such as teen mothers, need solid support networks. Investing in student and parent after-school programmes would greatly help.

Compensatory measures focus on reintegrating people back into some form of education after leaving school. MCAST has a second chance element

in its programme already, thanks to its foundation courses, allowing those with no qualifications to start school again. In itself, this is a great initiative

Malta has now hit a plateau. This could have something to do with the fact that the number of females becoming early school leavers is rising fast

but more work needs to be done to retain students. 'A high percentage of the people who sign up for MCAST foundation courses are gone by the end of the year,' says Borg.

'We need to break that cycle of failure and disappointment. What we cannot do is continue reproducing the same systems and hoping that they will lead to a different result.'

Change is sorely needed. The good news is that the wheels are already in motion to make that happen.

The Youth Guarantee programme, launched in April 2014 by the Maltese government, is the first port of call. The programme, which is also being implemented throughout Europe, works with young people to provide support, motivational training, and guidance on employment. It also recognises the effectiveness of

a combination of off-the-job and on-the-job training, giving trainees the opportunity to garner practical training either in a simulated workshop or in a real working environment.

According to the programme's report on the 2015 scheme, dropouts were prevalent. Of the 606 applications received, 418 opted out. What was noted from the scheme echoes Borg's words: 'the rates still highlight how essential it is to further invest in similar initiatives to try and reach this cohort and re-engage them in education, training, or employment.' But the task is far from easy.

Malta is trying. It ranks high in education investment. In fact, according to the latest figures from the World Bank (2012), about 6.8% of its GDP (Gross Domestic Product) goes towards education.

'Education authorities are highly aware and genuinely concerned about




early school leaving,' notes Borg. In fact, their research is being welcomed with open arms by the Directorate for Lifelong Learning. Borg is also certain that these authorities will step up to the plate and sponsor more studies in the years to come. This is essential. In Malta, research gaps go hand in hand with policy gaps. 'We need to produce more knowledge upon which we can design good policy.'

Across Europe, the aim is to bring down early school leaving to 10% by 2020, but Malta will not achieve this goal, according to Borg. While figures show that the rate declined considerably over recent years, 2004

saw it at 43.1%, Malta has now hit a plateau. This could have something to do with the fact that the number of females becoming early school leavers is rising fast. 'At best, we might hit the 10% mark by 2025. But this too seems unlikely,' says Borg.

So where does this leave the Maltese public?

At the second phase of Borg and Raykov's research, popular wisdom and research will come together as the pair interview a number of early school leavers. 'We will be digging deep, excavating narratives, and biographies,' Borg says. They will be looking into personal experiences and mining for further solutions to reduce early school leavers.

This three-year project has a long way to go, but it has the legs to go the distance fuelled by the deep-rooted sense of duty in Borg and Raykov. 'We are structurally responsible for the predicament of early school leavers' says Borg, 'and if we don't act now by investing in quality primary and secondary education for our children, then we will pay for it at a later stage.' 

FURTHER READING

- Eurostat. (2015). Early leavers from education and training. Retrieved from <http://ec.europa.eu>.
- Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE). (2014). A strategic plan for the prevention of early school leaving in Malta. Malta: Ministry for Education and Employment.