



# Bridge - A Validated Toolkit for Preventing School Dropouts Empowering Educators Through Comprehensive Strategies

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## Abstract

School dropout remains a critical challenge globally, impacting individual prospects and societal progress. School dropout rates present a persistent issue, with UNESCO estimating 258 million children and youth were out of school in 2018. Dropouts face limited career opportunities and higher societal costs, driven by academic struggles, disengagement, and socio-economic factors. Traditional interventions often address symptoms rather than root causes. This paper introduces a validated toolkit designed to equip educators with strategies to mitigate dropout risks. The toolkit offers a holistic approach, combining evidence-based methodologies to foster belonging, academic support, and proactive problem-solving. Its validation through empirical research ensures practicality and effectiveness. The toolkit integrates peer and cooperative learning, feedback mechanisms, and inclusive classroom practices. Validated through pilot studies in diverse settings, it demonstrates efficacy in enhancing engagement, academic performance, and social cohesion. Components, validation processes, and implementation guidelines are detailed, underscoring its transformative potential.

**Keywords:** dropout, toolkit, support, validation, classroom

## 1. Introduction

The availability of structural or local funding in the European Union for targeted interventions to support learners at risk of early school leaving has, over the years, contributed to reducing dropout rates. Nevertheless, a persistent percentage of at-risk individuals within several European countries continues to impede progress toward the newly established 9% target (Council of the European Union, 2021).

Efforts to combat early school leaving have involved deploying an educational figure (hereafter termed "educator," irrespective of formal qualification) in classrooms (Hughes, J. N., & Cao, Q., 2023). Through individualized support, this role assists learners facing transitory difficulties—such as motivational declines, learning challenges linked to migration backgrounds and limited language proficiency, or educational choices misaligned with aptitudes—or structural barriers, including special educational needs (e.g., attention deficits, hyperactivity, behavioral issues), social service referrals, or familial contexts marked by educational and economic deprivation (Borremans, L. F. N., Koomen, H. M. Y., & Spilt, J. L., 2024).

However, the implementation of these activities has revealed a pervasive challenge: teachers and educators struggle to delineate their roles and mutually comprehend their distinct responsibilities within the classroom (Jennings, P. A., & Greenberg, M. T., 2023). This ambiguity fosters interpersonal conflicts. Teachers perceive educators as "wasting time" when support extends beyond curricular instruction, while educators view curriculum-only interventions as inadequate when learners exhibit personal difficulties. The resulting tensions exacerbate classroom dynamics—manifesting in peer stigmatization (e.g., "that student has an educator"), familial discord, and diminished well-being—ultimately undermining both pedagogical efficacy and educational interventions (Allen, J. P., & Gregory, A., 2022).

Critically, the absence of well-being and mental health concerns contribute to early school leaving as significantly as individual risk factors. Thus, a novel pedagogical approach is imperative: one shifting focus from the at-risk individual to the entire class. Grounded in principles advanced by recent research (Wentzel, K. R., & Muenks, K., 2023), this strategy cultivates collective capacities to foster an inclusive environment that counteracts absenteeism, demotivation, anxiety, social withdrawal, and school phobia. The research of BRIDGE responds to this need by introducing a paradigm shift, transcending the constraints of traditional models that position the at-risk learner as the exclusive subject upon whom interventions act.

## **2. Objectives**

The BRIDGE project aims to shift the focus from individual students at risk of Early School Leaving (ESL) to the entire classroom dynamic. Its primary goal is to enhance relational competencies among all daily participants (students, teachers, educators), fostering an improved classroom climate, well-being, and mental health. This approach targets learning-environment-related factors to reduce ESL (Jönsson et al., 2024).

Specific Objectives:

- a) **Strengthen Relationships & Values:** Cultivate meaningful relationships and shared values among teachers and educators, promoting professional enrichment, life meaning, and well-being.
- b) **Build Resilience & Emotional Skills:** Enhance the capacity of at-risk learners, peers, teachers, and educators to:
  - Develop resilience and emotional self-regulation,

- Foster positive emotions and relationships,
  - Create emotional support networks,
  - Pursue personal and academic interests.
- c) **Develop Cross-Sectoral Recognition:** Promote the professional recognition of educators (including those with youth work roles) and activate sustainable cross-sectoral collaboration within schools (European Commission, p. 12).

**Implementation Strategy:**

- a) **Validated Capacity-Building Guide:** Researchers deliver a structured, year-long guide for teachers and educators (working with at-risk learners). This guide facilitates relational skill development through three phases:
- **Foundation:** Initial group formation and collaborative activities for teachers/educators.
  - **Integration:** Ongoing activities embedding pedagogical approaches, learner/group assessments, and learning objective planning during the school year.
  - **Evaluation:** Final activities to assess collaboration and identify improvements.
- b) **Practical Classroom Toolkit:** Researchers provide a concrete toolkit supporting integrated teacher-educator work in the classroom. This includes:
- Observation forms,
  - Collaboration guidelines,
  - Individual/group assessment tools,
  - Monitoring and evaluation instruments.
- c) **Transferability & Scaling:**
- Tools are designed for use across classes within participating schools and transferable to other institutions.
  - Informational materials are developed for school leaders to facilitate staff adoption of the guide and toolkit.

### **3. Target groups**

The researchers of the BRIDGE project target the following groups:

**In-service teachers:** 200 individuals employed at the lower and upper secondary schools implementing the project. These teachers work within educational institutions situated in contexts characterized by linguistic minorities. They possess disciplinary backgrounds in their subject areas and are typically aged between 40 and 60 years. Of this group, 25 are directly involved in the project's piloting phases.

**Educational staff at partner organisations:** 55 individuals employed by project partner organisations. The majority are in the early stages of their professional careers, with

educational backgrounds not necessarily related to pedagogy. They are engaged in socio-educational animation activities conducted outside regular school hours. This target group also includes professionals such as psychologists, pedagogists, and qualified educators. Within this cohort, 10 are directly involved in project implementation.

Learners: 800 children aged 12 to 16 attending the participating schools. This cohort is navigating a transitional phase associated with an elevated risk of early school leaving. Within this group, 10% (80 students) are identified as being at risk of early school leaving. These at-risk learners receive individualized support from educational staff during in-class activities within the school timetable. Risk factors include migrant background, language difficulties, learning difficulties, attention deficit disorders, experiences of marginalization and ethnic discrimination, socioeconomic deprivation or educational poverty within their family context.

School principals: Heads of the participating institutions. Principals are typically former teachers, aged between 45 and 60 years.

#### **4. Methodologies**

The challenge of collaboration between teachers and social educators, aimed at mutually integrating approaches and methodologies, stems from a failure to recognize the validity and value of integrating distinct professional roles. This lack of recognition impedes the potential for constructive dialogue and the generation of innovative solutions (Roorda, D. L., Koomen, H. M. Y., Spilt, J. L., & Oort, F. J., 2022).

In other words, the difficulties in dialogue between educators and teachers are characterized by persistent discrepancies. These can be categorized as:

- a) Relational gaps: Including inadequate communication skills, insufficient teamwork capabilities, non-validation of the educator's pedagogical approach by teachers, and non-recognition of informal and non-formal learning models by teaching staff.
- b) Instrumental gaps: Encompassing a lack of established processes or procedures to facilitate teacher-educator collaboration, deficiencies in problem-setting and problem-solving capacities, and the absence of shared observation and assessment tools.

The proposed interventions operate on dual levels:

- a) Quantitatively, through the development of a practical guide. This resource compiles actionable strategies for integrating the social educator into the teaching team, positioning them as a valuable asset within a capacity-building framework.
- b) Qualitatively, through the validation of the integration pathway. This validation serves two key purposes: (1) establishing the pathway as a recognized good practice, demonstrably feasible across diverse secondary education contexts; and (2) securing recognition by the direct beneficiaries (teachers and educators) of the pathway's efficacy within their daily classroom practice.

The implementation employs participatory methodologies (e.g., focus groups, action learning) (Pianta, R. C., & Sabol, T. J., 2022). These methods are specifically designed to

foster the necessary engagement of participants. Concurrently, they enable the identification and development of the essential competencies and intervention areas critical for the successful execution of the capacity-building pathway (Oberle, E., & Schonert-Reichl, K. A., 2022).

The design, development, field testing, and monitoring of the tools comprising the toolkit's "toolbox" methodologically represent the core phases essential for achieving the specific objective of the research.

Achieving this necessitates building upon the valorisation of the experiences and expertise accrued by project partners in implementing support activities for learners at risk of early school leaving . In this context, establishing an international working group enables the design of an initial version of tools. These tools, grounded in the analysis of concrete challenges identified within local experiences, are capable of establishing, even during the piloting phase, the fundamental conditions necessary to engage selected class groups in an innovative process aimed at transforming established teaching approaches and methodologies.

This process concretely ensures the construction of diverse, more comprehensive tools, prepared for validation in daily practice. Consequently, the piloting phase is fundamental for achieving the objective of validating the toolkit's instruments, which are essential for implementing a new pedagogical paradigm. This phase enables the involved teachers, educators, and learners to actively collaborate in the shared development of emotional and social competencies. These competencies benefit not only at-risk learners but the entire class group.

The development of these competencies thus represents the cornerstone for enacting a shift in approach to the learning process, and hinges on the utilization of genuinely effective tools.

To ensure this, it is essential to design ongoing assessment and monitoring instruments for the various pilot activities. These instruments, through the systematic involvement of project partners and target groups, provide valuable input to the toolkit's validation process, paving the way for its publication and widespread adoption.

## **5. Results**

The outcomes from the activities conducted by the researchers are a capacity building guide with

- a) Factsheets for developing initial activities;
- b) Formative activities during the school year aimed at integrating teaching approaches and methodologies;
- c) Frameworks for individual learner assessment and whole-class evaluation;
- d) Tools for instructional planning;
- e) Summative activities to evaluate collaboration;
- f) Instruments for continuous improvement.

The monitoring and evaluation of the pilot implementation is conducted by the researchers through the development and deployment of feedback instruments, including questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups.

Other outcomes from the activities implemented by the researchers are:

- a) The components of the toolkit. Specifically, these consist of educational activity sheets, questionnaires, and guides developed in each partner's national language.
- b) Indicators and targets for evaluating the pilot testing of each toolkit component. Monitoring and evaluation of the pilot action is conducted through the development and implementation of feedback instruments, such as questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups.
- c) An optimized digital platform. This platform hosts the toolkit components during the pilot phase and subsequently the validated toolkits, accompanied by video tutorials subtitled in Italian, Slovenian, Greek, Serbian, Spanish, and Romanian.
- d) Complete toolkits containing the instruments in English, Italian, Serbian, Slovenian, and Romanian to ensure the resources are available to classrooms in their native language.
- e) Pilot testing data. The collected data will enable the evaluation of the actions' impact on classroom climate and facilitate improvements in the large-scale adoption and utilization of the toolkit instruments.
- f) A validated toolkit ready for publication on the digital platform and widespread use.

## **6. Impact of the project results**

The relationships established by the researchers partnered with local schools, were instrumental in identifying the initial needs that motivated the project, enabled not only the implementation of pilot actions but, crucially, the potential to extend the utilization of project outcomes - namely the capacity building programme and toolkit - to classrooms beyond the pilot phase and to other institutions with which partners maintained existing collaborations. Consequently, the participants engaged in the pilot testing and development of the outcomes were also their primary end-users. One of the main foci of the researchers was the pilot action (including tool development and impact assessment), which aimed to introduce instruments capable of transforming the pedagogical paradigm underpinning partner collaborations with schools. Once developed, the outcomes constituted finalized products readily deployable beyond the project lifecycle. Furthermore, they provided a foundation for initiating new initiatives. By adapting content to address new target groups, such initiatives could facilitate the introduction of novel pedagogical paradigms for lifelong learning and vocational training. This approach strengthened the competencies of teachers and educators, enhanced their ability to develop relationships that integrated professional contributions within a shared vision, as well as their proficiency in employing new educational methods and tools in the classroom and collaboratively with students. The competencies and tools developed through the piloting, with particular emphasis on user-friendliness, were subsequently utilized by educators and teachers from

partner organizations across all relevant operational contexts. This included interventions implemented by other organizations with similar objectives within educational institutions. The multiplier effect of the outcomes and the overall impact was further reinforced by engaging institutional stakeholders, such as local offices responsible for allocating school funding or officials from European Social Fund programming units.

## **7. Conclusions**

This research underscores the critical importance of systematically evaluating collaboration between teachers and educators. The BRIDGE Project's development of facilitative tools aims to strengthen this partnership. Crucially, the evaluation process—structured as a dual-faceted (individual and collective) self-assessment—is designed to foster a constructive exchange of perspectives and experiences regarding the cooperative dynamic. This approach ensures the process is perceived as developmental rather than critical, acknowledging that effective collaboration and cooperation are intrinsically linked to the quality of the relationship between the involved parties.

The evaluation of teacher-educator collaboration holds significant import for several compelling reasons:

- **Enhancing Student Learning:** Effective collaboration allows for the alignment of efforts, sharing of instructional strategies, and development of cohesive approaches to meet diverse student needs. Evaluation assesses the efficacy of this collaboration, identifies areas for refinement, and ultimately contributes to improved student learning outcomes and experiences.
- **Supporting Professional Development:** Evaluation provides essential feedback, enabling teachers and educators to reflect on collaborative practices and identify areas for professional growth. This fosters a culture of continuous improvement, guiding targeted development activities that enhance collaborative competencies.
- **Optimizing Resource Allocation:** Collaboration necessitates the strategic allocation of resources (e.g., time, expertise, materials). Evaluation determines the effectiveness and impact of these allocations, enabling educational institutions to make informed decisions that ensure resources are utilized efficiently and effectively to support collaborative endeavors.
- **Advancing Instructional Practices:** Collaboration facilitates the exchange of best practices, innovative strategies, and research-based approaches. Evaluation assesses the impact of these collaborative efforts on instructional methods, supporting the refinement and enhancement of teaching practices for improved learning experiences.
- **Cultivating School Culture:** Successful collaboration fosters a sense of community and shared responsibility. Evaluation helps identify factors contributing to a positive collaborative culture (e.g., effective communication, mutual trust, shared goals), enabling institutions to cultivate a supportive environment that benefits all stakeholders.

Overall, the systematic evaluation of teacher-educator collaboration is fundamental to promoting effective partnerships, driving educational improvement, and achieving optimal outcomes for both professionals and students. The BRIDGE Project's tools represent a proactive step in embedding this evaluative practice within the collaborative framework.

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