DEVELOPING VIRTUAL AND COLLABORATIVE LEARNING SKILLS FOR TACKLING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

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Abstract: *Today's reality testifies to the fact that teachers are still lacking appropriate skills and competences, and consequently of motivation, in understanding and dealing with students at risk of early school leaving. Often, teachers are not able to identify well in advance the manifestation of the risk factors leading to dropping out, not to mention the initiatives for effective intervention. The focus of the paper is on how the Stay@School (Multilateral Transfer of Innovation Project) tries to provide a working solution to the needs of the teachers outlined above by setting up a VLE in order to provide them with skills for identifying students at risk of early school leaving and for preventing and combating the problem. The project training program focuses first on how to identify students at risk, and then on the strategies used to address the problem: communication techniques - offering practical ideas on how to prepare and carry out an effective conversation with young people and their parents as well as on the actions to be taken; teaching methodologies – based on effective teaching strategies that foster the active involvement of all students in productive educational pathways. The strategies proposed include active teaching and learning, collaborative learning, peer education and the effective application of creativity to education; evaluation of educational processes - teachers need to be acquainted with the modern meaning of evaluation, evaluation types and forms, evaluation models, techniques and tools in order to become able to use them effectively in their school classes to achieve, among other educational objectives, the prevention of early school leaving; and finally external resources and support for teachers and students - introduction to authentic scenarios for reflection, an exploration of a variety of teacher responses to students in danger of leaving school early, an exploration of the level of risk of particular students, a description of the range of support available to help with the problem and the examination of the different types of support.*

Keywords: *school dropout, virtual learning, collaborative learning, teaching methodologies, communication techniques, education*

I.   IMPACT OF SCHOOL DROPOUT

The strategic objective set up by the member states of the European Council at Lisbon (2000) declare that education and training are decisive, in order to make the European Union the most competitive and dynamic society, with an economy based on knowledge, research and innovation. One of the most important indicators of an educational system's efficiency is the school dropout rate. This reveals the capacity of the school system to integrate and keep the students within, to ensure access and support in order for them to finalize at least the compulsory school level.

School dropout consists in ceasing to attend school, the abandonment of the education system, regardless the level that has been reached, before obtaining a qualification or a complete professional training or free betting tips uk before completing an education level. The causes of school dropout can be economic, socio-cultural and religious, psychological or pedagogic.

The objective of the European Union on the issue of school dropout is clear and firm: a dropout rate of less than 10% in EU by 2020. The statistics show that every year 6 million young people drop studies (which mean about 14% of total students). For them, the future is bleak: unemployment, poverty and marginalization. Young people who quit school are considered to be those who despite having aged between 18 and 24 years old, they have completed more than secondary school by the time they drop the school. School dropout is an important indicator which evaluates the performance of the educational system, by level of education, but it signals some aspects of social and economic life that can influence people's access to education. In recent years, the dropout rate in school education increased by a third, from 1.8% in school year 2000-2001, to 2.4% in 2008-2009, according to data from the National Statistics Institute. At the end of the 2008-2009 school year, the number of students who are out of primary and secondary units was 1,707,200 students, with less than 29,100 students in early. Dropout rate was 1.7% (1.4% to 1.9% for primary and secondary). It is worth noting that there are large differences in dropout rates by gender (males 1.8%, females 1.5%). Residential areas is remarkable, however, lower values of drop-out rates in primary education in urban areas (1.3% in urban areas compared to 1.5%) and higher in secondary education (1.6% in urban and 2.2% in rural areas). In the 2008-2009 school year at high school level, 19,100 students dropped out of this level of education, the dropout rate being maintained on a downward trend, with minor fluctuations, for this level of education (from 3.5% in school year 2000-2001, to 2.4% in 2008-2009).

For achieving a rate below 10%, Member States are invited to develop policies to cover the entire educational cycle, eliminating factors that determine school dropout, while solving the problems that arise and offering a second chance to young people who regret decisions made in a time.

1.1   What can be done to prevent early school

There are three strands:
- Prevention - Improving equal access to high quality education at an early age. Should be introduced measures to ensure the participation of all children in classes (language support for immigrant children for example).
- Intervention - advice and tutoring for students, strengthening ties with parents when signs such as unexcused absences and very poor performance
- Compensation - students who drop out of school should be given the chance to gain further qualifications that have not achieved the first time. Schools "second chance" must offer courses for small groups of students and teaching methods more personalized and more flexible than regular schools.

Under the fact that teachers are suffering from a lack of skills and competences, and consequently of motivation in understanding and dealing with pupils at risk of school abandoning. Teachers often are not able to identify with the necessary anticipation the manifesting of the risk factors leading drop out and to the necessary initiatives to give effective answers. The Stay@School project (Leonardo Da Vinci Subprogramme – Multilateral Project Transfer of Innovation, Project Number: 2011-1-IT1-LEO05-01961; CUP: G32F11000680006) tries to respond to this challenge by providing an effective answer to the needs of the teachers outlined above, intends to transfer the successful experience of the School Inclusion project, evaluated positively both by the European Commission and by the external evaluator: "the main contents of the teachers' training programme provides the necessary skills and tools to fight students' drop out and prevent early school leaving".

II.   ABOUT STAY@SCHOOL PROJECT

The project intends to transfer the main products of the School Inclusion project:
- The online training course aimed at preparing teachers to identify students at risk of early dropout and provide them with skills to prevent the problem.

- The database of 240 reviews of the most important European publications on the topic of scholastic drop out.
- The collection of 25 Case Studies of students who have dropped out of school and direct experiences of 52 teachers who have been successful in preventing the problem of dropping out of school.

    For the following subjects:
- 80 new teachers in higher education, technical institutes and Italian vocational institutes in 3 different regions: Tuscany (with other schools not already involved in the School Inclusion Projects) Veneto and Lazio.
- 60 new teachers in high schools, technical institutes and vocational institutes from 3 different European countries: Romania, Spain, and Belgium.

    Through the following activities:
- Translation of the training course in 3 new languages: Romanian, French, and Spanish.
- The organization's use of the course in a "Blended Learning" mode, supported by the organization of virtual conferences during which teachers can share their experiences and opinions.
- The integration of the publication database with new reviews
- The integration of the collection of experiences of teachers with new contributions both to describe new cases and to discuss the existing ones (cooperative learning).
- The creation of a collection of 35 reviews of training events for teachers on the issue of dropping out of school. Each event will be described in its main functions in order to highlight the strengths and elements useful to a potential transfer.
- The involvement of teachers in the production of educational and informational materials aimed at teachers and students on the theme of prevention and fight against school drop-out, as the practical application of "learning by doing" is learned during the course.

III. ONLINE COURSE ON PREVENTION OF SCHOOL EARLY LEAVING

The idea of the training package for secondary school teachers is to help them to identify students at risk of early school leaving and to provide them with some useful skills to help prevent or reduce the problem. The Training Package consists of:
- Five on-line course modules focusing firstly on how to identify students at risk and then on strategies which can be used to address the problem: communication techniques, teaching methodologies promoting an active participation, evaluation of educational processes and finally on external resources and support for teachers and students.
- Teachers Forum to comment and receive further information on each of the modules. Teachers are invited to use the Forum to interact with each other and to contact the authors of the course. On the Forum, the authors of each of the course modules answer questions and provide clarification or further information about the contents of the module they have developed.

The first module *Identification of students at risk* aims to help teachers and other educational professionals to identify young people at risk of dropping out of education. The module is based on a small number of case study interviews with young people, parents, teachers, Head teachers, Public Officers and has been produced after extensive research undertaken in the production of the National Report in the project partner' countries. For the purpose of this module the identification factors to look for which can lead to school 'drop outs' or early course leavers, have been divided into four chapters, educational, personal, family and community.
Testimonials:

"Things are changing at all levels very fast nowadays: families are under pressure, family quality time is affected, mobility has become part of our normal and common environment, learning/teaching methods are changing etc. These changes deeply affect our lives. It is no wonder that teenagers are confused. We, teachers, are overwhelmed by zillions of problems, which belong to our teaching load and we are therefore asked to solve. That's why we have appreciated the materials: they brush up on on our memory, raise our awareness about issues we have neglected or forgotten or introduce new ideas. Everything has a solid scientific basis."

"The identification of the students at risk is a major task of all the teachers in a school and it is closely connected to school achievement and academic motivation. Often a younger teacher learns by personal experience the cost of not being careful with the attendance of his students and the dramatic effect bad attendance has on school results, on intrinsic motivation and on class behaviour."

"I agree that the student's family is a useful resource in order to carry out an effective intervention. The families of the students at risk have to be periodically contacted by school teachers, whether for positive or negative communications. This may help the school not only to monitor the student situation but also to weigh up the didactic strategies, adapting them to suit the student's needs. Nobody can help teachers to deal with the problem of school dropout better than the families."

The second module *Communication* provides practical proposals on how to facilitate communication with difficult students. This module identifies the best ways to prevent communication difficulties which may lead to a student dropping out from school. The module also offers suggestions on how to deal with students who are at risk of school dropping out, and suggestions on how to react to the first signs of absenteeism. Finally the module offers practical ideas on how to prepare and carry out an effective conversation with young people and their parents as well as on the actions to be taken after this conversation has taken place.

Testimonials:

"Each pupil/ student is an "I" that can easily be transformed in "nobody" and very difficult in "somebody". Experience showed me that by using communication one can solve many difficult situations. Communication can be initialized by yourself or you can become a link in the chain of it. The communication between teachers – students – parents is important but not sufficient in education. We should also try to motivate them and the others to communicate among them."

"Communication between teachers, students and parents is very important. This means families who are active and engaged in their children's present and future. Nowadays families spend less and less time together; most of the parents do not have enough time to speak with their children. Some of them do not know their children; some of them are not near their children- in an attempt to make money for their family. It is difficult to achieve real communication. Sometimes we, teachers, need to activate parents and make them react to our calls or questions. The materials we found in this module can help us."

"Both the teachers and the parents should learn on how to communicate and to collaborate and the pupils should learn that they can speak any time about their problems and that the teachers are there for them, not to judge them but to support and help."

The third module *Teaching Methods* focuses on effective teaching strategies that foster the active involvement of all students in productive educational pathways. The strategies proposed include active teaching and learning, cooperative learning, peer education and the effective application of creativity to education.

Testimonials:

"Learning is very personal, which means that teachers should be very knowledgeable about teaching methods and techniques in order to make the teaching content interesting, accessible and clear for each student. That is why we have found the content of Chapter 3 so useful: it provides us with a wide variety of teaching techniques that can be used in the classroom. There is no such thing as a perfect technique; we have to make use of a variety of techniques so that we get to each student style of learning; sometimes the constant use of a very good strategy leads to boredom. That is why we, teachers, should be very active and on the lookout for new methods."

"Teachers need an effective method to motivate students to learn. From my point of view the most effective teaching method is the one which encourages active learning. Students do not feel

comfortable if teachers adopt a unique teaching method. This is exactly what "Active learning" tries to avoid. It combines different learning styles and teaching models. Knowing what students' cognitive styles are helps teachers choose the most adequate techniques and it also teaches students how to learn. "Active learning" makes learning more accessible and personal. Active Learning promotes motivation and inclusion."

"The most effective teaching method is the one which encourages active learning because: it takes into consideration all students' learning styles; it is based on learning by doing; it means acquiring knowledge through experience and reflection; it focuses on skills rather that theory."

The fourth module *Educational Evaluation* and early school leaving prevention focuses on Evaluation which is a dynamic feature of any educational process. In the case of the early school leaving prevention, evaluation is strongly related to the pupils' needs assessment before their engagement in a learning activity in order to identify in time their learning difficulties. Teachers need to be acquainted with the modern meaning of evaluation, evaluation types and forms, evaluation models, techniques and tools in order to become able to use them effectively in their school classes to achieve, among other educational objectives, the prevention of early school leaving.
Testimonials:

"Students are usually evaluated together with their fellows. Our evaluation targets all students, highlighting their progress and difficulties. In my opinion the satisfaction you get from your work and the recognition/appreciation of your work and progress is excellent incentive to go on learning and therefore stay at work/school. What I mean is that if we know the difficulties encountered by our student at risk, we can work on his learning so that he can also register progress and thus enjoy satisfaction from his work"

"We have found the Scale for the assessment of student's social skills very interesting. It is true that students' communication skills, team work and cooperation skills, disagreement skills and acceptance of changes skills speak volumes about their self-esteem, adaptability and even school success. They can be indicators of students' school performance. However, never have we realized the relation between these skills and school dropping out. Useful! Thank you very much."

"I fully agree with the opinion that evaluation is a core stage in the process of learning and teaching/consolidating knowledge, skills and competences. To have this idea at the heart of the evaluation process is an educational technique that gives rewarding results. To stimulate such an approach an enlargement of the people invited to have a say about evaluation could be used."

The fifth module *External support and cooperation* examines external resources and supports for teachers and students to help them in the prevention of early school leaving. The module includes an introduction to authentic scenarios for reflection, an exploration of a variety of teacher responses to students in danger of leaving school early, an exploration of the level of risk of particular students, a description of the range of support available to help with the problem and the examination of the different types of support available for students with varying needs.
Testimonials:

"There should be a real communication among school-parents-community partnership, real country or region programmes which should be implemented, we (teachers, parents, and community) should do something precise in preventing ESL"

"Depending from one case to another I involve other persons (teachers, friends, colleagues) or institutions. from my experience I noticed that the sooner I find out about these situations the easier and faster we can solve them and that classes' head teacher have a major responsibility in forming the relationships within the group by organizing common activities in and out the school specially in the first years."

"School plays an important role in preventing early school leavers but also in implementing reintegration programs for students who have already dropped out of school in condition monitoring system to prevent a crisis and to identify periodic changes in the factors of abandonment school."

IV.   Conclusions

The participants in the Stay@school project have deeply appreciated the project content (its well organized online course) and the opportunity given by the project forum to express opinions on the online materials as well as share ideas, experience and thoughts on the topic with a view to learning and applying the best ways of managing dropout and its related issues.

As far as content of the online course is concerned teachers agreed that the materials have a solid scientific basis and provide comprehensive information and hands-on practice on the topic. The course fills a gap and meets an existing need: considering the size of the phenomenon it is necessary for teachers to have access to a wide range of materials and cooperate in order to find solutions. Therefore, in a world where change has become a constant the implementation of such platforms which should offer easily accessible specialized information and hands-on solutions is beneficial. The existence of such reliable materials is useful for those interested to refresh memory, raise awareness about issues, introduce new ideas or suggest solutions by coming up with practical examples. The teachers held that the materials are also generous in providing opportunities for reflection. All the existing materials are organized with one idea in mind: the phenomenon, school early leaving, is complex and requires a thorough analysis and cooperation among all factors involved in its prevention.

The project forum has developed in time from an opportunity to comment on the course content, clarify points or exchange ideas and experiences to a reliable way of enriching the already existing materials. The participants have found the forum very interactive by permanently encouraging dialogue and cooperation. There are also cases when participants have revealed their own worries and problems related to the topic. They said that what the forum does is fantastic. It brings together teachers from different European countries in a new community whose main interest is to find solutions to a problem. The issue raised in the forum is analyzed from different angles and perspectives and filtered through different teaching experiences and education systems. The online materials have often been the basis for the teachers' suggestions. The role of the platform as a tool to consolidate good and positive attitudes, celebrate success and effort and encourage cooperation and communication has also been highlighted by the participants.

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