Supporting Second Chance Education: Drop-in Students' Views on Educational Barriers and Needs to Study

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Abstract

In many Western societies, earning a degree is considered an ultimate educational achievement. Second chance education (SCE) serves as a distinct pathway for those who have dropped out of school, allowing them to re-enter the educational system. Understanding the specific obstacles and needs of students in SCE is crucial for providing better-tailored support. However, limited knowledge exists about the challenges faced by students seeking to enrol in SCE. This qualitative study conducted in-depth interviews with 28 drop-in students (M_{age} = 30) to explore these barriers and needs. Identified barriers span institutional, situational, environmental, and life-course levels. Primary needs centre around warm and accessible teachers, as well as flexible, student-focused learning options. The results underscore the value and significance of second chance education as a unique pedagogical context for drop-in students. It also emphasizes that the insights gained from SCE can inform improvements in regular, first-chance education, serving diverse student populations. Lastly, SCE serves as a societal mirror, urging a re-evaluation of the broader discourse in education. Overall, this study calls for more appreciation of SCE, acknowledging and recognizing its unique pedagogical context, dedicated teachers, and determined students.

Keywords

Introduction

'School attendance problems (SAPs)' as a major concern worldwide, both for present and future generations. In Europe, 9.7% of students left school without a degree in 2021 (Eurostat, 2022), referred to as 'dropout students' in this study. These are young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 who have not completed upper secondary education (cf. International Standard Classification of Education - ISCED level 3 (UNESCO 2011) and who are not enrolled in tertiary or further education and training (cf. ISCED level 5 and above) (Eurostat, 2022). The reasons for students to drop out of school are complex, involving both individual and environmental factors (i.e., a range of risk factors) (Gren-Landell, 2021; Havik & Ingul, 2022; Van Den Berghe, Vandevelde, et al., 2022), while the consequences of dropping out can lead to a range of life-course problems, such as higher rates of unemployment, poverty, juvenile crime, single parenthood, political and social apathy, and lost tax revenues from unemployment (Archambault et al., 2022; Klein et al., 2022; Koc et al., 2020). In large parts of the world, a degree is deemed to be the ultimate goal of education as it increases opportunities in the labour market and in further tertiary education (cf. ISCED level 5 and above), where employment plays a crucial role in economic productivity and contributes to the economic growth of society (Bills & Howard, 2017; Van Den Berghe, Vandevelde, et al., 2022).

Against this backdrop, a variety of alternative trajectories to gain a degree after dropping out of school are developed worldwide (Ivančič, 2015; Schuchart & Bühler-Niederberger, 2020). One of the main initiatives is 'Second Chance Education (SCE)', which serves as a 'compensation measure' or an alternative to regular education, aiming to provide a means to return to education and potentially acquire a qualification (cf. ISCED level 3) (Ivančič,

2015). In the last two decades, SCE has been developed in various parts of the world, with different approaches based on the social, political, and cultural contexts. Nonetheless, its objective remains the same: they provide an alternative path as a second chance for dropout students to gain a degree by offering opportunities to reintegrate into education and society and enhance their employment prospects (Kiprianos & Mpourgos, 2020; McGregor et al., 2015). In Belgium, the context of this study, in 2019, no less than 21,2% of the dropout students returned to SCE to gain an upper secondary degree (cf. ISCED level 3) (Flemish Department of Education, 2022) – in this study referred to as 'drop-in' students (Van Den Berghe et al., 2024). International studies have shown the positive effects of studying in SCE on drop-in students. In a recent qualitative study by Martins, Carneiro, Campos, Ribeiro, Negrâo, et al. (2020), students were found to develop a higher commitment to education, identify positive changes in personal and skill development, and establish life goals through studying in SCE. Another study showed that SCE intends to provide a mainstay for drop-in students in the transition to become actors of their own educational and social pathways (Macedo et al., 2018). Furthermore, based on two case studies, McGregor et al. (2015) discussed how SCE can provide meaningful education for drop-in students by creating opportunities to engage in education by recognizing and accommodating students' personal circumstances.

However, despite the high number of drop-in students in SCE and the documented positive effects, scientific research and reports on SCE are far and few between. However, more insights into specific barriers and needs of students to enrol in SCE can contribute significantly to the expansion of the research field of SCE and the development of tailored and needs-based support for drop-in students. Although the empirical studies that focus on

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these barriers and needs are scarce, a handful of studies yield some insight. First, a qualitative case study shows a complex interplay of educational, family, and economic factors that motivate and discourage students from pursuing education in SCE (Portela Pruaño et al., 2022; Van Nieuwenhove & De Wever, 2021). Second, Hickey et al. (2020) found in their quantitative inquiry-based study that educational system barriers in SCE, such as lack of collaboration and partnerships, inadequate resources, and rigid implementation, prevent meeting student needs. Third, Gueta and Berkovich (2021) highlighted in their quantitative study the crucial role of an autonomy-supportive climate in SCE while Martins, Carneiro, Campos, Ribeiro, Negrâo, et al. (2020) emphasized that SCE students need schools where they are heard, respected, and valued for who they are and can be. Fourth, Bills et al. (2015) conducted action research to develop SCE and experienced that emancipatory leadership is a good practice because drop-in students need a pedagogical approach different from conventional schooling, with a focus on adult learning, community-based curriculum, technology integration, and support for self-directed and individualized learning. Fifth, the quantitative study of Hickey et al. (2020) suggested establishing a trauma-sensitive environment in SCE schools because educational contexts can be retraumatizing for students.

Next to explorative empirical studies, intervention studies also bring interesting insights regarding barriers and needs in SCE. For example, Wahlgren and Mariager-Anderson (2017) found that training programs for teachers, designed to enhance their relational competencies with students, had a positive effect on the educational culture within SCE. Villardón-Gallego et al. (2020) conducted an in-depth case study which showed that motivation can be boosted by providing a relevant curriculum (i.e., tailored and in

partnership with the labour market) – where creating a supportive environment that incorporates self-assessment, and peer assessment in addition to teacher assessment is crucial. In their action research, Bills et al. (2015) emphasized the relevance of valuing students' life experiences in curricula, giving them a voice in education, providing opportunities to express community-based issues and cross-curricular teaching approaches. Another quantitative study showed that one in three drop-in students in SCE face a discrepancy between their expectations of teachers and what teachers can provide, with a larger expectation gap for students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, which might also be associated with dropping out in SCE (Schuchart & Bühler-Niederberger, 2020).

Lastly, when it comes to individual student support, Gueta and Berkovich (2021) emphasized in their quantitative study the importance of relatedness, especially with teachers who play a key role in students' educational journeys, together with the significance of working with students' authenticity in SCE, providing a positive impact on students' education reducing dropout risk. According to Savelsberg et al. (2017), SCE needs to possess knowledge of students' specific characteristics, needs, barriers, and the ability to connect with the students, which has been shown to significantly impact the success of SCE programs.

However, when focusing on the existing literature, only a fraction of the existing studies have specifically investigated the educational barriers and needs faced by drop-in students. Therefore, more research is needed, both at the quantitative and qualitative levels. Hence, this study aims to gain insight into the barriers and needs of drop-in students to study in SCE. These insights are believed to aid in tailoring education and support based on student's

specific needs, where SCE ultimately creates 'an additional window of opportunity' in the developmental journey of students seeking to attain a degree (cf. secondary degree, high school, ISCED level 3). Two major questions steer this research: *'What are barriers in SCE for drop-in students?',* and *'What are drop-in students' needs when studying in SCE?'.*

Methods

In 2021, a qualitative study took place in a SCE school in Ghent, Belgium. Ghent was chosen because it is a diverse provincial city in Belgium, attracting students from neighbouring areas due to its metropolitan character. The high dropout rate (i.e., 16.8% in 2019 (Education Flanders, 2021)) in Ghent and the presence of various SCE schools make it a valuable case for this study.

After a period in which the first researcher got acquainted with the school and actively participated in its activities, the school was asked to participate in a qualitative study with its' drop-in students. This study involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews with twenty-eight drop-in students, which were carried out to explore the barriers and needs of students in SCE. A heterogeneous group of participants participated: 17 females and 11 males, aged between 18-55 years of age and with an average of 30 years of age, who had different financial incomes (i.e., unemployment allowance, disability allowance, (part-time) employment, and no income), and different educational backgrounds (i.e., primary education (cf. ISCED level 0 and 1), secondary education (both vocational and academically oriented tracks) (cf. ISCED level 2), and tertiary education (mainly students with a degree gained abroad not entitled for recognition in Belgium)(cf. ISCED level 3 or higher)). Their

dropout stories of regular education varied largely, including, for example, medical issues, family problems, migration, conflicts in school, and more.

For ethical considerations and data protection, all students of the SCE school were contacted by the school management through the school's digital platform. Interested students were asked to contact the first researcher of the research to schedule an interview. The interviews, which lasted between 50 minutes and 2 hours and 15 minutes, were recorded on a digital audio recorder with the participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and pseudonymized. Half of the interviews were conducted digitally, and the other half took place in person at the school, with COVID-19 measures in place to ensure a safe environment. An Informed Consent form was used to explain the students' rights and obtain permission for confidential data processing and anonymous representation.

After conducting the interviews, the first researcher analysed the transcripts using NVivo, a computer software package for qualitative data analysis (Lumivero, 2023). The analysis proceeded inductively, drawing on the participant's data. During the data analysis, the research team focused on thick descriptions and the inclusion of contradictory results to facilitate 'negative case selection' following the guidelines of Portney (2020). Further, the results were reviewed by all four authors, each with varying fields of interest and research backgrounds, to enhance reflexivity in the data and foster the quality of the results (Portney, 2020; Wasti et al., 2022).

Results

In total, four themes emerged from the data, which advanced our insights into the barriers and needs of drop-in students in SCE. The findings of this study are represented in a
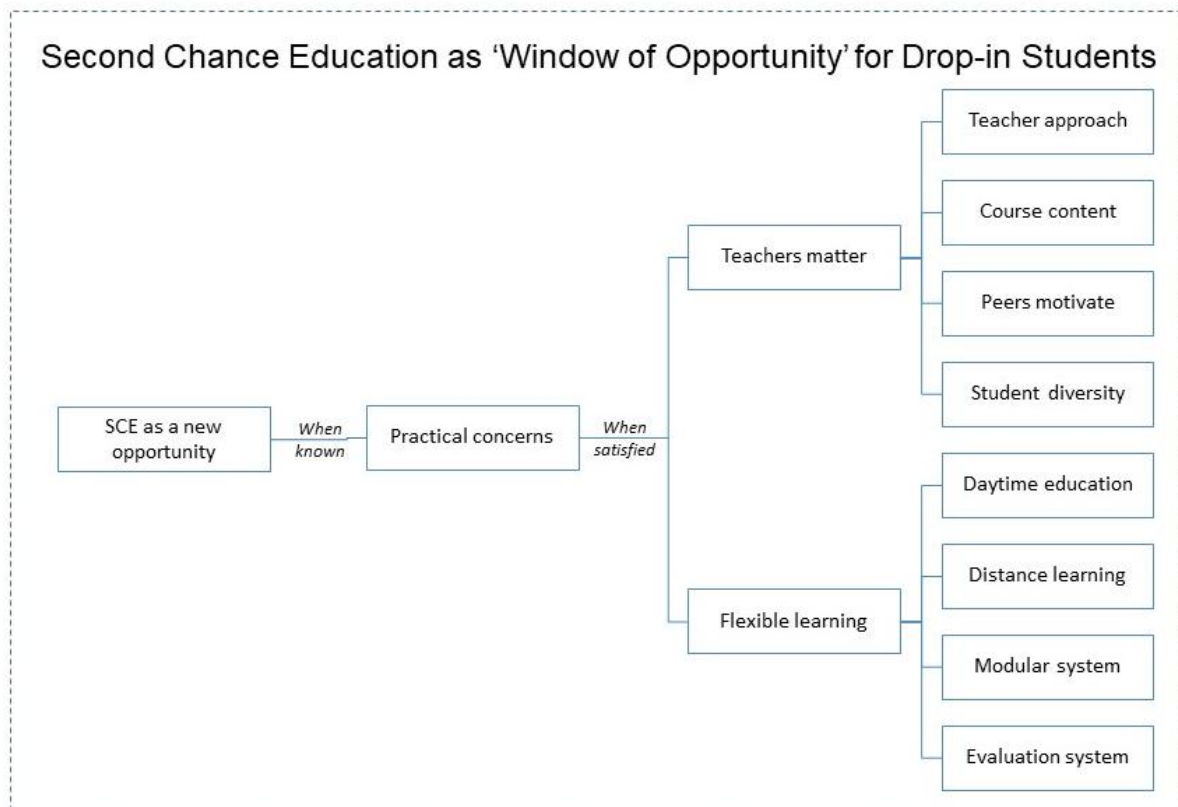
graphical overview (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The graphical overview of educational needs and barriers of the drop-in students in SCE.

SCE as a new opportunity

Many participants reported that they were first unaware of SCE as a study option. They believed that their only options were to return to regular secondary education or take national central exams (cf. a system where students are required to independently learn all necessary study content and subsequently take an exam). Some participants stated that discovering this option was a relief as it offered hope of earning their degree after all (cf.

secondary degree, high school, ISCED level 3). When they learned SCE was a way to earn a degree, some participants initially had negative beliefs about this option. Some had doubts about the value and recognition of an SCE degree for employment, while others had misconceptions due to the unfamiliarity of this type of education. Many participants talked about how the concept of 'Second Chance Education (SCE)' and 'taking this second chance' made them feel like it was their last option after multiple failures. Some reported that others in their social context had biases towards SCE, which made them unsure about their choice initially (e.g., employers who asked about SCE specifically, and peers who responded condescendingly). Some participants felt that significant others in their lives were patronizing them because SCE is not a traditional way to earn a degree.

> I used to have misconceptions about SCE: that it is only for those who are less intelligent. I was initially ashamed of choosing SCE because it didn't sound like a positive thing to me. I no longer feel ashamed, and I am proud to be pursuing this path towards my goals. (Interview 18)

Some participants learned about SCE through social welfare organizations or career support organizations. They expressed gratitude to the employees of these organizations for being their gateway to a second chance. Others heard about SCE from friends who were already enrolled. Others found SCE through internet searches and ended up on SCE websites, which led them to request more information from the relevant schools.

> I was referred to a career coach at [name organization]. They were friendly, supportive, and helpful. We talked about my goals and went over all my educational options. That's how I ended up with SCE. (Interview 17)

In contrast, some participants who received support from organizations or doctors faced barriers in enrolling in SCE because their abilities and motivation to study were questioned. For instance, they were supported by a compulsory job placement organization and their career support worker in the organization had to consent to their education to be eligible for government financial assistance during their studies. This made their decision to enrol in SCE even more challenging as their supervisors did not give their consent, leaving the participants to find alternative means to finance their desired studies. Some participants with chronic disabilities also faced additional barriers in enrolling in SCE due to the requirement for their doctors to give consent for them to receive government allowances for their education. These participants had to repeatedly explain their motivation to study to others, which added to the difficulties in (re)starting their education.

> I must attend meetings with my career supervisor again. They pressure me and say, 'You're costing society a lot of money if you study and there are so many employers who need employees, you should work instead.' (...) I want to earn my degree first. (Interview 27)

Practical and financial concerns

The majority of participants discussed the substantial financial impact of enrolling in SCE. Many of them were employed before they enrolled and had a source of income when enrolling in SCE. Before enrolment, some drop-in students had to quit work due to medical reasons, while others were fired or chose to stop working to study again. Enrolling in SCE had different financial implications for each participant. Some participants had no stable financial income because they were not eligible for a government study allowance, often leading to the need to balance work and study, which created an important, additional

barrier to continuing their education. Additionally, some participants reported a lack of information about costs beforehand, causing uncertainty and doubt about enrolling in SCE.

> As a student, I had to pay the full cost, which was very high for me, around 400 euros per semester. This was difficult for me to manage, and I had to work extra jobs as a student. (Interview 13)

A number of participants faced concerns about balancing their studies with work, family, and hobbies. Upon enrolling, they encountered difficulties in rearranging their daily routines, which was a challenging process for many and took time and persistence. Some participants considered this process a barrier to education that brought uncertainty, affecting their own lives and those around them (e.g., children, partners, parents). To manage their education, work, and family commitments, some participants chose SCE due to the convenient location of the school (near their home or work).

> I found a job, but it wasn't a great one. I had to plan my school lessons, buy books, and start postponing my education. I became better at the job and forgot about my studies. After a year of work, I started to doubt myself and quit school. I had no degree and did things I didn't like. So, I decided to start studying again and enrol. (Interview 22)

Teachers matter

The majority of participants emphasized the significance of the teaching approach in SCE. They stressed the importance of teachers' positive reinforcement and belief in their abilities, particularly because many students had loads of negative experiences with teachers in the past. This positive reinforcement was described by students as a key factor in their motivation to persist and their confidence in succeeding in SCE, and labelled it as a

significant departure from their prior educational experiences. Additionally, the majority of participants emphasized that teachers who adopted a personalized approach provided high levels of support by addressing their individual needs and concerns. For instance, some students stated that balancing work and family with the school was difficult, but teachers who were flexible and approachable helped them to persist in their studies. Other participants emphasized that their teachers were understanding of their health issues, which made it difficult to attend school or keep appointments.

> I particularly enjoy SCE because of the teachers. I have two teachers who promised to go have coffee with me after the Corona situation. This is pleasing because it shows that they believe in my abilities and my future. They support my goals and aspirations, and this encouragement is what motivates me to persist. (Interview 2)

In addition to the supportive elements, teachers' approaches can also negatively impact students' progress. Some participants reported feeling demotivated when teachers lacked enthusiasm in their teaching and did not allow room for questions. Others mentioned teachers who were unresponsive to their questions and unwilling to make accommodations during lessons or appointments based on their needs. These students emphasized the importance of support and communication with teachers and noted that a lack of these elements makes them more likely to give up and distance themselves from school.

> Some teachers are flexible, but others are not. Even if I complete all my assignments, I still have to attend all the lessons. It's that simple. If we don't attend all the classes, we can't succeed, and we won't earn a degree. I think to myself, 'We're not in secondary education anymore.' (...) Give them some flexibility, give them opportunities. (Interview 20)

For many participants, teachers must pay attention to the course content and consider the level of difficulty during their lessons. Initially, the drop-in students expressed fear and uncertainty regarding their abilities and the difficulty of the courses they were about to undertake. However, as they started studying, they gradually gained confidence and became more engaged with their studies and the school environment. They found the course content interesting and manageable. Although some participants faced challenges in specific courses, such as French or Mathematics, they remained determined to succeed and actively sought extra help.

> It was challenging initially, but I am happy to have found a manageable routine for studying. To be honest, the first month was scary and I wasn't sure how to start. In my previous school, I was simply told which pages to learn, but now I have to study the entire book and don't know what the teacher will ask. (Interview 26)

Flexible schooling

The majority of participants opted for daytime education with face-to-face interaction with peers and teachers. Many of them reported that in-person education allowed them to ask direct questions and receive feedback from instructors on their coursework, which they felt helped improve their learning. Regular school attendance and interaction with peers and teachers tended to increase the drop-in students' motivation to attend classes. Peers and teachers also provided valuable tips and strategies for studying, planning work, and completing assignments. However, while peers can have a positive impact, some participants also talked about the negative effects of unmotivated peers in SCE. For some students, it was frustrating to see uninterested classmates in SCE, as they saw it as an opportunity to change their lives. For instance, when classmates disrupted lessons, arrived

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late played music or slept during class, it affected the ability of these students to focus, and teachers often had to deal with misbehaviour.

> During lessons in the modular school system, I sometimes encountered students I had never seen before. For instance, one student came into the class, threw his backpack in a corner and jacket on the ground, he lay down on his desk. This behaviour bothered me. (Interview 25)

Some students have expressed their initial uncertainty about returning to school after years of working instead. They feel out of practice with the school structure and learning process. Therefore, it is important for these students to be provided with flexible lessons and not always require their presence at school. This flexibility is necessary because managing their education and work-life balance can be challenging for them.

> I had desired to attend school full-time, which was the best choice for my selected field of study. (...) I must be honest; it can be challenging at times. For instance, in mathematics, there are various steps to take, and I was not aware of how to do so. But during class, I can ask my teacher: 'Can you explain this to me?' (Interview 1)

Furthermore, some participants primarily engaged in distance learning and shared both its advantages and disadvantages. One of the key benefits cited was the flexibility it offers students, making it easier to balance school, work, and family. However, some participants mentioned the lack of personal interaction with peers and teachers as a drawback. Additionally, a number of participants highlighted the need for self-reliance and discipline to succeed in this type of education. Notably, technical issues with computers and online platforms posed challenges for some participants during their distance learning experience.

Subsequently, some participants expressed the need for additional options for distance learning to make the combination of work, family and education feasible. They argued that not all lessons could be offered through distance education, which sometimes resulted in study delays or missed requirements for graduation due to absent classes held during regular hours.

> I was searching for an educational option that could fit my job. I sought a way to attain a degree that would align with my work and lifestyle. SCE offered this solution, including the option for distance learning. (...) This form of adult education offers numerous options and varieties of programs, making it perfect for my schedule. (Interview 12)

For most participants, the modular system at SCE, which is applied to all subjects and courses, was one of the biggest advantages of SCE. This motivated some participants because completing a module meant completing a part of their curriculum. A few participants mentioned the availability of 'waivers' where they could skip a course (i.e., a module) if they passed a test, such as a test for the French 1 or Mathematics 2 module. Subsequently, some participants chose SCE specifically because of its modular system, which offered shorter graduation durations (e.g., an average of two years) if students could bypass courses based on prior competencies. Conversely, some students felt that the program was too long and preferred a shorter option to allow them to work or advance to higher education more quickly. Some of these students expressed concerns about starting SCE due to the length of the program, and some stated that it required a lot of determination.

> I appreciate the modular system. If you complete one module, you're done with it. In traditional secondary education, if you failed one, two, or three courses, you had to repeat the entire year. At SCE, if you don't pass a module, you can retake it while still moving forward with other modules. (Interview 14)

Most participants were highly positive about the evaluation system in SCE. They stated that exams were primarily mid-term, with no end-of-year exams that covered a large amount of material. This allowed them to study smaller chunks of content at a time, making it easier to succeed in the modules. Additionally, some participants noted that the school used colours instead of grades to indicate passing or failing. This created less stress for the students as their only goal was to pass.

> I am positive about my evaluations. Mid-term evaluations consist of assignments, which I prefer over traditional exams. The new approach, known as 'permanent evaluations,' is less stressful because it allows for continual assessment throughout the term, rather than relying on one high-pressure moment. (Interview 23)

Discussion

This qualitative study aimed to gain insights into the barriers and needs of drop-in students to study in SCE using in-depth interviews, based on their lived experiences. The analysis revealed four key themes: SCE as a new opportunity, practical and financial concerns, the significance of teachers, and the importance of flexible schooling. In the subsequent sections, we discuss these barriers and needs and reflect upon the meaning of SCE for drop-in students, education, and society.

The barriers of drop-in students to study in SCE

The results of this study revealed two themes regarding the barriers of drop-in students: SCE as a new start and practical and financial concerns. These barriers related to SCE can be categorized based on the dichotomy of *institutional barriers* (i.e., linked to education itself) versus *situational barriers* (i.e., linked to the lives of students) as proposed by Keita and Lee (2022). However, our results expand the existing dichotomy with two additional types of barriers: *environmental barriers* and *life course barriers.* These four types of barriers are discussed in the subsequent sections.

First, SCE students described lots of *institutional barriers,* withholding them from re-enrolling in SCE. These included for example (fear of) school-related expectations and procedures, such as initial contact moments with SCE schools, making phone calls to the school, initiating the enrolment procedure, and starting classes. Students described the relational contact moments as crucial for students' feelings of welcome, recognition, and engagement in their studies. These examples corroborate previous research in SCE emphasizing the significance of school engagement for students in education (Piscitello et al., 2022; Wang & Fredricks, 2014), where lower school engagement was related to higher absences in SCE (Schuchart & Bühler-Niederberger, 2020).

Second, *situational barriers* discussed by drop-in students, like the financial impact of returning to study and balancing work, school, family, and healthcare, pose significant barriers to enrolling in SCE. Past studies indicate that these factors contribute to students leaving SCE (Bühler-Niederberger et al., 2023; Kelly et al., 2022; Van Den Berghe, Vandevelde, et al., 2022). This study asserts that learning success in SCE requires addressing

and supporting barriers from the start. Emphasizing tailored, and intensive support is crucial for identifying students' needs and exploring solutions for practical concerns (Gueta & Berkovich, 2021; Martins, Carneiro, Campos, Ribeiro, Negrao, et al., 2020; Portela Pruaño et al., 2022).

Third, this study introduces *environmental barriers*, encompassing examples of obstacles related to society, policy, and time-related aspects (Karakitsiou et al., 2023; Taka, 2023). For example, the drop-in students were at first unfamiliar with SCE as a new opportunity and many of them initially held negative beliefs about the value of an SCE degree (cf. secondary degree, high school, ISCED level 3). These examples could serve as barriers to education goals in general, as they indicate a lack of awareness about this study option and the existence of a more negative discourse surrounding SCE as a viable educational choice (Redgrave et al., 2014; Van Praag et al., 2018).

Fourth, *life course barriers* were reflected in the experiences of stigmatization, discrimination, and social exclusion based on living without a degree (cf. secondary degree, high school, ISCED level 3). Participants emphasized that when these factors reoccur at SCE, they encounter difficulties attending school, acting as barriers that (again) hinder their educational journey. These experiences can lead to educational traumatizing events (Spiteri et al., 2023), school disengagement, and eventually academic failure, making school 'not their story anymore' (Van Den Berghe, Pouille, et al., 2022). To date, only a handful of studies have addressed these kinds of traumatizing experiences in the SCE context (Hickey et al., 2020; Spiteri et al., 2023; Van Den Berghe, De Pauw, et al., 2022). The current study adds to the notion that experiences encountered during the first chance in education

substantially influence second chance processes in education (Munns & McFadden, 2000; Van Den Berghe et al., 2024).

The needs of drop-in students in SCE

From the results, two key themes emerged related to the specific needs of drop-in students, which we labelled as 'teachers matter' and 'flexible schooling'. First, participants emphasized the importance of *warm and accessible teachers* who provide positive reinforcement, demonstrate belief in students' abilities, and adopt a personalized and flexible approach. This aligns with previous research in SCE, indicating that drop-in students expect teachers to take an interest in their personal lives and circumstances (Martins, Carneiro, Campos, Ribeiro, Negrao, et al., 2020; Schuchart & Bühler-Niederberger, 2020). These findings underscore the relevance of 'relational pedagogy', emphasizing positive and meaningful relationships with teachers (Bovill, 2020; Gravett, 2023). Examples are school staff who engage with drop-in students through phone calls or during lessons, empathetically addressing reasons for absenteeism, and attempting to understand their unique stories and struggles. This also aligns with the principles of a 'pedagogy of presence' (Fidyk, 2013; Stone & Springer, 2019), where personalities, efforts and struggles of students are seen and tailored, and person-centred support is developed to maximize opportunities for students to engage in school (García-Moya et al., 2019; Stone & Springer, 2019). These needs could be linked to a desire for more emotional engagement towards learning, which is considered a necessary foundation in education and support to foster personal growth (Archambault et al., 2022; Martins, Carneiro, Campos, Ribeiro, Negrao, et al., 2020; Van Den Berghe, De Pauw, et al., 2022).

Second, drop-in students in this study endorsed the critical importance of *flexible schooling*, enabling opportunities to balance personal, work, and family commitments with education. In this context, the students emphasized the modular system, with its flexible enrolment and grading procedures as good and efficient practices. Also, the more direct evaluation procedures, allow more short-term success and course completion, enabling students to manage smaller quantities of study content and maintain motivation (Mazrekaj & De Witte, 2020; Shipway, 2013). Another illustration of flexibility is the recognition of acquired knowledge and competencies through course waivers, allowing tailor-made adjustments to student study programs. Students also repeatedly expressed wishes that traditional education would better recognize their alternatively gained knowledge and competencies, validate workplace experiences, and establish alternative pathways to employment, including systems of simultaneous learning and working (Aarreniemi-Jokipelto & Bäck, 2014; Jackson, 2021; Redgrave et al., 2014). Overall, these findings underscore the imperative for prioritizing individualized (Portela Pruaño et al., 2022; Savelsberg et al., 2017) and flexible, modular study programs in SCE (González-Rodríguez et al., 2019; Mazrekaj & De Witte, 2020).

The broader significance of second-chance education for drop-in students, first-chance education, and society

In addition to identifying specific barriers and needs of drop-in students, this study also provides additional insights into the broader significance of SCE as a particularly promising pedagogical environment, deserving more attention from policy, research, and practice. Three main observations arise.

First, the value and significance of second-chance education for *drop-in students* cannot be underestimated. On the one hand, SCE truly serves as a second chance, a positive alternative, to mainstream education, providing opportunities to return to schooling and complete their degree (cf. upper secondary degree, high school, ISCED level 3). On the other hand, SCE functions as 'a necessary alternative' chosen by students for its adaptability to individual needs, as other options are out of reach (Espinoza et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2022; Portela Pruaño et al., 2022). SCE- educational programs hence address economic perspectives - leading to improved labour market outcomes - and social perspectives – leading to personal, academic and social growth and development (Savelsberg et al., 2017). When SCE schools balance social and educational goals, acknowledging the complex barriers while accommodating their personal stories and needs, they become potential 'transformative contexts' which may help drop-in students navigate their educational journeys and pursue goals and self-development. As a result, they may be regarded as promising 'windows of opportunity' (Tanner et al., 2009), where new chances may lead to substantial beneficial changes in students' lives.

Second, the unique pedagogical context of second-chance education also offers valuable insights for regular, *first-chance education*, as it holds multiple keys to meet the needs of diverse student populations. The flexible, student-focused SCE practices may also have the potential to reduce school disengagement and ultimately prevent school dropout in regular education (Ivančič, 2015; Martins, Carneiro, Campos, Ribeiro, Negrao, et al., 2020; Nada et al., 2020). These SCE practices, greatly valued by drop-in students, urge us to further contemplate the design of education and to challenge the rigid, conventional organization of schooling such as grade-level or academic systems (Bowers, 2010; Kearney, 2019) and

using academic tracking systems to divide student populations in education (Hanushek & Wossmann, 2006; Ogawa, 2023). Second-chance educational practices may hence inspire first-chance education schools to focus more on skills, knowledge and attitudes needed and valued in adult life, such as proficiency in working with new and digital technologies, communicating in foreign languages, planning and problem-solving, and focusing on personal growth (Kearney et al., 2023; Kiprianos & Mpourgos, 2020). As such, the SCE-pedagogy aligns with pleas for 're-imagining schooling for education' (McGregor et al., 2017), where the focus is not on 'learning for school', but on 'learning for life' (Koludrović & Ercegovac, 2023; Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2017).

Last but not least, SCE also holds up a *mirror to society,* challenging us to re-evaluate the macro discourse in education. Awareness should grow that (Western) education systems are increasingly influenced by a neoliberal perspective, driven by market logic (such as the new public management framework) encouraging everyone to pursue a degree (Bills & Howard, 2017; Kennedy-Lewis, 2015; Tomlinson, 2016). These systems place 'meritocratic ideology' at its core, asserting that academic success solely depends on individual willpower and hard work (i.e., 'merits') (Wiederkehr et al., 2015). SCE as a pedagogical practice highlights the hazardous pitfalls of this system, by recognizing that school drop-out is always a unique story that results from a complex interplay between individual and environmental factors which extend far beyond 'merit' or 'failure in willpower' (e.g., social class and gender; Hung et al., 2020; OECD, 2023b). SCE helps mitigate the societal repercussions and negative impact on the mental health of students pushed out of the regular educational system. However, the growing impact of market-based and management-driven systems in Western education also puts increasing pressure on SCE (Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2019; Kerr &

Ainscow, 2022; Strauss & Hunter, 2018). Market-driven pressures result in constraints in teaching, working, and providing support, and endanger valuable time and resources for student-centred, question-oriented approaches in second-chance education. Taken together, as a society, we need to cease demeaning SCE, and instead, give more appreciation and recognition to its unique pedagogical context, its dedicated teachers, and its determined students.

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