

E-INSTRUMENTS TO FACILITATE POSITIVE CHANGES IN LEARNING AND TEACHING

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Abstract

This article is a study based on Non-formal learning can prevent early school leaving project, a project funded by the European Commission (Erasmus +) for the years 2015 - 2017, which is being developed within an international partnership including institutions from Germany, Italy, Romania, Cyprus and Greece. The study analyses the dramatic school dropout rate – one of the problems faced by schools in Europe and in Romanian as well, its causes and measures that have been taken so far. School dropout creates the premises for failure to achieve social integration, as it significantly reduces the individual's chances for self-fulfilment in legal activity fields. The project highlights the advantages offered by informal and non-formal education, which does not require student attendance and whose activities take place outside school and are adapted entirely to students' needs and interests. Given the contribution of informal and non-formal education to students' development, accreditation of informal and non-formal learning is seen as a lifelong learning service, which should be offered to individuals in order for them to become aware of their own skills and competences and to receive a certification linked to a specific qualification. The article analyses both students' and teachers' views on the issue, with a view to understanding the real causes of the phenomenon and adapting the interventions according to the real existing needs. All respondents, teachers and students alike, agreed that non-formal and informal learning has a high impact on students' general knowledge, development and image and, therefore, given its contribution, it must be taken in consideration when assessing students at the end of a school year.

Keywords: school leaving, non-formal, informal education, accreditation, assessment

1 INTRODUCTION

In Romania the political changes after 1990 led to major economic and social challenges. The education system, which has been marked by a dramatic school dropout rate, has been dramatically affected by these changes. School dropout can be defined as the phenomenon of early leaving the formal learning system, regardless of the level that has been achieved, before obtaining a qualification confirmed by a certificate [1]. Whatever the situation might be, school dropout creates the premises for failure to achieve social integration, as it significantly reduces the individual's chances for self-fulfilment.

In Romania early school leaving has increased to 17.5 percent in the last five years, according to a national study conducted by UNICEF in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labor, the National Statistics Institute and the Institute of Education Sciences [2]. However, the rate of students dropping out of school is aimed to be lowered to 12.8 percent by 2017 and 11.3 percent by 2020.

Children from rural and Roma areas register the highest rates of dropouts. Only 37 percent of 19-21 year olds coming from rural households have completed a high school degree, compared to 68 percent of their peers in urban households. The low number of upper secondary education schools located in rural areas is an important contributing factor. Students from rural areas who attend upper secondary education are often forced to travel long distances or to move away from home to go to schools closer to urban centers, which results in high costs for them and their families. Regarding Roma students, fewer than 10 percent of Roma children complete high school and, though exact estimates vary, it is thought that less than one percent of Roma children complete education [3]. Roma communities tend to exhibit multiple factors that place them at risk for failure in education, as these

communities are more likely to be poor, rural, or with adults with limited capacities to support their children.

At the national level a series of causes of early school leaving have been identified: lack of proper financial means of the family, family problems, limited parental education, immaturity, psychological instability, behaviour disorders, learning related difficulties and lack of help with studying, lack of motivation associated with lack of counselling and orientation.

2 GOOD PRACTICES FOR PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION

For some years different social programs have been developed in Romania in order to keep students in institutionalized forms of education.

Some of these programs are as follows:

- the “Euro 200” program, which helped students with acquisition of personal computers, different types of scholarships, school equipment, refund of transportation costs for students who come from the countryside, etc.
- The Second Chance program encourages people who dropped out of school for poverty reasons to come back to classes and complete their education; the program offers participants the opportunity to complete compulsory education, and to obtain a vocational qualification.
- The Ministry of Education encourages, stimulates and gives financial support to high achievers or students who have made special efforts and managed to get over their problems. Students with excellent results also benefit from school scholarships, which stimulate them to complete their studies.
- The Ministry of Education also fines parents who do not send their children to school and keep them home. Parents have to pay 1,000 lei fine or to do unpaid community work.
- Programs have also targeted teachers’ performance, infrastructure and parents/ school partnership; a better training of teachers to work with children facing the risk of school abandonment, improved infrastructure and better participation from the parents are some of the measures that have been taken to improve the situation.
- Schools have been encouraged to keep a rigorous record of students’ absences and contact parents whenever the case. This has led to an improved school/ parent partnership. Data are sent to the school inspectorate in each county and measures are commonly agreed on (experts in the field, teachers or parents).
- The introduction of optional classes has resulted in an increased attractiveness of schools; students can choose some of the subjects to study.

Aware of the effects of poverty on children’s access to school, and of the need to offer them equal chances, the government has added various other incentives, one of them being a free meal at school.

Other practical initiatives related to school dropout prevention have been implemented in recent years by EU funded projects. European projects have aimed to lower dropout rates by increasing school attendance, building student self-esteem, helping students cope with the challenges and problems that contribute to the likelihood of dropping out, enabling teachers to prevent school leaving and to motivate students to attend classes. Several projects acted against violence by introducing drama as an education method for young people facing violence. To achieve their main target, the programs offered training courses for young people teaching them in the art of communication, negotiation and conflict management. Another project, FACE IT, offered a practical approach and tools to effectively stimulate active citizenship within families and communities through non-formal and informal lifelong learning reaching across generations. Several projects have focused on enhancing Roma children’s social inclusion in Romanian schools by organizing activities meant to develop the following key competences: communication in Romanian, social and civic competences, cultural awareness, competence of learning, planning one’s own activities etc.

3 VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING: EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

3.1 Current state for recognition and validation on non-formal and informal learning – legal framework

The Order No. 4543/468 of 23 August 2004 of the Ministry of Education and Research and the Ministry of Labor, Social Solidarity and Family (completed and Amended by Order No. 3329/81 of 23 February 2005) finally laid down the procedures for the assessment and certification of informal and non-formal learning [4].

The new Law of National Education no.1/2011 explicitly promoted the importance of lifelong learning and provided a focus on the validation of formal and non-formal learning and lifelong learning counselling at all levels of education. The law also proposes the establishment of a new local institution called Community Lifelong Learning Centre, as a community centre that might also provide validation and counselling services, according to specific local needs. However, the methodology for establishing the Community Lifelong Learning Centre is not yet in place [5].

3.2 Validation of non-formal and informal learning in formal education

Interest in validation has been stimulated by the Lifelong Learning Program in Romania in recent years. In particular there is a growing number of non-governmental organizations interested in mobility and non-formal learning projects that are linked to YouthPass and Europass. The law on national education also provides some regulation on using the lifelong learning portfolio for all students in pre-university education. The lifelong learning portfolio contains evidence of learning outcomes acquired in formal, non-formal and informal contexts. This evidence helps facilitate the individual school pathway of all students and creates better prospects for entering the labor market. Since 2011, some schools have taken into account the lifelong learning portfolio of students as an additional evaluation tool in order to decide on the most suitable candidates when the school has more enrolment applications than available places. However, using the lifelong learning portfolio is not yet a common practice in most of the schools in Romania and is not yet embedded in schools as a tool for learning assessment.

3.2.1 Students' assessment procedures

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Official assessment policies used in secondary schools are formative and summative. Several types of assessments are used in Romanian schools:

- diagnostic/initial tests which assess students' weaknesses, strengths and skills prior to instruction; they are not scored: students find out about their weaknesses and strengths.
- formative tests which assess students' performance during instruction; they occur regularly throughout the entire process. Formative assessment is the means teachers use to find out how things are going so that they can decide how to proceed. Its purpose is to improve the quality of student learning, not to provide evidence for evaluating or grading students. It provides schools with feedback about their effectiveness as teachers, and it gives students a measure of their progress as learners.

Formative assessment is frequently used for its impact on students' learning process; it enhances motivation to learn; it helps students identify gaps in knowledge; it fosters self-study; it clarifies desired outcomes and diagnoses specific misunderstandings.

Summative assessment measures students' achievement at the end of the instruction. Summative assessment is intended specifically for the purpose of assigning a grade. The teacher considers the instruction for the particular topic to be complete: students are assessed and evaluated for their mastery of the material, and then the class moves on to the next topic (term written papers). It is norm-referenced: it compares students' performance against a national norm (final exam at the end of the eighth grade, Baccalaureate). It is criterion-referenced: it measures a student's performance against a goal or objectives (tests, oral examinations). It is interim/ benchmarked: it evaluates student's performance at periodic intervals, frequently at the end of a grading period (term written papers).

Students' assessment and evaluation system includes two milestones that determine transitions into upper levels: a national grade 8 exit exam, and the Bacculaureate at grade 12.

In kindergarten testing or giving grades/ marks to children is not allowed. That way the system promotes the idea of encouraging and developing a positive self-image and self-confidence of the children allowing them to progress at their own pace.

During the primary education, student evaluation is materialized in a rating of: 'insufficient' meaning failed, 'sufficient' or 'satisfactory' meaning barely passing, 'good' and 'very good' meaning passing.

Lower secondary school ends up with the taking of a "national test examination". The examination tests pupils' knowledge in the Romanian language and literature and Mathematics. The degree obtained in the national test examination counts for admission to high-school. Students can attend a vocational school in order to obtain a professional qualification that prepares them for the labor market.

Enrolment in high school is made on the basis of the results in the national test exam and the average grade obtained in the lower secondary school. High school studies end up with a "bacculaureate examination". After passing this examination, the graduates get the "Bacculaureate diploma". Students in the technological and vocational branches must take a "qualification examination" and get a "qualification certificate" in addition to the bacculaureate examination. The bacculaureate exam is organized every year in June. Students who do not pass the bacculaureate exam may repeat it in the autumn session (September). The average high-school grade and the average bacculaureate grade count for admission to the university.

3.2.2 Alternative ways of student assessment

Alternative ways of assessing students take into account students' needs, interests, and learning styles; they attempt to integrate assessment and learning activities. Also, they indicate successful performance, highlight positive traits, and provide formative rather than summative evaluation. Until recently the assessment scene was dominated by summative evaluation of learner achievement. Nowadays alternative means of evaluation (which are students' favourites) are more and more used in Romania:

The portfolio

The portfolio is used as a systematic collection of the student's work and other information about the student in order to determine whether they have maintained progress in accomplishing their learning goals. It is focused and efficient; visible and accessible. Grading portfolios is problematic since they are personal and unique. Scoring is criterion-referenced and individual referenced. The Romanian law on national education also provides some regulations on using the lifelong learning portfolio for all students in pre-university education. The lifelong portfolio contains evidence of learning outcomes acquired in formal, non-formal and informal contexts. This evidence helps facilitate the individual school pathway of all students and creates better prospects for entering the labour market. Since 2011, some schools have taken into account the lifelong learning portfolio of students as an additional evaluation tool in order to decide when the school has more enrolment applications than available places. However, using the lifelong learning portfolio is not yet a common practice in most of the schools in Romania and is not yet embedded in schools as a tool for learning assessment.

Role-play

This informal assessment technique combines oral performance and physical activity. Teachers often admit that students of all ages, when assessed through this technique, feel comfortable and motivated, especially when the activity lends itself to cooperative learning.

Written Narratives

Assessment of the written communicative abilities of students could be achieved through purposeful, authentic tasks, such as writing letters to friends, writing letters to favourite television program characters, and writing and responding to invitations. Young learners enjoy storytelling and are usually motivated to listen to stories as well as to tell them.

Presentations

Presentations are important for assessment because they can provide a comprehensive record of students' abilities in both oral and written performance. Furthermore, presentations give the teacher some insights into student's interests, work habits, and organizational abilities. Presentations cover a

wide range of meaningful activities, including readings, plays, role-plays, dramatizations, and interviews. Classroom presentations are nowadays becoming more sophisticated as a result of increasing access to educational technology.

Student/Teacher Conferences

Student/teacher conferences, including structured interviews, can be an effective informal way of assessing a student's progress in learning. Conferences and interviews provide opportunities for one-on-one interactions where the teacher can learn about a student's communicative abilities, emotional and social well-being, attention span, attitudes, pace of learning, and strengths and weaknesses. Conferences can be most effective when they follow focused observations.

Self-Assessment

Students may participate in self-assessment. It can yield accurate judgments of students' abilities, weaknesses and strengths, and improvement.

Peer and Group Assessment

Recent trends in teaching methodology have stressed the need to develop students' ability to work cooperatively with others in groups. For assessment, for example, students can write evaluative, encouraging notes for each member of their team emphasizing their positive contribution to team work. The role of the teacher would be to provide guidance, to explain to the students what they have to evaluate in one another's work, and to help them identify and apply properly the evaluation criteria.

Projects

Projects start in the classroom, move out in the real world and return to the classroom. The process implies revision, recycling, learning from the others and from the materials they use. One way of grading the oral presentation of the project is by using marking scales for testing oral speaking to which teachers can add descriptors for oral presentations.

In learning centers focused on informal learning (clubs, children's houses/ palaces) children get a certificate which evaluates their performance at the end of the instruction. The evaluation is done by qualifications, and not by grades. The qualifications rely on the teachers' direct observation of the students' behaviour, attitudes and performance throughout the instruction. The certificates are not validated by the Ministry of Education. However, when the student applies for a scholarship or wants to participate in a project against other candidates the certificates he/she gets from informal education will make the difference if the candidates have similar school grades.

4 SURVEY BASED ANALYSIS

EuroEd Foundation carried out a survey on 44 students and 10 teachers in order to identify students and teachers' attitude on school leaving; the survey also focused on identifying the benefits of recognizing and validating students' non-formal learning in school assessment. Respondents were informed about the NON FOR LESL project, the importance of their involvement in this survey and assured of the guarantee of confidentiality.

4.1 Students' questionnaire

65% of the students participating in the questionnaire were girls and 35% boys. 93% were aged 15+ and 7% 14 years old. 49% of students came from 2 parents families, 24% from families with 2 or 3 children, 15% from one child families, 7% from a monoparental family, 4% from a larger family and 1% lost one of their parents. The students had to answer four questions and rate the items given.

Regarding the most important factors that influence students to leave school early 23% of the students fully agreed that the most important factor that influences students to dropout is bullying, 15% voted for the lack of usefulness of school subjects, 14 % for not having a happy student/ teacher relationship, 14% held personal problems responsible for early school leaving, 10% for stressful school formal assessment, 8 % for family problems or other problems, 3% for their own weakness, 3% for not liking some school subjects, 3% agreed that problems with national language influence early school leaving, 1% of the students stated that low grades at school might influence early school leaving.

As for the changes that can be introduced in schools in order to help and encourage students to complete their schooling, the students fully agreed with the following changes: 14 % - formal recognition of students' talents and interests; 12% - introduction of more interesting subjects; 12 % - introduction of assessment for the skills acquired in informal/ non-formal activities; 12% - improvement of student/ teacher relationship so that it is more friendly; 10% - teachers' better understanding of students' family and personal problems; 9 % - the school should offer personal support to students who are in need; 8 % - the school should offer more support to weak students; 6% - school rules should be changed so that they are more flexible; 6% - students should be better prepared for transition school stages (e.g. primary to secondary education); 5% - school should allocate more time to social activities during school classes; 3% - better communication between school and family; 2% - teachers should change school's formal assessment.

The students highlighted the following benefits of the recognition and validation of the non-formal learning: 16% - students' skills/ qualification acquired through non-formal learning contribute to school performance; 15% - these skills/ qualifications change/ improve student's image for the better; 15% - communication between parents/ teachers/ students will be improved; 14% - all school subjects/ type of learning will be equally appreciated; 14% - validation of the non-formal learning will encourage students to work harder/ study more; 12% - validation of the non-formal learning will provide motivation for students to come to school; 8 % - validation of the non-formal learning will provide alternative ways for students at risk; 6 % - validation of the non-formal learning will encourage and assist students to complete school.

The students also had some suggestions as to how schools could take into account students' skills/ knowledge gained in non-formal learning/extra-curricular activities. 24% of the students consider all extra skills/ knowledge acquired should be recorded /or at least have a comment in their school report. 20% of the students consider that students should be given a school award for all extra skills/ knowledge. 20% of the students consider that they should be given extra points which can contribute to their term/ final year mark according to the subject. 17 % of the students consider that students who have extra skills/ knowledge/ qualification in a field should be given exemption from school assessment for that subject.

4.2. Teachers' questionnaire

The teachers had to answer two questions. Regarding the problems within the educational system that influence students to leave school early the teachers identified the following ones: family problems (economic, social etc) - 38%; personal problems - 31%; school subjects do not seem to be useful to students -13%; not happy/ satisfied with the student-teacher relationship -12%; poor results in main school subjects - 6%. In teachers' opinion the following factors do not influence early school leaving: bullying, low grades at school, not being able to obey/ follow school rules; not liking school subjects; not liking the school's formal assessment (tests/ grades) or problems with the national/country language.

As for the second question on the benefits of the recognition and validation of non-formal learning the teachers fully agreed on the following advantages: validation of non-formal learning will improve communication between parents-teachers-students -15%; validation of non-formal learning will make all school subjects be equally appreciated (e.g. music, football) - 14%; validation of non-formal learning will improve communication between parents-teachers-students - 12%; validation of non-formal learning will encourage and assist students to complete school - 10%; all students skills/qualification should contribute to their school performance - 10%; validation of non-formal learning will change/ improve student's image for the better -10%; all learning will be appreciated - 10%; validation of non-formal learning will enhance students' motivation to come to school - 9%; validation of non-formal learning will provide alternative ways of assessment for students at risk - 5%; validation of non-formal learning will encourage students to work harder/ study more - 5%.

5 CONCLUSIONS

School dropout rate in Romania has increased during past years, being one of the highest rates in the European Union. In the current research we have investigated students' and teachers' perception on dropout phenomenon in connection with the use of extracurricular activities in students' school

assessment. Findings have highlighted that local factors may have a stronger effect on the dropout phenomenon in schools and need to be further investigated.

The purpose of the study is to analyse both students' and teachers' views on the issue, as to better understand the real causes of the phenomenon and to better adapt the interventions according to the real existing needs. All respondents agreed with the factors highlighted in the questionnaire as being responsible for early school leaving although their hierarchy is different depending on the perspective (teachers: students cannot obey school rules/ family problems/ students do not like some school subjects; students: stressful school formal assessment; lack of usefulness of some school subjects; personal problems).

The questionnaire carried out on students and teachers has identified common benefits singled out by both groups: improvement in students' general performance and change in students' image. Teachers also gave a high score to benefits such as encouraging students to study more and enhancing their motivation to learn. Generally speaking students seemed to be more pragmatic in relation to the way informal and non-formal learning contributes to their school performance and the necessity to recognize and validate such gains and introduce them in their school report. Teachers went for more general benefits such as its contribution to make students work harder and enhance their motivation to learn.

As for the possible changes that can be introduced in schools with a view to helping and encouraging students to complete their schooling, students agreed on: students' better preparation for school transition stages/ introduction of more interesting subjects at school/ teachers' better understanding of students' family and personal problems. The school stated that the following measures could bring the best results: individual and family counseling, permanent contact with family, regular meetings with parents, recognition of students' work and time and attracting students to interesting activities. Teachers valued the following measures: better understanding of students ("speak with the students, find their interests and hobbies"), contacts with students' families, attracting students to interesting school activities or extra-curricular activities. They also expressed the necessity to enrich and use a wider range of assessment in all areas, which should also cover non-formal and informal learning.

All respondents agreed with the importance of non-formal and informal learning in the development of individuals. Non-formal and informal learning is personal, personalized and capitalizes on students' aptitudes; it helps students find their place and their way in a changing world by showing them their strengths. It gives students the unique feeling of satisfaction that everybody needs when learning. It is closely related to students' personal talents and interests relying on intrinsic motivation. All respondents, teachers and students alike, agreed that non-formal and informal learning has a high impact on students' general knowledge, development and image and, therefore, given its contribution, it must be taken into consideration when assessing students at the end of a school year.

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