Learning in Disadvantaged Areas: Current Challenges, Future Scenarios

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1. Introduction

UNICEF Romania launched in 2010 the School Attendance Campaign, in order to assist national and local authorities getting the estimated 300,000-400,000 children back in the classroom and decrease the number of drop-out cases in the near future. The Institute of Education Sciences, sharing the concern for the situation of out of school children, is one of main UNICEF partners of the campaign. The Institute developed since 2003 several action-research projects based on an adaptation of the Educational Priority Areas (EPA) model [1] in schools located in social and economic deprived areas. The interventions are focused on children of primary and lower secondary age not attending school or at high risk of dropping out due to a social and economic disadvantaged background. The main areas of intervention include: training of school management team in the area of development of an inclusive school; training and assistance for teachers in curriculum adaptation and development of relevant extra-curricular activities for children at high risk of dropping-out; counselling and guidance for parents and family members; small school investment in teaching materials and equipments, aiming at supporting the learning activities at community level.

Currently, the project involves more than 100 schools from 37 counties of Romania. With the direct involvement of teachers, more than 6000 children at high risk of dropping out were identified, accounting for almost a fifth of the total school population of selected schools. Children at risk of interrupting their studies represent the main target group of the project, together with the children that are living in these communities and already dropped out or never attended school (estimated number 500 children). The decision on focussing mainly on these categories of children was influenced by ISE experience of previous EPA projects and by the methodology of Global Initiative on Out of School Children of UNICEF and UNESCO Institute of Statistics [2], and on as described in the figure below:

Figure 1: Five Dimensions of Exclusion
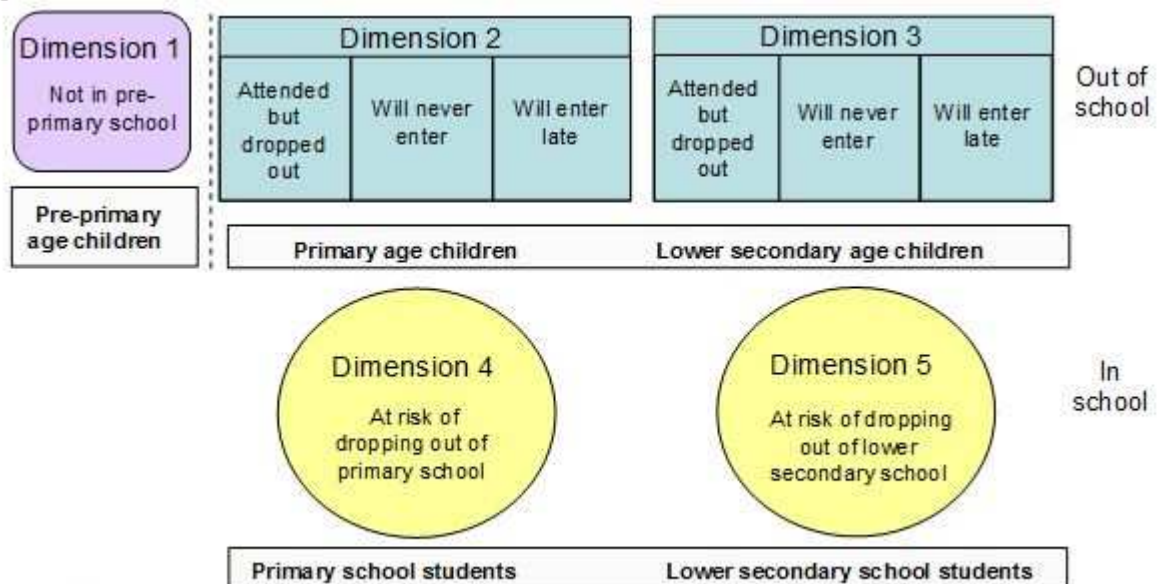
Source: UNICEF and UIS, 2010.

One assumption of our intervention was to combine *out-of-school* and *at-risk* dimensions and therefore makes possible a more accurate identification of specific groups of children who are not participating in the intended level of education, for an intended duration, at an intended age.

In the case of Romanian education system, the incomplete information on the general profile of children who drop out (i.e. level of family income, school results, adaptation to school culture etc.) and the scarce or no information on children who never attended school or are at risk demonstrates the usefulness of this approach.

2. Challenges in project implementation

Based on an integrated and complex intervention strategy, EPA combined various partners input and offered assistance to school actors in a large array of areas such as institutional planning, curriculum adaptation/individualisation for students with few opportunities, school-based curriculum development and implementation, innovative classroom minority and intercultural education strategies, parents involvement and counselling. Besides school managers and teachers working with children of high risk, the project involved the school support staff (counsellors, school mediators), parents and community representatives, as key actors in implementation of activities aiming at decreasing the drop out risk.

One of the most important challenges faced since the early stages of project implementation is related to the very low level of involvement in the case of parents of children at high risk of dropping out. This applies both to involvement in their child school-related activities and also involvement in events organised by school. Often this situation is due to a pessimistic view on the benefits of learning for their children and is reflected in the situation of an education deficit from the first grade, due to the lack of participation in pre-primary education at least in the year preceding the official entrance age into primary school. This was the reason why the interventions at individual level and at school level were also accompanied by family level interventions: information and counselling sessions with parents or tutors in cases when parents were not in community, aiming at strengthening and support parent-child relationships. All interventions took into consideration children physical, mental, emotional and behavioural functioning, understanding that the adaptation to school culture is for the children in this category a challenge in all these dimensions.

The lack of schools experience in identifying the students of any age at high risk of exclusion from education from primary level (Dimension 4) or lower secondary level (Dimension 5) is another barrier faced since early stages of project implementation. EPA schools are constantly exposed to this phenomenon and, in time, the school culture tends to erode the sensitiveness to absenteeism and drop out behaviour, as they become common, every-day facts. In order to address this challenge, school principals were trained to adapt and use a specific tool for registering all children enrolled who are at high risk of giving up studies during the year. This tool offered detailed information about children family and community background as well as school performance and other relevant individual characteristics. Based on the information collected, each school created individualized intervention plans for each children identified at risk as well as a regular attendance monitoring system, acting as an early warning tool.

The insufficient initial and in-service training of teachers from EPA schools in the area of didactic strategies for working with children at risk focused on of the main interventions of the project in development and implementation of a relevant blended-learning program. The face-to-face courses were organised in four regions (allowing teachers from various schools to get in contact and exchange experiences) while the online component was assured by the Institute of Education Sciences e-learning platform [4]. All teaching materials developed during previous EPA projects (curricular documents, students learning materials, teacher resources etc.) were also used during the trainings, Until the end of the project all these innovative didactic resources will be revised and developed, thanks to the large-scale application in EPA schools.

The social disadvantaged background of the majority of children at high risk demands a higher social protection service to be provided by local authorities. Due to the fact that a large number of EPA schools are located in very poor communities, also a higher investment in school infrastructure is necessary. However, until now, the local authorities despite the good intentions failed to meet these expectations and provide this support to students and schools. With some exceptions, the grant the school receives from the local budget is enough only to cover the basic needs while no special central budget financing programs are available (i.e. as in the case of EPA model implemented for more than 20 years in France).

3. Perspectives on future interventions: the case of Rroma students.

We have analysed briefly some of the main challenges faced during the project implementation and some of the solutions EPA project used to overcome these barriers. Of course, in each school case, a lot of other negative factors could be faced (ranging from the lack of experience and stability of the staff to the insufficient capacity of the institution to create an inclusive culture). But another very important challenge could be identified in all cases, and this is related to the lack of long-term vision of schools and local authorities to keep and develop the project outcomes and impact.

After the first semester of project implementation, the results achieved are encouraging. More than 80 percent of the students in risk are in school, many of them with a regular attendance and satisfactory school performance. Some of the parents of these children at risk started to have a more positive view on education and to avoid keeping the child home for work. Many teachers are declaring very satisfied to be a part of a new learning community, representing with success schools that so far have a poor public image.

However, the sustainability of these measures is a key for the future and the Institute (and also UNICEF) have a limited capacity to continue to support these schools in the coming years in all EPA components. A strategy at the level of each school is currently developed with the assistance of project experts aiming at identifying successful activities that should continue and even be developed and also categories of actors that should be involved in local education partnerships. For illustration, we will offer the example of schools with a large majority of students of Rroma ethnic origin.

About three in four students that drop out in Romania today are Rroma and the majority of EPA schools have a significant number of students at risk of this ethnic origin. There is a strong link between attainment and economic background and the Rroma population is the most severely affected by poverty today, after several years of economic depression. Due to the fact that the social assistance programs were reduced in the same period and no targeted policies were developed at national level, Rroma students remain one of the most vulnerable categories (together with children with special education needs) and a challenge for any school attendance program [5].

The school of tomorrow for these children will not exist without rapid and complex interventions. It is necessary to re-think these children needs, motivations, expectations and dreams and also the ones of their families.

One of the most effective long-term investments is related to strengthening the local partnerships but for this to happen a new generation of community developers and facilitators is needed. More precisely, the programs addressing the training of school mediators to facilitate family-school-community communication, of school principals to promote intercultural and inclusive education and of Romani language teachers are a priority for the future. Even conditional cash-transfer policies are proved to work better in communities where there is a higher level of trust (so an increased social capital) and since the cooperation is not spontaneous, these agents for change should be trained and assisted. Making an inventory of Roma school mediators and their needs in order to address them through future interventions is the first step in this direction.

A relevant curriculum, meeting these needs and motivations could be therefore more easily implemented, while supporting staff at school level is available and active. Another priority for the near future is to expand at national level the activities promoting positive Rroma models, who can act as role models among children. This could be possible as a caravan promoting documentaries of successful Rroma professionals who completed their education and also organizing screenings of this documentary in schools with a large number of Roma children. It is very important to facilitate the direct contact of the Rroma professionals with both children and parents and so to promote the importance of education at family and community level in order to increase the value of education among Roma youth.

Parenting programs, already implemented in UNICEF campaign should also be expanded so a professional network of trainers for parenting education to be developed and to be able to provide services in all needing communities. In parallel, further training programs for teachers should be organised for recognizing and addressing the needs of Rroma children and also for improving the quality of the teacher-student-parent relation, in order to make schools more attractive.

Other success initiatives, confirmed by impact studies, should also be continued such as the informal networking with Rroma leaders, trying to influence attitudes towards education in the community, connect the families of children at risk of dropout with the resources available in community and facilitate the enrolment and attendance in school of the identified children.

Last but not least, the interventions of the community level should take into account to create team of resource professionals at local level (including social workers, school and health mediators, promoters, informal leaders etc.) and assign specific roles in promotion of dropout new prevention interventions. Also at national level advocacy events in order to make dropout reduction a priority for decision-makers are a priority, offering the platform to explore in detail the profile of the out of school children and to design informed new policies in this field. Again, as EPA project shows, resources could be more effectively spent if some of these conditions will be met and, for sure, a lot of children will have higher chances to be in school of tomorrow.

References

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