

# REACH

improving youth  
employment prospects

ESF 57

## Evaluation Report

of project REACH coordinated by AĊCESS



Structural Funds Programme for Malta 2004-2006  
Project co-financed by the European Union: European Social Fund  
Co-financing rate: 75% European Union, 25% Malta Government



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The project REACH is a partnership between five different entities who are also involved in different aspects of its implementation. These are:

- The Employment and Training Corporation
- APPOĠĠ, Cottonera Community Services
- sedqa, Teen Support Services
- The Cottonera College
- AĊĊESS, Cottonera Community Resource Centre



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# Executive Summary

This report is an evaluation of the outcomes of project REACH – ESF 57 funded under priority 2 – Developing people. The project is coordinated by AÇCESS in collaboration with the Cottonera College, Employment and Training Corporation (ETC), SEDQA and APPOĠĠ. REACH targets young people who are approaching school-leaving age, particularly those young people with a history of absenteeism at school.

The terms of reference for the evaluation exercise, as specified by AÇCESS include: Interviewing those directly involved in the delivery and implementation of the project such as Learning Mentors, Family Worker and Heads of School; evaluating the outcomes of the project and its impact on participants with particular reference to the aims and objectives of the project identified in the project proposal; interviewing participants which include students, parents and teachers in the two schools concerned; drawing up a comprehensive evaluation report which is to be handed in by not later than the 31<sup>st</sup> July 2007; making recommendations on how the project can be taken forward or improved upon; and keeping updated records of work carried out such as interviews or report writing.

Several risk factors have been identified with respect to school drop outs. Four main risk factors, as identified by [Wells et. al. \(1989\)](#) are identified to be: school-related; student-related; community-related; and family-related. There is a positive aspect in that school factors seem to be a greater determinant of drop out rates than other socioeconomic factors. School factors can be changed and manipulated; it is possible to have intervention. It is much more difficult, however,

to try and bring about change in socioeconomic factors such as family and cultural background. This gives educators a degree of hope in working towards finding solutions to keeping students within the education system.

The project specifically aims to attract youth at risk in different ways. Actions included in the programme include providing: an alternative learning environment and exploring different learning methodologies; mentoring to students of school leaving age with a history of truancy and absenteeism; life skills training that can assist young people in identifying potential career paths and information on further education and on schemes; experiences that expose them to different working environments in order to bridge the gaps between learning that takes place in schools and the world of work; training to equip them with skills to prevent young people from dropping out of school; and holding regular monthly meetings between the learning mentors and supervisors.

The project involved a number of different professional people with different roles and responsibilities. The different roles include mainly the: *management committee*: with representatives from the different key players; *family worker* to

provide a link between the families and the school; *learning mentors* responsible for providing the support, labour market skills and alternative form of education to the youth; and *teacher trainers* who provided training to the teachers within the two schools involved in the project.

The methodology followed, due to the sensitive nature of the programme, is mainly qualitative in approach. The methodology followed involved: analysis of existing documentation to identify the context from which the programme emerged, as well as to identify the stated aims and objectives of the project; and a number of in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews with the main actors involved in the programme. Interviews were carried out with: project coordinator at AĊCESS; learning mentors; family worker; heads of school where the programme is being run; teachers who followed the training programme; parents of students participating in the programme; as well as boys and girls who participated in the programme. In addition, a quantitative approach involving a questionnaire with the teachers who followed the training course was also used.

The evaluation highlighted a number of aspects of the project. There was an agreement on the aims of the project by all the key players involved. Both schools stated that they needed a programme

such as REACH aimed at school drop-outs. The Project REACH did actually manage to attract students back to school despite difficult factors and situations. It was well structured between the different organisations involved. This structure promoted collaboration overall, even if this was better established in one school. The undefined role of the 'learning mentor', however, gave rise to uncertainty and misunderstanding among teaching staff. This was a big problem in one particular school. It was also noted that the programme could have had a better structured learning programme. Difficulties were also encountered to attract back and help students within the programme and girls were particularly difficult. This resulted in the project being implemented with different degree of success in the two schools. A number of students went back to school and took part in the programme as well as sat for their school leaving exams. Both schools felt that the second part of the project with fourth formers worked better in both schools.

Most of the teachers were satisfied with the training course and found the topics relevant. They enjoyed talking and sharing experiences with teachers from another school. However, they would have liked more practical examples and case studies. Premises used for training were also found to be up to standard.



Recommendations were made. A number of these recommendations were put forward by the people involved in the project.

Recommendations included the following:

- **Schools need to understand their role better** where external organisations and/or professionals are involved;
- **There should be a greater involvement of teachers in the schools.** The more the school staff is involved in the programme, the greater is the probability that it is successful;
- **Greater parental participation:** Parents of the students involved can be invited to be on the administrative committee, to participate in their children's activities, invited to go to school for regular meetings to monitor the behaviour and progress of their children, as well as be offered training in parental skills focusing on dealing with difficult adolescents;
- **Taking a 'school within school' approach:** The 'smaller scaled' school can include a system where problem students are in classes with smaller teacher/student ratio, curricular programmes that are tailored to their needs, as well as an added attention and personal touch which is usually not possible to achieve within big educational institutions;
- **The inclusion of a dialogical approach in the implementation of the project:** Dialogic learning is the result of the interactions produced in an egalitarian dialogue that is oriented to the creation and acquisition of new knowledge, which is the result of consensus;
- **Better defined learning objectives:** It would help to have a number of basic learning outcomes at the planning stage making it easier to implement the activities/tasks for the programme as well as assessing what these students have learnt;
- **Time for sessions should be regular and if possible time-tabled:** although it is good to have a certain degree of flexibility in the programme, there still needs to be some overall stable framework within which the programme operates;
- **Training session for teachers could have been better integrated within the project;**
- **A better defined role for the learning mentor:** It is important for the management team to agree on the specific terms of references, not for contractual basis, but for clarity and understanding of the role of the learning mentor within the programme;
- **The use of individual learning plan agreed between the learning mentor and the students:** This can be achieved through dialogue with the student and parents where the most important learning outcomes can be identified;
- **The inclusion of a portfolio as a record of the students' achievements.**

The Evaluation exercise has shown that the project REACH has all the ingredients: School, community, parents and youth indicated in literature as necessary aspects of successful programmes for school drop outs. This, in fact, has given an overall positive result in that a number of students have actually gone back to school as well as sitting for their school leaving exams to obtain the school leaving certificate.

# 1.0 Introduction

The Education Act (2006) for Malta stipulates that compulsory education is up to the age of 16. This includes 6 years of primary education followed by 5 years of secondary education. Although officially, students are not allowed to drop out of school before the stipulated age, it is sometimes the case that one finds a number of students who become unofficial school drop outs due to becoming habitual absentees within the school system. The reasons for dropping out of school are not simple but represent a complex social problem for which there is no simple solution (Woods, 1995).

This report is an evaluation of the outcomes of project REACH – ESF 57 funded under priority 2 – Developing people. The project is coordinated by AĊĊESS in collaboration with the Cottonera College, Employment and Training Corporation (ETC), SEDQA and APPOĠĠ. REACH targets young people who are approaching school-leaving age, particularly those young people with a history of absenteeism at school. These youth usually have low level of achievement at school. As ‘school drop-outs’, they are considered to be at risk of becoming unemployed (Gatt & Gatt, 2004). It is in fact as a result of the research conducted by Gatt and Gatt (2004) on the school to work transition of youth that the great risk for this particular group was highlighted.

It is not the first time that the project REACH is running. It has already been piloted in the previous years, but on a much smaller scale due to limited funds. Due to ESF-57, this year, as a result of more funding, the project could be implemented on a much larger scale.

The main aim of the project is to reach out to those young people who are regularly absent from school, and to try and attract them back to school. Keeping youth at school is believed to increase their possibility to access further education and training, as well as decrease the chance of becoming long term unemployed. The project aims to achieve this by providing support to the youth, their families and their teachers at school.



## 2.0 Terms of Reference

The evaluation formed part of project ESF-57, where towards the end of which, the programme was to be evaluated.

The terms of reference for the evaluation exercise, as specified by AČCESS include:<sup>1</sup>

- Interviewing those directly involved in the delivery and implementation of the project such as Learning Mentors, Family Worker and Heads of School.
- Evaluating the outcomes of the project and its impact on participants with particular reference to the aims and objectives of the project identified in the project proposal. Participants include students, parents and teachers in the two schools concerned.
- Drawing up a comprehensive evaluation report which is to be handed in by not later than the 31<sup>st</sup> July 2007.
- Making recommendations on how the project can be taken forward or improved upon.
- Keeping updated records of work carried out such as interviews or report writing.

This report is being drawn up in response to these terms of reference.

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<sup>1</sup> As specified in contract drawn up by AČCESS.

## 3.0 Theoretical Background

Several risk factors have been identified with respect to school drop outs. Four main risk factors, as identified by Wells *et al.* (1989) are identified to be: school-related; student-related; community-related; and family-related.

School related issues refer to academic achievement. Students performing poorly in the primary years will go on to do badly and eventually lose all interest in education during their secondary education. Large school size (Lehr *et al.*, 2004), especially those situated in low socioeconomic areas have been found to have higher drop out rates. A negative school environment and climate has also been found to contribute to school drop-out (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999), as well as feeling unsafe at school.

In student relation issues, sometimes students may have individual problems which are not related to social or family background. Examples can be situations such as school phobia, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, criminal behaviour etc. A technical report on dropout factors and exemplary programmes (Hammond *et al.*, 2007) elaborate further these four factors identified. They describe how individual factors in the U.S. link early school leaving to background characteristics such as racial/ethnicity, gender, immigration status, limited English literacy, limited cognitive abilities or some other type of disability; physical, emotional or behavioural.

Hammond *et al.* (2007) also cite research (Gleason & Dynanski, 2002; Rumberger, 2001) which indicate how additional family responsibilities,

having to take on a job to help the family, or caring for siblings can increase the chance of dropping out of school.

Another individual factor relates to adolescents' general behaviours and attitudes such as early antisocial behaviour, violence, substance abuse, trouble with the law, early sexual behaviour, un-recommended friends, as well as low self-esteem and self-confidence. Students with disabilities also possess multiple risk factors (Wagner *et al.*, 1993).

Students gradually demonstrate difficult types of disengagement with school (Hammond *et al.*, 2007). Such disengagement can be: academic disengagement which results in absenteeism from school; behavioural disengagement through misbehaviour leading to expulsions and exclusions from school; psychological disengagement with low educational expectations and a general dislike of school; and social disengagement where drop outs tend to have trouble with their peers at school.

Community related issues refer to socioeconomic status, attitudes and values in which children are brought up. Hammond *et al.* (2007) cite literature (Schargel, 2004) which shows how drop out rates in the U.S. are higher in urban areas compared to suburban or rural schools. Drop out rates were also found to be higher in impoverished communities or

with high numbers of single-parent households or adult drop outs (Rosenthal, 1998).

Family background is another important factor. If children are brought up in a home environment which is low in socioeconomic status, single parent households, as well as cultural attitude towards education, the probability of students dropping out from school increases. Socioeconomic status measured in terms of parental education, income or occupational level increase the probability of dropping out of school (Alexander *et al.*, 2001). In the U.S., students from single-parent households (Rumberger, 2001) as well as step-parents (Teachman, 1996) are also at risk groups.

Other family aspects identified by Hammond *et al.* (2007) include level of household stress, due to family problems and conflict; family dynamics such as degree of regulation of the youths' behaviours; attitudes, values and beliefs about education transmitted by parents and their behaviour towards education are all contributing factors.

Although the reason for which students drop out of school can be various and complex, there are particular indicators which may be considered as good predictors. One of the most significant and good predictor identified includes academic achievement record (Wood 1994). Dropping out of school also does not take place suddenly but often is preceded by a high rate of absenteeism. It appears that as students progress through the educational system, their low performance tends to lead to less interest in learning, with students being left behind due to not fitting within the existing educational system.

There is a positive aspect in that school factors seem to be a greater determinant of drop out rates than other socioeconomic factors. School factors can be changed and manipulated; it is possible to have intervention. It is much more difficult, however, to try and bring about change in socioeconomic factors such as family and cultural background. This gives educators a degree of hope in working towards finding solutions to keeping students within the educational system.

The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL)<sup>2</sup> in the U.S. list what key characteristics are needed for successful school drop out programmes. They list four main key features:

- **Relevancy and learning:** This aspect emphasises the need to provide learning opportunities that motivate students, these often possibly extending beyond the traditional schooling system. Methods mentioned include: mentoring/ tutoring where a tutor is assigned to a student to provide that additional help with academic work; service learning where learning programmes are designed to have meaningful experiences such as related to employment, social and personal development; alternative schooling where other possible pathways of schooling leading to school completion can be achieved; as well as after school experiences which help to increase interest in aspects of the curriculum;
- **Instructional focus:** It is important for learning to be in such a way as to accommodate different learning styles and interests. This can be achieved through empowering teachers such that they can address individual needs successfully. It is thus important to invest in teachers'

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2 <http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/characterstics.asp>

professional development in teaching techniques for students at risk, students with different learning styles and approaches, use of state of the art technology; individualised learning through a differentiated approach, as well as a shared belief in the importance to raise literacy and academic expectations;

- **Accountability:** This can be achieved through continuous assessment that reflects personalized learning, commitment from all the different groups of the community as well as community involvement in the decision process; and
- **Community involvement:** This helps to remove the school barriers and brings learning to the youths' everyday life. This can be achieved through greater community involvement in the evaluation of goals and planning of policies,

building a stronger infrastructure and support to the educational staff; training and preparation for the world of work; as well as programmes that promote conflict resolution and violence prevention through interpersonal skills.

Woods (1995) also outline elements of successful programmes: He argues in favour of setting up 'schools-within-schools' particularly in the case of large schools. Such structure allows a low student/teacher ratio. Woods also highlighted the effectiveness of alternative education provision with schools working in non-traditional settings within the community. In the case of programmes within the traditional school it is very important to have a climate which is non-threatening as well as a system where students are involved in the design of the programme.

## 4.0 Project Description

The project REACH is coordinated by AĈĈESS in Birgu. The project targets school drop outs approaching school leaving age within the Cottonera area. By working in collaboration with other institutions concerned with social and educational aspects, AĈĈESS aims to reach out to those school drop outs at risk of unemployment and try and attract them back to school.

### 4.1 Project Aims

The project specifically aims to attract youth at risk in different ways. Actions included in the programme comprise:<sup>3</sup>

- Providing an alternative learning environment and exploring different learning methodologies that might better suit the individual needs of these young people;
- Providing mentoring to students of school leaving age with a history of truancy and absenteeism in order to encourage them to complete their schooling and improve their employability aspects;
- Providing life skills training that can assist young people in identifying potential career paths and information on further education and on schemes;
- Providing students with experiences that expose them to different working environments in order to assist them in identifying interests and talents and bridge the gaps between learning that takes place in schools and the world of work;
- Providing training to teachers which will better equip them to prevent the possibility of young people dropping out of school, through skills such as differentiated learning;

- Organising regular monthly meetings between the learning mentors and supervisors in order to deal with issues from the mentor's relationship with the youth as well as other personal issues concerning their professional role.

### 4.2 Project Structure

The project involved a number of different professional people with different roles and responsibilities. The different roles include:

- **Management Committee:** Although AĈĈESS assigned a coordinator to be responsible for the management of the project, this is mainly related to the administrative aspect of the project. A management committee with representatives from the different key players: the Coordinator from AĈĈESS; the College coordinator; the Heads of the schools involved; as well as representatives from APPOĠĠ, ETC and sedqa was set up. The role of this management committee was to oversee the whole development and progress of the project. It also took decisions with respect to mainly, but not solely, the educational aspects related to the implementation of the project;

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<sup>3</sup> As stated in project proposal.

- **The Family Worker:** The role of this professional was to provide a link between the families and the school. In fact, the family worker was responsible for contacting the parents of the students identified by the schools. She then had the responsibility to convince the youth, as well as the family, of the importance of going to school. The family worker was also responsible to keep in contact with those families where the participation of the youth was irregular and at risk of dropping out also from the REACH programme;
- **The Learning Mentors:** The learning mentors were responsible for providing the support, labour market skills and alternative form of education to the youth. They were also responsible to keep in contact with and update the coordinator at AÇCESS with the progress at schools. The learning mentors respected the authority of the school when working within the school;
- **The Teacher Trainers:** These were contracted professionals who provided training to the teachers within the two schools involved in the project. The aim of the training was that of sensitising teachers to methods and approaches that can help them tackle problems that they encounter frequently when teaching in their schools.

In addition to these specific roles, there are also other professional people from other institutions who provide further administrative support.



## 5.0 Methodology of the Evaluation Exercise

The evaluating exercise of such an educational programme involves looking at its various aspects, these ranging from: the justification for having the programme in itself; the aims and objectives of the project; the way it is managed; but to a great extent, how effective it has been in reaching its aims and objectives with the target group.

The evaluation will thus have to look into the following aspects of the programme:

- **The justification** for the need of such a project as well as the value of its aims and objectives. One needs to consider what value such a project provides, as well as how much it actually targets an existing problem;
- **The structure and management of the project.** It is no use to have a good idea, a good justification for a project and good intentions but then manage it badly. The aims and objectives of a project can only be reached through good management. It is thus important to look at how the project is managed in terms of running the educational aspect of the REACH programme and to study how effective such method is and in what ways it can be improved;
- **The training and capacity of the professionals** involved in the project. It is important for such a sensitive project to look at how well prepared the professionals were in dealing with such students as well as to how good and effective was the training offered;
- **The impact of the programme** on the target group and their families. It is important to note that the most important issue is how much the target group – youth, have actually gained from such project. It is thus important to look at what these youth have gained as well as the impact

that this change has had on the family. Any measurable outputs/gains observed are to be identified.

In looking at all these aspects the strengths of the programme as well as the areas of weakness were identified, and, based on these outcomes, recommendations on how the project can be improved if run again in the future were put forward.

In order to be able to gain insight of the impact of the programme on the youth participating, it is necessary to collect data about different aspects of the project and to use different methodologies. The methodology followed, due to the sensitive nature of the programme, is mainly qualitative in approach. A qualitative approach allows the researcher to dig deep and understand not only the strengths and problems of the programme, but also the reasons why. The methodology followed involved:

- Analysis of existing documentation to identify the context from which the programme emerged, as well as to identify the stated aims and objectives of the project. The documentation considered included the project proposal where the aims and objectives of the project are specified, some material produced by the students during the programme; as well as the

notes on the activities forwarded by the learning mentors to the project co-ordinator;

- A number of in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews. Interviews were carried out with the main actors involved in the programme. Interview schedule questions were drawn up for each of the groups interviewed, depending on their role. Interviews were carried out with:
  - Project coordinator at ACCESS;
  - 3 learning mentors;
  - the family worker;
  - the 2 heads of school where the programme is being run;
  - 4 teachers who followed the training programme;
  - 2 parents of students participating in the programme;
  - 2 boys and 2 girls who participated in the programme.

In addition, a quantitative approach was also included with respect to the evaluation of the teacher training programme. In this instance, the teachers were given a questionnaire at the end of the course. The questionnaire included items related to: the training provided for the different themes identified; the value added learning provided by the training; as well as the quality of the surroundings in which the training took place.

The qualitative interviews with the different players were semi-structured. They targeted a number of similar issues such as the respondent's views of the aim of the project, its need, as well as its degree of success. All respondents were also asked to put forward suggestions and recommendations should the programme be run again.

There were also a number of questions particular to the key players being interviewed. The family worker was asked questions relating to her experience in convincing parents and youth to go back to school. The Heads of school were asked additional questions with respect to the implementation of the programme within the school system. The learning mentors were asked about their experiences in dealing with the students during the programme.

Through the whole range of questions it was possible to get different views on issues from the different key players as well as additional insight of the persons involved in the programme in different ways. The question schedules for the different semi-structured interviews can be found in Annex 1. Field notes were taken during interviews. For ethical purposes, the names and personal details of the different persons interviewed are not included in this report.

The methodology followed allowed the researcher to complete the evaluation of the REACH programme.

## 6.0 Outcomes of the Evaluation Exercise

The evaluation exercise will focus on the different aspects of the project identified and uses data extracted from the different qualitative and quantitative data gathered. The analysis will look at the following issues in turn, these being: the justification of the project; the context within which it was carried out; the management of the project; its implementation in the school systems; the role of the different key players; the main strengths and weaknesses; the teachers' training as well as the measurable outcomes of the project. Based on the main findings, recommendations will be put forward.

### 6.1 Justification and aims of the project

This part looks at whether the main key players perceived the aims of the project in the same way and whether they felt that the project was needed within their school.

- **Key players agreed on the main aims of the project:** The interviews showed that the different key players (these including the Heads of School, the learning mentors, the family worker as well as the coordinators at ACCESS) had, more or less the same perception of the aims of the project. They all stated that the programme aimed to keep students at risk of being school drop-outs at school as well as to attract back those students who had practically stopped going to school and risked not finishing their compulsory education. They recognised that this could be achieved through adapting the structure of the curriculum and activities. The learning mentor also had a good idea of the overall aims of the programme. They also had a deeper view of the aims – mentioning aspects such as helping

students develop personally, be better prepared for the world of work as well as improve their literacy and ICT skills. They, however, had some difficulty in understanding their role in terms of their responsibilities and the activities they should be involved in. This aspect will be dealt with at a later point in the evaluation;

There was agreement on the aims of the project by all the key players involved.

- **Programme was needed in the school:** Both Heads of schools involved in the project stated that the project was needed in that they both experienced a number of school drop outs which were impossible to attract back to school through the usual channels. The response was more positive in the case of the boys' school where the project was implemented as an integral part of the school initiatives from the beginning. In the case of the girls' school, however, it was slightly more problematic as there was another

similar project being implemented. None the less, the Head of School recognised the problem of school drop outs within the school as well as the merit of the REACH programme in attracting these students back to school;

Both schools needed a programme such as REACH aimed at school drop-outs.

## 6.2 Context of the project

In carrying out the interviews with the different key players, some insight into the problems giving rise to absenteeism could be identified. There are various causes leading to students dropping out of school. The causes that could be identified in the course of the evaluation exercise include the following:

- **History of Low achievement:** Many of the students identified as drop outs by the secondary school were low achievers. They were in the low streams at primary and consequently among the lowest achievers at secondary school. Both heads of school acknowledged that many of these students were already 'unhappy' with the schooling system from primary level and the problem became more accentuated within the secondary years. It was difficult to envisage how students who have great problems with literacy can cope with the large range of subjects which they are supposed to do at secondary level, particularly since there is the same provision of curriculum irrespective of the students' capabilities;
- **Lack of parental control within the home:** One main problem involved parental control at home. Teenagers, by their very nature tend to be

rebellious against any structure and expressing opposition is common. However, in many of the cases with student drop outs, the parents of the students involved had great difficulty in exerting authority over their children. In some particular cases, it was reported that parents felt helpless and had no idea of how to deal with their children. This problem is not the result of adolescence, but reflects the outcome of a particular upbringing. If children, from an early age, do not foster a respect for their parents' views and opinions and follow their guidance, the problem will become bigger and more difficult to control as they grow older. In some cases, the students identified within the REACH programme did not have any regard for their parents' views and/or wishes;

- **Attitude to life and school within the home:** There were cases where the family held particular attitudes which either did not give education enough value or else lived a way of life with little initiative and ambition. Education requires a degree of commitment and a degree of hard work. If the family does not foster a positive attitude towards initiative and promote hard work and commitment, it is difficult for the children to demonstrate such behaviour if they lack role models within the home;
- **The existence of employment before age 16:** There were cases where the students were not going to school simply because they had employment (illegal as they are not yet 16) during school hours. In one particular case, a student admitted that the main reason for which he did not go to school was because he could go and help a relative at his shop. However, in this case, it was good to see that the programme has helped this student to understand the value of

the school leaving certificate as well as the value of the employment skills that the programme included. The student in this particular case had also learnt to value education.

The Project REACH managed to attract students back to school despite difficult factors and situations.

### 6.3 Management of the project

This part of the evaluation looks at the way in which the programme was implemented and how each of the players within the project were able to carry out their duties and responsibilities in working towards achieving the aims of the project.

- **Clearly specified organisational structure:** All the persons involved in the project were aware of the organisational structure. The members of the central organising committee – mainly the Heads of School understood that educational decisions were taken at this level while the administration of the project was in the hands of the coordinating institution ACCESS. The family worker also was aware of the different key players and stated that she collaborated well with the committee, ACCESS, the Heads of school as well as the learning mentors. The learning mentors also stated that they knew that they had to respond to and respect the Heads of school when in school and also to answer to the coordinator at ACCESS with respect to problems relating to the individual students as well as to their professional role;

Project was well structured between the different organisations involved.

- **Organisational structure allowed and promoted collaboration and communication:** The good administrative organisational structure within the project promoted good communication and collaboration. This worked better in one school than the other. The main reason for this difference was the initial difficulty in establishing a good understanding of the project's aims and objectives. None the less, it can be stated that towards the end of the year, a better channel of understanding and communication which led to better collaboration has been established in the second school;

Structure promoted collaboration overall, even if this was better established in one school.

- **Some problems with understanding of roles:** The main problem encountered was the definition of the role of the learning mentors. Whereas in the case of the family worker, the professional involved knew exactly her role and responsibilities within the project, this was not that clear in the case of the learning mentor. The learning mentors themselves highlighted the problem that they did not know what their role was exactly within the school. They were not teachers, not facilitators but had some other role which they felt was not clearly defined. This led to a certain degree of insecurity of the learning mentors and particularly with the other teachers who had problems in accepting these 'new roles' within the school. The main problem was a lack a clear description of the role of the learning mentor as well as the terms of reference in terms of responsibilities that they were to assume.

The undefined role of the 'learning mentor' gave rise to uncertainty and misunderstanding among teaching staff. This was a big problem in one particular school.

## 6.4 The implementation of the programme within the school systems

This part looks at the main problems encountered: in introducing the projects in the schools; in attracting students back to school; the parents' reactions to the project initiative; as well as the learning programme developed for the students.

- **The programme was introduced with different degree of success in the two schools:** The project was more successful in the case of the boys' secondary school. The main reason for this success, as the Head of school himself described, was that the guidance teachers were involved from the beginning of the project. This aspect made it easier for the school staff to accept the new initiative. In addition, the school administration's support for the project was evident and this was reflected in the teachers' attitude. None the less, there were still a few teachers who did not show complete support due to the project allowing students to leave the class. Some teachers felt that this gave rise to a certain attitude in students which could disrupt their lessons. The introduction of the project was much more problematic in the girls' school. The main reason for this was that some of the staff did not really accept the value of as well as the methodology of the project. The learning mentors, with their unclear role, provided greater uncertainty. In addition, a number of the students called back to school refused to go

back to the school premises, but accepted to go for activities in other locations. All these aspects compounded to a difficult start within the girls' project;

Project was implemented with different degree of success in the two schools. The second part of the project with fourth formers worked better in both schools.

- **Degree of difficulty was encountered in attracting students back to school:** The family worker was entrusted with the main responsibility of convincing students to go back to school and participate in the programme. The methodology adopted involved the family worker visiting the families at home, and talking to both the youth and parents, trying to convince the students to go back to school. The advantage of the role of the family worker over that of the usual social worker, was that the family worker only had the role of talking and convincing parents with no monitoring role which social workers usually have. The threat of a fine for not attending school which social workers are obliged to make often hinders the relationship between the social worker and the families, blocking dialogue and understanding. The family worker, who can be considered as one of the strong assets of the project, managed to convince a good number of students to return to school. As the family worker herself expressed, there were different difficulties encountered in convincing parents to send their children back to school. The main trend observed was that in many cases the parents did value education but did not know how they could manage and control their children and make them go back to school. In other circumstances, although



parents were aware of the benefits of going back to school, their way of life was too lethargic to take the initiative and force their children to attend school. The youth, themselves, in fact, proved harder to convince and in some cases it was only the insistence of the family worker that managed to get the students back to school. The main problem was that parents seemed to lack those parental skills needed for educating their children and promoting responsibility and respect for authority. Major problems were encountered in the case of the girls. One particular girl stated that she suffered from school phobia and in fact only accepted to go back to learning but not to the 'school building'. In other cases, the girls reflected a great apathy and lack of enthusiasm to do anything and it was often on the parents' insistence that they eventually went back to participate in the programme;

Difficulties were encountered to attract back and help students within the programmes and girls were particularly difficult.

- **The learning programme varied in the degree of structure:** The learning programme had a better structure in the case of the boys' school. This was due to the programme being incorporated in the school's time-table. This allowed the students to know exactly at what time they were to have the special activities. Any other extracurricular activities such as outings were planned in collaboration with the school administration. Such a structure provided a stable overall framework for the programme. The situation was different in the case of the girls. Due to the difficulty with the school staff as well as with the girls involved, the programme

was not incorporated within the school time-table in the same way as the boys' school. In addition, due to some of the girls' insistence on not entering the school premises, changes and adjustments had to be made in order to accommodate these difficulties. The result was a difficult and unstructured programme which was constantly changing. There was little or no framework which provided stability to the way that the project was run. There was also, however, a common problem with both schools in that the educational objectives and targets were not clear. In addition, the students seemed to be in some cases very reluctant to do certain activities. In view of such a reality, the learning mentors ended up organising activities which at least engaged the students and which they enjoyed. This problem appears to have been greater in the case of the girls. The problem thus was that the educational objectives were not defined, nor were they identified and listed in terms of learning outcomes to be achieved. At this point it has to be acknowledged that whereas it is easier to measure success in terms of the number of students convinced to go back to school, the educational value of their learning is more difficult to assess;

The undefined role of the 'learning mentor' gave rise to uncertainty and misunderstanding among teaching staff. This was a big problem in one particular school.

The learning programme allowed flexibility but had a degree of uncertainty due to learning outcomes not being defined.

## 6.5 Strengths and weaknesses of the project

The different key players were asked to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the programme. The following are the aspects that were highlighted:

### Strengths

- **The role of the family worker:** The role of the family worker as well as the person chosen to carry out this role was considered as a strength within the project. The school heads felt that the role of the family worker provided that bridge between the school and the home (parents) without the threat of legal action which is usually the case with social workers. The family worker represented an extension of the school to the home and this aspect was appreciated by many parents. In addition, it was also acknowledged by many of the key players that the person who was chosen to fulfil this role was professional in her attitude, but most of all, had the right approach and enthusiasm to encourage and convince parents of the value of finishing school as well as convincing the youth who in many cases agreed to go back to school. A degree of the project's success has to be attributed to this person's success in getting the students back to school;

The family worker (both the role as well as the person carrying out the work) was a significant contributor to the project's success.

- **An alternative form of education:** Most of the students interviewed stated that they enjoyed most of the activities organised in the REACH programme. They considered it as a better and more worthwhile experience compared to normal schooling. There are a number of aspects of the programme which were considered

positive and 'better' than normal schooling. These aspects included: the smaller number of students per learning mentor; the possibility to decide together with the learning mentor on what activities to do; as well as the type of activities involved. The students appreciated the small numbers assigned per learning mentor. They appreciated this particularly because they felt that the learning mentors could dedicate more time to them individually and build a relationship. These students may not have experienced situations where teachers, educators or other adults give them their full attention and listen to what they have to say. In fact, the students also appreciated that the learning mentors gave them the opportunity to a certain degree to decide on what activities to organise. This approach gave the students self-esteem as well as a sense of importance as their ideas and wishes were taken into consideration. The third aspect referred to the type of activities. A number of the students liked the activities that they were engaged in for two different reasons. On the one hand, they appreciated those activities that were related directly to employment skills. Students appreciated the relevance of such activities, particularly since many of them were about to start looking for work. The students also appreciated the ICT skills that they learnt as they could use computers better for pleasure as well as for other use. They also, however, also appreciated that they were not required to sit down and listen and write for the whole sessions as is usual in traditional lessons. They appreciated that they were allowed to move around, do different things. They considered this aspect as different from the traditional school setting but was one which was more adapted to their particular temperament;

The programme provided an alternative form of education which was well received by the young people.

- **The involvement of the various key players within the locality:** There was a constant message from the different key players that this particular project reflected the input and effort as well as collaboration of the different key players in the Cottonera community. The collaboration, and particularly the decision making aspect at committee level provided ownership to the project for the different players. Although the project worked better in one school than the other, none the less, there were positive comments on the structure and method of the procedures for decisions taken and direction given to the project. At other levels, the regular meetings of the learning mentors with the family worker as well as with the school, provided the right dynamics for ensuring that these difficult students were followed up and given the attention needed to keep them going to school;

The inclusion of community groups as well as parents was crucial to the project's success.

- **A good learning experience to the schools:** Both heads of school stated that the project in itself was a learning experience for the school in itself. It provided some insight into the reasons for which some students become habitual absentees, as well as what methods and approaches can be applied in order to attract these students back to school. Both schools felt

that the project experience has helped them develop the programme and to a certain extent 'change the current curriculum' to cater for the needs of these difficult students. These changes were being implemented within the school structure. Both schools also realised the impact of intervention, that trying to get students back does work and became aware of the need for earlier intervention to prevent students from becoming habitual absentees in the first place;

- **The involvement of the parents:** One particular feature of this project is the presence of the parents in the process of getting the students back to school. Parents are not usually very much involved in the education of their children at secondary level and many times schools rarely have any contact with the students' parents. This project is different in that the parents were included in the process of convincing youth to go back to school. The parents needed to be convinced and supported to convince their children to go to school. This aspect in fact proved to be positive and most parents appreciated the school's effort and attention given to their children. In fact, one particular parent expressed her interest in being involved more in the programme and would have liked to take part in the activities together with her daughter as she felt that the activities could be of benefit to her too as a parent;

Parental involvement was a key ingredient to the project's success.v

## Weaknesses

Respondents were asked to identify the project's weaknesses. Some weaknesses identified were general aspects which applied to the implementation of the project in both schools.

Some other weaknesses referred to specific situations of players involved in the project. The issues raised are the following:

- **Schools were not that prepared for the participation of other entities in educational initiatives:** This weakness was present in both schools but more accentuated in one of them. It is not common practice in Malta to have public entities directly involved and implementing programmes in schools in collaboration with the school administration. Teaching staff thus tends to be wary of such initiatives and reluctant to accept external intervention. This was particularly felt in the REACH programme particularly in the case of the teaching staff not directly involved in the project. Many of the teachers were not aware of the arrangements made. Since the students involved were given allowances with respect to some school rules and routines, teachers may have considered this as a potential danger for disruption by the other students who did not benefit from such conditions. This was mainly the result of not enough communication with the whole school. Since some teachers were not aware of the aims and objectives of the programme, they may not have felt ownership in the same way as those teachers directly involved, and thus this gave rise to some misunderstandings and hitches in the initial implementation of the project;

Schools were not used to the involvement of community organisations in school projects and some of the teaching staff may have been cautious and suspicious of such initiative.

- **The Role of the learning mentor:** The term learning mentor is specific to the REACH project. Consequently, one cannot assume that people understand what the learning mentor is, as well as what are his/her responsibilities and status within the school. The documentation for the REACH project does not provide a clear definition of the role and responsibilities of the learning mentor, as distinguished from the role of a teacher. This situation caused problems within the schools where the learning mentors were working and with the learning mentors themselves. Their undefined role gave rise to misunderstandings with other teaching staff within the schools. In addition, the learning mentors did not have clear terms of reference of their duties and responsibilities. This placed the learning mentors in a position where to a certain degree, they were unsure of what their role within the school was as well as what were their responsibilities with respect to the students – did they have to provide self development and self-esteem in the students, or were their responsibilities extended further to include basic skills? If so what were the skills that they had to help the students develop?

The role and responsibilities of the learning mentor need to more clearly defined.

- **Too much flexibility:** This weakness was identified in different forms by the different players. Whereas the possibility to organise activities according to the students needs and likes is in itself a good thing, this at times led to a situation where the different players were not sure what was going to happen next. The schools, in some cases, particularly when

involving students who refused to stay within the school premises, were not sure at what times the learning mentors were to be at school. There were also some instances mentioned by one particular student where either to some misunderstanding or other, the learning mentors were not on the premises at the time that the student went to school, having to go back after such an effort. There is also evidence in the notes on activities, that the learning mentors had at times difficulty in doing activities as either the students did not turn up or were reluctant to be involved in the planned activity. The end result of such situations resulted in a rather unstructured programme. This situation was more accentuated in the case of the girls' programme. In the boys' school, the sessions with the learning mentor were included within the school time-table and this created a degree of structure for the programme. There were still problems, however, as students' attendance was not regular.

Programme could have had a better structured learning programme.

## 6.6 Measurable outcomes

There were a number of measurable outcomes that could be identified. The greatest achievement was the number of students who participated in the programme and who eventually sat for their school leaving exams. This is of great importance as the school leaving certificate is important for employment purposes as employers ask for it. In fact in the case of both girls and boys 32 Form V students (19 girls and 12 boys) and 15 Form IV students (8 girls and 7 boys) did participate in the

programme out of which 31 Form V students sat for their annual examinations and obtained their school leaving certificate.

School drop-outs are youth at risk and as such, success cannot be considered in terms of numbers. Each and every youth who has benefited from the programme is a contribution to the project's success. In this case, the number of students who eventually sat for and obtained their school leaving certificate can be considered as significant when one considers that these were students which the normal school system had practically completely lost. REACH can be considered as a possible intervention which prevents youth from slipping through the net, promoting social cohesion and helping individuals at a vulnerable age and where intervention can have a life-long impact.

A number of students went back to school and took part in the programme as well as sat for their school leaving exams.

Success of a project should not be measured only in terms of extrinsic rewards. The students have actually gained more from the programme than the school leaving certificate. The students themselves when interviewed, as well as the learning mentors and heads of school indicated that the participating youth have gained as they:

- **Realised that learning could be also an enjoyable experience:** When interviewed, most of the youth stated that they enjoyed the programme overall, this often said in contrast to normal schooling. Different reasons were given. One of the most common aspects mentioned was





Figure 1: Crafts produced by students in activities during the programme

that they had the possibility to negotiate with the learning mentor on what activity to do. They stated that they felt that the learning mentor was interested to know more about their interests and problems, as well as valued their opinions. In addition, the students also stated that they enjoyed the outings most as they were different to the school setting, they were not expected to sit down and listen for a long time, and could move about and engage in things that interested them;

- **Acknowledged that education is valuable and that it can help in the labour market:** The students appreciated the activities which had a direct relation to employment. They felt that the activities such as filling in a C.V., reading and filling in applications for jobs as well as training in preparation for job interviews had value. They stated that these things were relevant to their

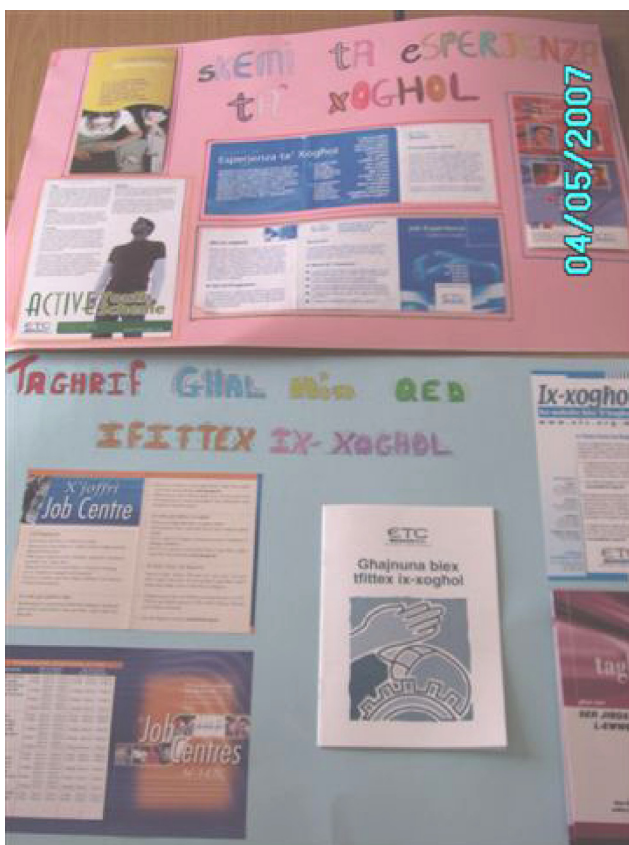


Figure 2: Samples of student work produced during the project.



needs, unlike the usual school subjects that are often covered by the traditional curriculum. Such comments were more positive in the case of the boys. The advantage here was that students probably had more exposure to these skills in the boys school due to the structure of the programme with timetabling of sessions as against the less structured format in the case of the programme for girls;

- **Have gained some basic literacy and ICT skills:**

One of the things that the students liked and found relevant was the experience related to the training in ICT. They stated that they enjoyed the sessions on computers as they learnt basic things such as email, browsing etc. which they can use and are interested in doing;

- **Managed to build a relationship and trust of the learning mentor:** The students appreciated the relationship that they built with the learning mentor. They felt that the small number of students per group made it possible for the learning mentor to have the time to listen to what they have to say. This made it possible for the learning mentor to know more about their interests and what they wanted to do, building a relationship which is usually difficult to have within a normal classroom with around 25 students;

The youth developed positive attitudes and values towards education.

All these positive aspects mentioned provide a good review of the project. Obviously, as with any other project, it can always be improved and more tangible results can be achieved. One particular aspect which this project did not achieve is that of convincing these youth of the value of further training to stay on at school beyond 16. Unfortunately, from the limited interviews carried out, none of the youth expressed an interest in further training beyond compulsory schooling. The overall reaction was that they were to a certain degree enduring the programme in view of the end result or extrinsic reward – the school leaving certificate, beyond which they would not need any form of further training as they enter the labour market. While one always needs to consider success in perspective, the reality of the labour market is one where there is demand for more and further training. This means, that the programme would have reduced the risk of these youngsters from unemployment, but not eliminated it. But then, in order to promote such a positive attitude towards lifelong learning, a much longer intervention than that of a few months would be needed.

## 6.7 The training of teachers in schools

This part of the evaluation looks at the impact of the training course organised for the teachers employed at the two schools where the project REACH was implemented. Teachers from the two schools were invited to attend the training course. The course was held after school hours and teachers were remunerated for their participation.

The evaluation of the training courses includes mainly a questionnaire which was distributed to the teachers at the end of the course. Twenty two out of a possible twenty four responses were collected and analysed. The results of the questionnaire are

supplemented by interviews carried out with a few of the teachers who attended this course. The analysis will thus involve mainly an analysis of the questionnaire responses while the interviews will be used to provide further insight into the trends obtained.

Teachers expressed a range of expectations from the course (Table 1). However, the majority expected the course to focus mainly on the issue of absenteeism and dealing with challenging behaviour of difficult students. In view of these issues, a number of teachers also expected to discuss and learn about coping strategies to deal with such difficulties as well as in a few cases, on how to

motivate such students. It is worth noting that many of these expectations focused on students' needs and it was only in one case that stress management, which deals with the teacher's needs, was mentioned.

A little less than three quarters of the teachers (72.7%) stated that the course more or less achieved their expectations (Table 2). This shows that overall the majority of the teachers felt that the training course was useful to them. Only two teachers felt that the course was disappointing. From the interviews with the teachers, it was evident that in the case of the new teachers just out from their teacher training course, found that the course was too theoretical and that it offered nothing additional to their pre-service training.

Responses provided by respondents rating negative on expectation (Table 3).

**Table 1**  
**Teachers' stated expectations from course**

| Course expectations      | No         |
|--------------------------|------------|
| Absenteeism              | 8          |
| Challenging behaviour    | 8          |
| Coping Strategies        | 7          |
| Motivation               | 2          |
| Stress management        | 1          |
| Professional development | 1          |
| <b>TOTAL</b>             | <b>27*</b> |

*\* values add up to more than 22 as some teachers listed more than one expectation*

Most of the teachers were satisfied with the training course.

**Table 2**  
**Degree to how much teachers felt that their expectations of the course were met**

| Rating        | No.       | %          |
|---------------|-----------|------------|
| A lot         | 2         | 9.1        |
| Quite well    | 6         | 27.3       |
| Enough        | 8         | 36.3       |
| Not that much | 4         | 18.2       |
| Not at all    | 2         | 9.1        |
| <b>TOTAL</b>  | <b>22</b> | <b>100</b> |

Teachers provided a range of reasons on which they rated how much the course met their expectations. Overall, the main feeling was positive in that it provided better insight and understanding of the issues, provided examples of coping strategies, was relevant to their experience, dealt with teacher stress and wanted the training to last longer. The teachers who rated negatively and stated that the course did not meet their expectations pointed out that it was not practical but was mainly based on theoretical knowledge which they felt did not reflect their everyday reality at school. However, as previously indicated, these were few teachers from the whole group of 22 respondents who followed the training course.

Four fifths (81.9%) of the teachers feel that the course has helped them learn how to tackle better the challenges posed by the students they teach. It was only a case of four teachers out of the 22 who felt that the course did not really provide much added value (Table 4). This shows that overall the course seems to have reached the aim of sensitizing and helping teachers in the two schools be better prepared and trained to face the challenges of teaching difficult students.

**Table 3**  
Reasons for which course did/did not reach expectations

| Reasons provided                       | No.       |
|--|-----------|
| Better insight/understanding of issues | 2         |
| Course could have been longer          | 4         |
| Content was relevant                   | 4         |
| There could have been more on stress   | 3         |
| Provided coping strategies             | 1         |
| Good deliver by trainer                | 1         |
| There was lamenting                    | 1         |
| Course was too theoretical             | 3         |
| Course was not practical               | 1         |
| No response                            | 2         |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                           | <b>22</b> |

Over half of the teachers considered the course to be relevant to their needs (Table 5). The responses for this question were less positive than those obtained for the first few questions. In fact one finds that there were ten out of the 22 teachers who considered the content not to be so relevant. A better understanding for this can be obtained from the interviews where some of the teachers were mainly concerned with their own particular problems and are looking for specific strategies which they could use in their particular context. In this sense, theories and arguments become just an academic exercise with little practicality for the reality of the classroom. This was the main lament mentioned by the teachers and could also have been the reason for which the course was not considered that relevant by a number of the teachers.

When one looks at the ratings given to the individual sessions, it can be noted that the responses were mainly positive with few ratings under the 'not so relevant' or 'not relevant' (Table 6). The two topics which the teachers found most relevant were Student Culture/Teacher Stress with over half (54.5%) rating it as very relevant and Stress reducing Techniques where nearly 60% of the teachers rated it as very relevant. However, this

**Table 4**  
Degree to which course has helped teachers learn tackle challenges posed by students

| Rating        | No.       | %          |
|---------------|-----------|------------|
| A lot         | 1         | 4.5        |
| Quite well    | 8         | 36.5       |
| Enough        | 9         | 40.9       |
| Not that much | 3         | 13.6       |
| Not at all    | 1         | 4.5        |
| <b>TOTAL</b>  | <b>22</b> | <b>100</b> |

**Table 5**  
Degree to which the course was relevant to the teachers

| Rating          | No.       | %          |
|-----------------|-----------|------------|
| Very relevant   | 0         | 0          |
| Quite relevant  | 4         | 18.2       |
| Relevant        | 8         | 36.4       |
| Not so relevant | 6         | 27.3       |
| Not relevant    | 4         | 18.2       |
| <b>TOTAL</b>    | <b>22</b> | <b>100</b> |

**Table 6**  
Degree of relevance of the individual training sessions

| Session                          | Very Relevant |      | Quite relevant |      | Relevant |      | Not so relevant |      | Not relevant |     |
|----------------------------------|---------------|------|----------------|------|----------|------|-----------------|------|--------------|-----|
|                                  | No.           | %    | No.            | %    | No.      | %    | No.             | %    | No.          | %   |
| Teacher and student motivation   | 6             | 27.3 | 7              | 31.8 | 7        | 31.8 | 2               | 2    | 0            | 0   |
| Differentiated learning outcomes | 3             | 13.6 | 9              | 40.9 | 8        | 36.4 | 1               | 4.5  | 1            | 4.5 |
| Challenging behaviour            | 6             | 27.3 | 5              | 22.7 | 8        | 36.4 | 3               | 13.6 | 0            | 0   |
| Student culture; teacher stress  | 12            | 54.5 | 1              | 4.5  | 5        | 22.7 | 4               | 18.2 | 0            | 0   |
| Stress reducing techniques       | 13            | 59.1 | 1              | 4.5  | 7        | 31.8 | 1               | 4.5  | 0            | 0   |

latter topic was then considered as not so relevant by the greatest percentage (18.2%). The trend is that overall most of the teachers found the topics quite relevant. When one considers the responses given in the interviews as well as those provided in the questionnaire, the limited satisfaction with the delivery mainly boils down to the teachers' need for practical and workable solutions that they can use when dealing with the students they teach at school.

The feature of the course which the teachers liked best was the opportunity to talk and share their experiences and concerns (Table 7). They stated that this was even more valid in the case where they were teachers from two different schools. Teachers became aware that there were common difficulties in the two schools. They realised that they may not be the source of the problem but that there are other extraneous factors in play and on which they have no control. They also liked the possibility to share their experiences as well as the strategies that other teachers have used to cope with the situation.

**Table 7**  
Best Features of the Course

| Best Aspects of the course               | No.       |
|--|-----------|
| The trainer                              | 1         |
| Practical Examples/case studies provided | 4         |
| Discussions during the sessions          | 12        |
| Group work                               | 3         |
| Motivation                               | 1         |
| Support                                  | 1         |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                             | <b>22</b> |

**Table 8**  
Worst Features of the Course

| Worst aspects of the course   | No.       |
|-------------------------------|-----------|
| Time too short                | 9         |
| Too theory based              | 5         |
| Story telling/lamenting       | 5         |
| Deviations in discussions     | 1         |
| Attitude of some participants | 1         |
| No response                   | 1         |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                  | <b>22</b> |

A number of teachers also appreciated the practical examples provided as they could identify their problems with the situations mentioned and suggestions given were considered useful.

The main lament by the teachers is that the time allocated for the training was too short and that there was need for more time to go in depth in the issues included in the course (Table 8). This reflects the teachers' interest as well as enthusiasm for the training provided. The other things that teachers did not like were the tendency for some to lament resulting in discussions focused on the bad experiences people had at school with no fruitful outcomes. Another comment made was that the course was too theory laden and that it lacked that practical aspect that these teachers expected. This complaint was also highlighted by the teachers interviewed, mainly from those who have recently graduated from University. There is a tendency for young graduates to have difficulty in giving value to theories that explain educational situations, expecting quick recipe solutions when theories provide understanding of complex situations and provide difficult and complex solutions. These comments should be considered within this perspective.

Most of the teachers found the topics relevant. They enjoyed talking and sharing experiences with teachers from another school. They would have liked more practical examples and case studies.

The teachers felt that the premises used for the courses were very comfortable overall. None of the teachers complained about the premises and nearly half of the teachers rated it at the highest level.

Premises used for training were up to standard.

The overall experience of the training course was rated quite positively by the teachers (Table 10). In fact, one finds that nearly three quarters of the teachers (72.7%) rated the experience as either good or very good while another 13.6 % said that it was acceptable. It was only in the case of three teachers that the experience was not rated positively. This means that the course has overall been a good investment in the project and that it has achieved most of the objectives set within the project.

**Table 9**  
**Quality of venue and facilities during course**

| Rating             | No.       | %          |
|--------------------|-----------|------------|
| Very Comfortable   | 10        | 45.5       |
| Comfortable        | 8         | 36.4       |
| Acceptable         | 4         | 18.2       |
| Not so comfortable | 0         | 0          |
| Unacceptable       | 0         | 0          |
| <b>TOTAL</b>       | <b>22</b> | <b>100</b> |

**Table 10**  
**Overall rating of whole experience**

| Rating       | No.       | %          |
|--------------|-----------|------------|
| Very Good    | 4         | 18.2       |
| Good         | 12        | 54.5       |
| Acceptable   | 3         | 13.6       |
| Not so Good  | 2         | 9.1        |
| Poor         | 1         | 4.5        |
| <b>TOTAL</b> | <b>22</b> | <b>100</b> |

**Table 11**  
**Recommendations made for course in future**

| <b>Recommendations</b>  | <b>No.</b> |
|---|------------|
| Course could be longer  | 7          |
| More practical work/ case studies                                 | 7          |
| More handouts   | 2          |
| Input from other players<br>(University, Education Division etc.) | 1          |
| No response   | 5          |
| <b>TOTAL</b>  | <b>22</b>  |



## 7.0 Recommendations

Recommendations are being made based on a review of literature on successful examples of programmes for school drop outs in other countries as well as from issues raised during the interviews carried out with the different key players. A number of these recommendations were put forward by the people involved themselves.

### 1. Schools need to understand their role better:

It is not part of the local education and school culture to have programmes within the school where external organisations and/or professionals involved. Schools thus need to undergo a cultural change where school matters are not seen as the sole responsibility and domain of the school staff, but that other agents and actors, within the community as well as other professional organisations, may be involved. School teaching and administrative staff thus need some time to adjust to this different approach. It is thus understandable that some of the school staff may currently be wary and suspicious of such programmes. In order to avoid unnecessary problems, it is thus recommended that the school administration spend extra time and energy to disseminate as much as possible the nature and aim of initiatives within the school to the staff not directly involved. Information disseminated should include information about the aims and objectives of the programme, the target students, the additional organisations and professionals involved as well as the overall structure within which the programme is implemented. The more teachers know about what is happening in the school, as well as the support that the school administration has for the project, the greater are the possibilities of easy implementation;

**2. Greater involvement of teachers:** Building on the previous recommendation, the more the school staff is involved in the programme, the greater is the probability that it is successful. This can be achieved by inviting teachers to volunteer to participate, either by taking on a role in the project or by sitting on one of the committees. With specific reference to the REACH programme, the schools could have invited teachers (openly or by picking those who would fit the needs best) to work in collaboration with the learning mentors in order to build up a possible curriculum with respect to literacy, ICT skills. In the case of the boys' school, there could have been greater collaboration with the teachers involved in the 'normal' lessons such that there could be greater synergy and impact in the whole programme;

**3. Greater parental participation:** While REACH is one of the few programmes which involves parents, particularly at secondary school where parents rarely have any contact with the school, parents could have still been given more importance. Although the programme really targets the students, many of the problems also stem from the family situation too. As some of the parents themselves expressed, they would have liked to have greater participation in the programme. Parental participation can be in

different forms. Parents of the students involved can be invited to be on the administrative committee. Even though one may think that a number of the parents may not be interested or see value in this, having one or two parents will help give the committee a realistic perspective of the problems parents face as well as to the way that the students involved in the programme usually behave, what interests them and the activities they usually enjoy. Parents can also be included in other aspects: they can be involved in the planning of activities, invited to participate in their children's activities, invited to go to school for regular meetings to monitor the behaviour and progress of their children, as well as be offered training in parental skills focusing on dealing with difficult adolescents. The few parents interviewed expressed an interest in having a greater involvement in the programme. In this way, the family, rather than just the youth may benefit from the programme;

**4. A 'school within school' approach:** In the same way as big schools in the U.S. have been successful in tackling the problem of drop out students through creating a smaller system, the same approach can be taken by the schools involved. The 'smaller scaled' school can include a system where problem students are in classes with smaller teacher/student ratio, curricular programmes that are tailored to their needs, as well as an added attention and personal touch which is usually not possible to achieve within big educational institutions. This means that schools need to develop different level systems to cater for different groups rather than have one single system for the whole student cohort;

**5. The inclusion of a dialogical approach in the implementation of the project:** A project involving different players requires that there exist trust and respect between the organizers as well as with the clients/target group that the project is designed for. Dialogic learning is a means through which collaboration is promoted between different players. It is the result of the interactions produced in an egalitarian dialogue that is oriented to the creation and acquisition of new knowledge, which is the result of consensus. Dialogic interactions depend on the use of communicative abilities in any context—from home to the community, work... etc.—and a more active, reflexive and critical participation in society. In dialogic learning, people are considered as cognitive subjects acting on the basis of a dialectic relation between thought and action. In this sense, dialogic learning implies a series of organizational and participative measures that favour learning, especially in contexts where other conceptions have only brought partial solutions. In recommending a greater participation of the students and their parents in the project, adopting the dialogical approach can be an effective tool for greater success. Features which would need to be introduced involve including parents and students in more aspects of the projects – at committee level and in deciding the learning programme. In these processes, it is very important that dialogue is egalitarian and all opinions provided from the different key players are to be given the same value. Such an approach requires that schools and teaching staff consider as partners, not only the members of community organisations, but also the parents as well as the students involved in the programme;

**6. Better defined learning objectives:** One of the aspects where the project lacked clarity involved defining what the students were to learn once they go back to school. Having students go back to school following persistent and long absence is a great achievement. However, real education achievement is obtained once these youth learn something that is relevant to them and to their life in the community after they leave school. In order to ensure that the students are being provided with such a relevant and adequate education, it would have been much more effective had a number of basic learning outcomes been identified and documented at the planning stage. Such learning outcomes could have been quite basic: relating to aspects such as personal development e.g. 'can address an adult politely', 'can find out how to get instructions when wanting to find a location', 'can respect authority'; literacy and numeracy e.g. 'can compute simple shopping bills', 'can plan and manage money over a period of time', 'can read instructions on a simple home appliance'; ICT skills e.g. 'knows how to switch on and switch off a computer', 'know how to open browser', 'knows how to carry out a simple search'; employment skills e.g. 'knows how to do his/her own c.v.', 'can fill in a simple application form', 'knows how to face a job interview'; responsibility e.g. 'keeps word between one session and another', 'can carry out instructions without difficulty and completely'. These defined learning outcomes may not be all achieved by the students, but it would be much easier to implement the activities/tasks for the programme as well as assess what these students have learnt. In order to develop such learning outcomes, it is thus important for the management committee, together with teachers and the learning

mentors to agree on what learning outcomes the programme should focus. In order to allow students a degree of participation and decision making in the programme, they can be given the opportunity to go through the learning objectives and suggest what they would like to do – but always with some learning objective kept in mind;

**9. Time for sessions should be regular and if possible time-tabled:** The interviews revealed that due to certain factors, and in one school more than in the other, the programme did not have a stable structure/timetable. As already argued, although it is good to have a certain degree of flexibility in the programme, there still needs to be some overall stable framework within which the programme operates. Such framework seems to have been more or less established in the boys' school even though the irregular attendance by the students still caused problems. Programmes in the U.S. have used a system of tokens, often transport passes, as a motivator to get students to go to school. Although transport tokens may not be the appropriate system for Malta, some other token system, for example a day outing for every 3 school sessions attended, may help make these students attend on a more regular basis. The resulting system would be a better established programme;

**10. Training session for teachers could have been better integrated within the project:** In the same way as parents needed to be roped in more and better in the whole process, the same argument can be put forward in the case of those teachers not directly involved. It would probably have been more effective if teachers who were

teaching the particular students at school and who were ready to work with them were to have the training. The other teachers wanting the training also could have had an overview of the programme as well as the rationale behind the whole intervention. In addition, had the training taken place earlier in the year, more teachers would have appreciated the effort being put into keeping difficult students at school. It may also be worth investing in time and initiatives which bring the teachers from the two schools together such that they can share their experiences as well as examples of good practice and success. This can be done through a day seminar on the project and the issue of school dropouts and difficult students;

'A learning mentor is responsible for:

- Organising activities which helps students in their personal development;
- Engages students in activities relevant to employment aspects;
- Introduces examples of situations to promote the use of ICT;
- Is to ensure that any activity organised targets at least one learning objective set in the programme;'

The management team can also go further and specify what the learning mentor should not be engaged e.g. in teaching subjects that are tied to the normal school syllabus even though s/he can do activities which cover parts of it.

#### **11. A better defined role for the learning mentor:**

One of the main problems identified was the role of the learning mentors. Whereas it was a good idea to have a new role other than that of a 'teacher' introduced within the school setting, this new role still needs to be better defined, particularly from that of a normal school 'teacher'. It would have thus helped the school, other teaching staff as well as the learning mentors themselves to have specific terms of reference which determine what their responsibilities were. It is thus being recommended that next time round, if the project is to run again, that it would be important for the management team to agree on the specific terms of references, not for contractual basis, but for clarity and understanding of their role within the programme. Such role definition could include aspects such as:

#### **12. The use of individual learning plan agreed between the learning mentor and the students:**

The different students involved in the programme had different reasons for which they became drop outs as well as different needs. In taking a more personalised approach, it would have greater value if each of the students is considered individually and his/her greatest needs identified. Some may need basic literacy, others more self-esteem, others more self-control. This can be achieved through dialogue with the student and parents where the most important learning outcomes can be identified. It may be also worth exploring going further and asking the youth to agree to achieve some of these outcomes by the stipulated time. This approach can only be successful if the student feels that his/her opinion is valued and that s/he is being given the chance to make decisions about his/her own learning;

**13. The inclusion of a portfolio as a record of the students' achievements:** If the learning outcomes as well as the individual targets for the students are identified, then it is most important to assess and keep record of what has been achieved. One way that is becoming increasingly popular is that of a portfolio. A portfolio is some form of document where an individual keeps record – in terms of certificates, letters of reference, photos, actual outputs produced, in order to show the experiences that s/he has made and what s/he has learnt and is able to do as an outcome of these activities. From the photos provided of the students' work, it is possible to see what the students did, learnt about and achieved. The students thus should be given credit for all that they do. The learning mentors should have a method of recording the activities which is more detailed than the one used for the present project. They

should have better planning in that for each and every activity planned, its learning outcomes need to be identified and indicated in some official document. The students should also have some form of assessment sheet which describes the activity that they did as well as what learning outcome the learning mentor has assessed as achieved. Although all these suggestions may introduce a certain degree of additional administration and paperwork, it allows better planning, tracking of the learning outcomes targeted during the implementation of the programme as well as assessment of what the students have achieved, however little that may be. These aspects are all aspects of accountability and quality assurance which allow the programme to develop and grow each and every time that it is run. It is thus strongly recommended that such documentation be incorporated next time round.

## 8.0 Conclusion

The Evaluation exercise has shown that the project REACH has all the ingredients: School, community, parents and youth indicated as number of factors related to successful programmes for students dropping out of school.

This in fact, has given an overall positive result in that a number of students have actually gone back to school as well as sat for their school leaving exams. None the less, there are aspects of the project which can be improved, namely: better culture of cooperation and collaboration with other entities in schools; greater parental involvement; clearly defined learning outcomes and definition of roles; a structured framework which allows a degree of flexibility; as well as record and assessment of achievements.

Obviously, the project has been a good step in the right direction, and should it be run again, it can work within the same framework as the one just evaluated. What is crucial is to add:

- Clearer project objectives and definition of roles of the professionals involved;
- Work towards having more dialogue with the project recipients, mainly the parents and the youth;

- Have defined desired learning outcomes for students following the programme;
- Have a structure for documentation of activity planning involving mainly the learning outcome targeted per activity;
- An organised framework for the programme which allows a degree of flexibility through which the youth can decide with their learning mentor what activities to be engaged in;
- A greater role for parents – who may receive support, training, within the decision process as well as participate with their children if they want to; and
- Assessment procedures (formative – as the students are engaged in the activity) which provides record of what the youth have achieved as a result of the activities.

All these aspects have been tackled in detail in the section including the recommendations. REACH has certainly been a project which is a step in the right direction to keeping difficult youth at school and avoiding the chance that they drop out of the system.



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# Appendix 1- Research tools

## (semi-structure interviews questions)

### REACH Interview Schedule

#### Programme organisers/coordinators

1. Can you give me some background about the project REACH? How did it originate?
2. What are the main aims of the project?
3. How did you decide on what youth to target?
4. Can you describe the administrative structure/persons involved in the project and your role within the project?
5. Can you describe how the programme was organised in the two different schools? (Time of sessions, type of sessions, where they were held etc.)
6. What do you feel are the main strengths of the project?
7. How did the parents react to the programme initially and then later on?
8. How did the youth react to the programme initially and then later on?
9. What do you think that the youth liked most about the project? In what way was it different from normal schooling?
10. How did the staff/other students in the school react to the programme?
11. How successful do you think that you think that the project is? Why?
12. What concrete measures of success did you achieve?
13. What problems did you encounter in implementing the project? Why do you think that you had such problems?
14. What aspects of the project would you have organised/delivered differently next time if you were to run the programme again?

## Programme learning mentors

33. Can you describe in brief what the project is about?
34. What do you think are the aims of the project?
35. Can you describe what you do within the project?
36. For what reason/s did you decide to take part in such a project?
37. What different types of problems/needs do the youth participating in the programme have?
38. What difficulties were there within the school in implementing the project: initially and then as the programme progressed?
39. What was the youth's reaction at the beginning of the project? Were they reluctant to participate?
40. Did the youth participating in the programme have the chance to determine what type of activities they did? Were they part of the decision process related to the programme activities?
41. Did parents participate in some way in their children's programme? If so, in what role and what way?
42. Did the students' attitude change with time over the weeks? If so, in what way?
43. What do you feel that the strengths of the project are?
44. How did the parents react to the programme initially and then later on?
45. What do you think that the youth liked most about the project? In what way was it different from normal schooling?
46. How successful do you think that you think that the project is? Why?
47. What concrete measures of success did you achieve?
48. What problems did you encounter in implementing the project? Why do you think that you had such problems?
49. What aspects of the project would you organise/deliver differently next time if you were to run the programme again?

## Heads of school

50. Can you describe in brief what the project is about? How is it organised? What does it involve?
51. What do you think are the aims of the project?
52. Do you feel that the school needed such a programme? If so, for what reasons?
53. What different types of problems/needs do the youth participating in the programme within your school have?
54. What difficulties did you encounter in convincing students to participate in the programme?
55. What were the main difficulties that you encountered when introducing and during the programme? Which players – staff/ parents/ students did it involve?
56. Do you find any difficulties with the staff at school when introducing and implementing the programme in the school?
57. What type/s of communication did you keep with ACCESS/families/students during the project life?
58. What was the youth's reaction at the beginning of the project? Were they reluctant to participate?
59. Did the students' attitude change with time over the weeks? If so, in what way?
60. Did the parents' attitude change with time? If so, in what way?
61. Did the other teachers' attitude change with time?
62. What do you feel that the strengths of the project are?
63. What do you think that the youth/parents liked most about the project? In what way was it different from normal schooling?
64. How successful do you think that you think that the project is? Why?
65. What concrete measures of success did you achieve?
66. What do you feel that the parents gained from their children's participation in the programme?
67. What do you think that the school has gained from such an experience?
68. What aspects of the project would you organise/deliver differently next time if you were to run the programme again?

## Students following the project REACH

1. Tista tghidli xi haġa fuq il-programm REACH li qiegħed/qgħeda tipparteċipa fih?
2. Għalfejn aċċetajt li tapparteċipa fih?
3. Taf li dan il-programm huwa mmirat għal dawk l-istudenti li m'humiex daqstant kuntenti li jattendi skola normali. Tista' tghidli x'ma tantx jogħbok fl-iskola normali?
4. Hemm aspetti fil-programm REACH li m'humiex fl-iskola normali? Jekk iva, x'jogħbok fihom?
5. Ikollok tagħmel programmi ta taħriġ oħra li jixbħu dan il-programm ikun jinteressak?
6. Kieku isaqsuk studenti oħra fuq il-programm, kieku int tirrakomondahulhom? Għalfejn?
7. Thoss li kellek ċans tesprimi x'tixtieq tagħmel f'dan il-programm?
8. Thoss li l-programm g]enek timbidel f'xi mogħod? Jekk iva, kif?
9. T]oss li program għinek tapprezza xi ftit l-educazzjoni u l-valur tagħha?
10. Li kieku kellek terġa tgħaddi minnu, x'kont trid differenti?

## Parents of students following the project REACH

10. Tista tgħidli xi ja[a fuq il-programm REACH li ipparteċipa/t fih it-tifel/tifla tiegħek?
11. Għalfejn aċċetajt li it-tifel/tifla tiegħek j/tipparteċipa fih?
12. Taf li dan il-programm huwa mmirat għal dawk l-istudenti li m'humix daqstant kuntenti li jattendi skola normali. Tista' tgħidli għalfejn it-tifel/tifla tiegħek ma kienx/kenitx tmur skola regolari?
13. Hemm aspetti fil-programm REACH li m'humix fl-iskola normali? Jekk iva, x'joġġhok fihom?
14. Ikkollok tinkoraggixxi it-tifel/tifla tiegħek biex issegwi programmi ta taħriġ oħra li jixbhū dan il-programm tkun interessat/a?
15. Kieku isaqsuk ġenituri oħra fuq il-programm, kieku int tirrakomondahom? Għalfejn?
16. Thoss li kellek `ans bja;a ġenitur li tesprimi x'tixtieq tagħmel f'dan il-programm?
17. Tjoss li l-programm għen biex it-tifel/tifla tiegħek j/timbidel b'xi mogħod? Jekk iva, kif?
18. Thoss li program għinek tapprezza xi ftit l-edukazzjoni u l-valur tagħha għat-tifel/tifla tiegħek?
19. Li kieku kellek terġa tibgħat it-tifel/tifla tiegħek, x'kont trid differenti?



## The employee will be assigned duties as from these mentioned below:

- Building informal relationships with young people at risk that are identified and referred to the project by the Head of School
- Working within the school environment and liaising with school staff, family and Family Workers to help students reach the targets set by the Programme.
- Preparation and facilitation of life skills sessions based on the individual and group needs of the students participating in the project
- Planning and implementing informal activities for the students that can be both school based as well as out of school visits with the aim of improving the students' employability or further education opportunities.
- Assisting with the re-integration of the participants in education through assistance in carrying out schoolwork and the organisation of study sessions when required, with the support of school staff.
- Attending regular supervision sessions with the assigned supervisor in order to, discuss progress, provide feedback and deal with any difficulties encountered in the course of the project.
- Keeping up to date records of interventions with participants and the outcomes of the activities implemented.
- Assisting in the formulation of the evaluation report on termination of the project period.

