



Summative Evaluation of the Education transition modelling project 2018 - 2022

Evaluation Report

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ROMANIA

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ARACIP	Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education
ANPCDEFP	The National Agency for Community Programmes in the Fields of Education and Vocational Training
CC	County Council
CAPI	Computer Assisted Personal Interview
CAWI	Computer Assisted Web-interview
CCESR/CJRAE	County Centre for Educational Support and Resources
CCS	Community Consultative Structure
CCD	County Teachers' Training Houses
CPOs	Causal process observations
CSI	County School Inspectorate
CRED	Relevant Curriculum, Open Education for All
DBR	Desk based research
DiD	Difference-in-Differences
ECHR	European Convention on Human Rights
ESL	Early School Leaving
EU	European Union
GoR	Government of Romania
IES	Institute of Educational Sciences
IDP	Institutional Development Plan
KoM	Kick-off Meeting
MATE	Romania's mechanism for early warning in education
MoNE	Ministry of National Education
MPS	Minimum Package of Services
MTR	Mid-Term Review
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PSM	Propensity Score Matching
QIE	Quality Inclusive Education
QMS	Quality Management System
RAQAPE	Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-university Education
SAI	School Attendance Initiative
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SIIR	Integrated Information System of Education in Romania
ToC	Theory of Change
ToR	Terms of References
TP	Technical Proposal
UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

Executive summary

Quality Inclusive Education Transition (QIE Transition) model aimed at supporting vulnerable children, at risk of dropout, to successfully graduate at least the mandatory education. QIE Transition is a continuation of the Quality Inclusive Education package implemented during 2015 and 2019 in the Bacău County with a more focussed objective and an extended set of components and activities. The model provided several forms of help to disadvantaged students to develop their competences and to compensate for learning outcomes gaps so that they are well equipped for the National Evaluation exam at the end of the 8th grade.

The model was implemented over a period of 4 years in 55 schools from Bacău County some that were also participating in QIE. The target group of the education transition model included children aged 13-16.

QIE Transition model focused on: (i) identifying disadvantaged students, at risk of dropout and helping them to compensate for learning outcomes gaps by offering tutoring and remedial education and counselling aiming at enhancing their self-efficacy; (ii) motivating adolescents to continue their education and increase their resilience and non-cognitive skills through school clubs organising extra-curricular activities, mentorship and career guidance and counselling; (iii) supporting parents of adolescents to better help their children continue schooling through parental education; (iv) improving teachers capacity to support pedagogically the children at-risk of dropout, develop a more inclusive ethos in the classroom and devise personalized learning pathways; (v) providing two types of microgrants to schools and high schools to support school participation of adolescents and student scholarships; (vi) providing support for schools' managers and staff to improve their strategic planning and to develop their capacity to access non-reimbursable funding for further school development and sustainability.

The model was developed, implemented, and monitored together with the Ministry of Education, as well as the county and local authorities. The knowledge of NGOs, specialized public institutions (such as the National Centre for Policy and Evaluation in Education, Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-university Education) was harnessed, and partnerships with the media and corporate sector as well. At local level, the partnerships among high schools and lower secondary schools were a critical component.

The summative evaluation of QIE Transition model aimed to „assess if the assumptions underlying and objectives formulated for Education Transition were validated and achieved as well as to ascertain whether Education Transition contributes to promoting the child rights to quality education”. The main assumption of the model is that the transition of school children (from the supported schools) from lower secondary to upper secondary school level is facilitated by several interconnected types of support actions, targeting the schools or high schools (through management and human resources capacity building), children from both secondary schools and high schools and their parents.

The evaluation covers all components of QIE Transition model implemented in the period: September 2018 – June 2022 / December 2022 in the 55 schools where all or some of the activities planned have been implemented.

In line with the purpose and the scope of the evaluation, the evaluation team: (i) assessed the QIE Transition development, dynamics and results; (ii) analysed different components of the model in the period 2018 – 2022 from a results-based management approach; (iii) identified programme implementation main achievements, against intervention's goals, opportunities and constraints and lessons learned; (iv) identified most effective and efficient elements / components for a future scaled-up intervention; (v) identified successful elements that should be integrated in the relevant public

policies; (vi) identified complementarity with other initiatives and sustainability opportunities under the current national framework in education and in line with European guidelines; (vii) evaluated the model's results also from a gender and ethnical perspective and analysed if ethical aspects were overall considered and promoted by QIE transition model. Moreover, the evaluation paid particular attention to the assessment of the influence of Covid-19 pandemic in regards with project's results, as according to the existing literature, it has significantly affected the educational system and process. Key lessons learned in relation to the QIE Transition implementation have been also formulated.

The summative evaluation used a mixed methods design, by combining qualitative and quantitative data collection and data analysis techniques. Triangulation was used in order to validate findings, including the triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data collected. Quantitative analyses of secondary data preceded in most cases qualitative field data collection, to allow explanation of possible different results through data collected during interviews, focus groups etc.

Quantitative data used include data from the school electronic system (SIIIR) provided and analysed by UNICEF in the framework of the evaluated model. The SIIIR data comprises baseline information as well as details regarding the status of students and schools throughout the implementation of the QIE Transition model. It illustrates the annual progression of 7th-grade students from the 2018-2019 school year through their graduation in the 10th grade in the 2021-2022 school year. Moreover, data have been collected through four surveys: with students, parents, teachers, and school managers.

Extensive desk research was carried out, involving the summary, collation, analysis and/or synthesis of existing documents. At national level interviews were carried out with UNICEF, project partners, Ministry of Education. At country level three interviews were conducted: with the County Council, the County School Inspectorate (reorganized as County Directorates for Education) and the County Education Resource Center. Case study was a key methodological instrument applied in the framework of this evaluation, as part of the mixed-method approach. Based on the quantitative data at disposal and the recommendation from UNICEF and partners, six schools have been selected for case studies. In the framework of case studies, the quantitative data from school annual reports have been complemented by qualitative data collected through interviews with schools' principals and teachers and through focus groups with teachers, students, and parents. Additionally, interviews with children in high schools have been conducted. Process Tracing was carried out at the level of the case studies to assess the result chain of the model at school level.

In order to ensure the integrity of evaluation, special attention was paid by evaluators towards respecting the ethical standards of UNICEF. The evaluators acted with integrity and honesty in their relationships with all stakeholders and respected the ethical principles of the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) Code of Conduct for Evaluation in the UN System.

Based on evidence collected and analyses carried out, the evaluation concludes that QIE Transition model was highly relevant, covering in a comprehensive manner the problems and their drivers as identified in the needs analysis. The initial phase of the QIE model, implemented from 2013 to 2018, provided valuable insights into the factors contributing to poor academic performance, low attendance, and dropout rates. This knowledge was integrated into the QIE Transition model, specifically addressing the needs of school management, teachers, students, and parents. The model aims to create optimal conditions for inclusive learning, bridging gaps in learning outcomes. Its distinctive value lies in its holistic approach.

Dealing with the complex issue of keeping children, especially those from socio-economically disadvantaged communities, in school requires a multifaceted perspective, and improvements take time. The model's recognition of the significance of non-cognitive capacities, placing them on par with or even above academic performance, sets the stage for a successful initiative. Moreover, QIE Transition model, through its activities, addresses challenges faced by students during the transition,

offering support for adapting to new academic demands, fostering skill development, and facilitating integration into the school community. The introduction of the mentoring program in the QIE Transition model recognizes the need to support younger students, particularly from rural areas, in adapting to the high school environment. This addition aims to prevent school dropout and enhance the overall transition experience.

The model retained its relevance throughout implementation, as the initially identified needs remained largely consistent. In instances where deemed necessary, specific activities were introduced for various reasons: (i) to better address urgent needs arising from external conditions, such as those resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic; (ii) to cover needs identified during implementation, through ongoing reflection by project management on the model's relevance and potential success; or (iii) to adjust activities by revising approaches, materials, and addressed topics based on specific needs gathered from beneficiaries during the planning phase, as reported by project partners. For example, additional activities were implemented when the remote education process was introduced during pandemic times. Likewise, the component related to counseling and professional guidance was incorporated in the latter half of the project implementation in response to the identified need for training school counselors. There are very few additional activities that are required to fully achieve the model's objectives and among them the most important are related with the need for additional material support (hot meals or increased financial incentives/scholarships). Moreover, more non-formal education activities and extra-curricular activities could be useful to support students' motivation to learn.

Although the theory of change of the model is comprehensive (including all necessary elements and a list of activities and outputs that is in general sufficient for the expected change), the system of indicators falls short in capturing all anticipated effects, especially outcomes. The link between outputs and outcomes is not sufficiently explicit. Furthermore, the labeling of outcome indicators is generally appropriate, but the actual measurement or reported values only cover outputs (i.e., for the outcome 'developed capacity of schools to enhance transition,' the monitored element has been the number of schools engaged in capacity building activities and their capacity was not measured in a systematic way). Also, implementing partners reported the project outcomes in different ways.

The QIE Transition project followed to a large extent the key UNICEF criteria for model projects. The following criteria were largely addressed: (i) the existence of a clear Theory of Change, (ii) the development of a comprehensive and useful baseline study, (iii) the involvement of relevant partners in the design and implementation, (iv) the deployment of highly qualified and appropriate human resources in the implementation of the model, (v) the existence of an exit plan, (vi) the development of a communication plan / strategy (but, less effective in implementation) and (vii) the representation of human and child rights in all existing model plans/strategies. On the other hand, there is room for improvement as regards the following components: (i) a shared understanding of the logic of the intervention, especially of the link between activities and expected final impact, at local community level, (ii) the monitoring system and (iii) the sustainability plan.

The QIE Transition objectives, activities, and results demonstrate high relevance in alignment with the national strategic framework and programs, as evidenced by the collected data, due especially to UNICEF's and partners vision, expertise, substantial role, and experience in Bacău County, specifically, and in the field of education, more generally. Moreover, UNICEF's longstanding collaboration with the Ministry of Education in formulating and executing educational policies supported the model's relevance and implementation

Various national interventions, including programs such as "Masa caldă în școli," "Nouă ne pasă," and "Școala după școală," align with the QIE Transition model, collectively offering a comprehensive strategy to combat early school leaving and dropout rates in Romania. Additionally, the QIE

Transition project is in harmony with international educational frameworks and contributes to the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, the European Education Area, OECD's "Learning Compass 2030," and the European Union Youth Strategy, addressing key issues identified in the 2023 European Semester Country Report and Education and Training Monitor while emphasizing human and child rights, equity, and a holistic approach to education.

The available data does not allow a detailed and exhaustive analysis on the effects generated by the project at the level of vulnerable children, firstly because a clear and complete identification of vulnerable children at the level of lower secondary education included in the project was not systematically conducted. Secondly, for several activities focused on vulnerable children, monitoring data is not available (such as: number, activities from which they benefitted from, educational path). But all collected information from principals and teachers indicated that in general the children most in need for support were involved in various activities, were given tasks and responsibilities, even coordination jobs as to improve their involvement in school life, increase their self-confidence and their motivation to continue their education.

As regards the general effectiveness of the project for children, according to the monitoring data for the activities that reached directly pupils, the targets were achieved or surpassed; moreover, according to the target groups perspectives, all of them generated the expected types of effects - better school results, increased motivation to continue school and pursue a profession, increased self-confidence, increased proactivity, responsibility, and ownership of their decisions. However, this occurred to different extents, depending on the pace and frequency with which activities were carried out in schools. In regards with the activities that were meant to help parents better guide and support their children in their educational path, they are considered to be of utmost importance based on the needs that they address and the effects that they generate. Nonetheless, while in general parenting sessions and partially extracurricular activities managed to bring parents close to school and more interested on their children's educational paths, almost in each in-depth analysed case there was still a (rather large) category of hard-to-reach parents for whom the effectiveness of the project was limited.

The evaluation showed that QIE transition project was effective for children being at risk of dropout, due to its integrated approach, where applied properly. While quantitative data is not available (e.g., in regards with the percentage of vulnerable children that were involved in the project and received the necessary support), the majority of collected and analysed perspectives showed that vulnerable children were the focus of the teachers that coordinated UNICEF activities in schools. Not all cases could be solved by school staff, but many of them were identified and important steps were taken by teachers as to avoid dropout and increase the school performance of vulnerable children, such as: remedial actions, discussions held with their families, involvement in extracurricular activities, discussions among teachers for better addressing together the problems.

The gender sensitive approach was ensured by the project to a large extent. But, not for all implemented activities the achievements were reported taking into consideration gender differences (e.g., remedial activities, participants to role model activities or participants to Career Bus components, where data are partially available). Activities such as: microgrants ensured an approximately equal number of boys and girls beneficiaries. The activities where less balance was registered were: mentoring programme, scholarship programme, HoltIS clubs. In these cases, more girls have benefitted from the project than boys.

The primary external factors facilitating project effectiveness, as identified in the evaluation, included the quality, interest, and motivation of human resources at the school level, collaboration with the local community (particularly the public local authority's willingness to implement complementary measures, such as providing financial benefits to vulnerable families), and effective

coordination between project management and County Directorates for education. Conversely, factors impeding project effectiveness encompassed the socio-economic status of children's families, the educational level of parents or caregivers, prevailing stereotypes in conservative communities, the absence of motivating role models in the children's vicinity, staff turnover in schools (especially among principals), inadequate quality of administrative data in the education system's public monitoring system, and the disruptive impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, exacerbating disparities between disadvantaged and more developed communities, disrupting connections between parents and schools, among children, and contributing to the isolation, anxiety, and other mental health issues among children.

The evaluation showed that resources were used in an economical manner within the model implementation, with small variations from a component to another, based on the specificity of the conducted activities. Resources have been used in the most efficient manner to achieve expected results, especially considering that many activities generated very important effects, in terms of visibility and target group coverage, with rather limited resources. The best example in this regard are microgrants. The project enhanced the financial resilience of the schools through two means: (i) microgrants that funded activities and equipment acquisitions, and (ii) strengthened capabilities of school principals and teachers to secure funding through workshops on project writing and implementation. However, the project has partially addressed the scalability of the model from a budgetary standpoint, and a comprehensive costing analysis for the QIE Transition model has not been undertaken. Applying at national level some components or activities of QIE Transition that were not originally part of the QIE model will necessitate an additional costing analysis.

At school level, many teachers are well-prepared to continue QIE Transition activities, including remedial activities, Holtis clubs, and extracurricular programs. While adequately equipped and motivated teachers are essential, they alone do not guarantee the project's sustainability and they are exposed to the risk of burnout. Additionally, factors such as the school management team's interest, and the availability of financial and time resources are crucial. The capacity to secure non-refundable funding, particularly National Programme for Reducing School Dropout (PNRAS) funding covering most QIE Transition activities, remains vital for project sustainability.

On the other hand, at national and county levels, several components of the project have been integrated into national legislative and programmatic documents, establishing crucial foundations and budgetary allocations for the continuation of activities aligned with QIE Transition. These include the incorporation of monitoring fiche for vulnerable children in PNRAS, parental education integration into the Education Law, utilization of strategic documents from the CRED project, diverse activities of UNICEF partners, and the adoption and dissemination of methodological and teaching materials by responsible public entities at the county level.

The evaluation led to the formulation of the following main findings and conclusions regarding the impact of the model for children and especially vulnerable children, parents, teachers and schools' principals, school communities and the education policy, for which we further present evidence:

- While there is an overall positive trajectory in graduation rates for the 10th grade (compulsory education), sustained efforts are required to address specific challenges, including enrollment disparities and the sustainability of progress. Moreover, existing information indicates that children in the 7th grade are the most vulnerable to dropout risk, but data at project level and recorded in the schools' electronic system (SIIR) show no consistent evidence that the QIE Transition project, implemented amid the COVID-19 pandemic, has significantly altered this trajectory. Deficiencies in recording absenteeism and tracking the educational paths of students at risk of dropout hinder a more in-depth analysis of the model's impact on school attendance and participation.

- The family's situation, including their income, alongside children's intrinsic motivation to learn, emerge as primary factors influencing school attendance and, consequently, dropout rates. Therefore, the policy and procedures regarding scholarships are of utmost importance for the assessed impact. On the other hand, there is a limited belief in the school's and teacher's capacity to motivate children to attend school regularly and engage in learning, despite the various activities implemented within the project.
- Surveys conducted among students, teachers, and parents underscore a widespread acknowledgment among students regarding the overarching importance of education and its specific relevance to their future success. A substantial number of children express a robust desire to pursue further studies at high school or vocational school, a sentiment corroborated by both teachers and parents. Moreover, soft, cross-cutting skills, particularly communication, have been developed by children participating in the activities of QIE Transition.
- While these competences are deemed crucial, it is essential to complement these skills with the cultivation of other key competences to ensure successful completion of upper secondary education. The results of the National Evaluation exam underscore persisting deficiencies in key literacy and mathematical competences.
- QIE Transition have significantly impacted teachers' planning skills and organization of school and extracurricular activities, garnering strong enthusiasm from both teachers and students. Improvements are also observed in areas such as school strategic management, didactic strategies, community partnerships, parental communication, and support services. However, these changes remain modest and have not led to substantial structural alterations in school organizations.
- QIE Transition has positively impacted parental attitudes toward education for parents participating in activities, but continuous efforts are needed for significant impact. Despite children noting changes in their parents' relationship with the school and teachers acknowledging an improvement in their relationship with parents, yet few teachers believe in increased parental involvement in school activities post-project, highlighting the challenge of engaging hard-to-reach parents and emphasizing the importance of further cultivating and expanding efforts to promote a substantial and enduring impact on students' annual graduation rates.

The following list presents the lessons learned, the aspects to which more attention should have been paid during project planning and implementation phases, due to the bottlenecks encountered, especially, in regards with the effectiveness of the project and the extent to which the generated effects could be captured and measured:

- the overall design of the project and its specific objectives were not very clear from the outset to all project stakeholders, especially to the schools that were involved, which led to, in some cases, poor coordination between activities and in general, to overlooking the final goal of the project at school level, facilitating a successful transition for all pupils.
- the evidence collected from schools showed that the identity of QIE Transition model was weaker than the one of the first phase of QIE model. Therefore, developing the identity of the project was found to be very important for motivating and activating local community actors, for replication and scaling up purposes, and further for a better management of the snowball effect, which was produced in the case of QIE Transition project.
- using a comprehensive monitoring system, that is able to capture all the key expected outputs of the project and the related outcomes (results), unitary applied, with the necessary revisions, throughout the implementation period, is deemed valuable for the final goal of UNICEF modeling strategy, namely to gather evidence for the effectiveness of specific

interventions, which should be further used in the process of advocating for the improvement of public policies for children.

- more attention to the coherent implementation of the model at school level, could have been beneficial for the effectiveness of the project, its integrative approach being one of the key success elements of the model.
- Less than needed efforts were put into the advocacy activities conducted by UNICEF for model scaling up, especially compared to QIE model.

The evaluation formulates the following key recommendations:

Recommendation 1: The most important additional benefits that should be covered, in the context of a project replication or by other key actors in the sector: hot meal programs to support remedial activities, better promotion of the educational offer of high schools by their representatives, extracurricular activities with former students who are in high school, practical workshops/laboratory activities, more activities focused on personal development, for all target groups, additional financial incentives for students transiting to high school, merit-based, as well as for extra-curricular activities (i.e., in the form of very small grants, of an average value of even 100€).

Recommendation 2: In the case of project replication or scale up, the improvement of the monitoring system is paramount for better capturing outcomes and thus, better register evidence on the model effectiveness and impact. Such outcomes would be: improved school management increased capacity of teachers to support children in covering learning gaps and better preparing for the National Evaluation, increased capacity of children to communicate, improved self-confidence of children. Moreover, ensuring the coherence throughout the monitoring system (at partners level and period of implementation) it is needed. All implementing partners should measure the effects produced by the activities conducted by them and report against a target. Where relevant or possible, partners should report the registered values by gender, type of addressed school (middle school / gymnasium), and rural / urban dichotomy.

Recommendation 3: In order to create a common understanding regarding the objectives of the project and the responsibilities of schools, more efforts should have been made in the communication and coordination areas. For future similar projects, enhanced communication should also further entail further explanation of the project ToC and present, especially at the level of expected outcomes, that link between activities and related achievements with the expected impact of the project.

Recommendation 4: A similar future project needs to better capture the effects produced for most vulnerable children. The monitoring system should allow the analysis of the proportion of vulnerable children that benefited from each of the project activities addressed to school children. Thus, each indicator should be split by sub-target groups, covering explicitly the number of children identified as being at risk of dropout and participated in projects activities (at output level) and the registered effects (referring to the outcome indicators).

Recommendation 5: More advocacy activities should be conducted for expanding the use of the system for monitoring vulnerable children. The fact that this mechanism was included in PNRAS proves its added value, but it does not ensure its adequate or wide utilization at school level. This instrument should be taken up by the Ministry of Education and its County Directorates, who should ensure its application at national level.

Recommendation 6: In the event of model replication, more attention should be paid to the adequate implementation of projects' activities by school staff, without losing from sight the importance of projects flexibility and alignment to the specific needs of each school.

Recommendation 7: For future similar interventions, improvements in terms of monitoring and risk management processes are needed as to be able to timely identify school units where the project

encounters significant bottlenecks and to take the necessary mitigation measures during implementation.

Recommendation 8: In addition, an engagement strategy should be developed for future similar interventions. Increasing the interest of school management in adopting UNICEF proposed activities, keeping them motivated along with the teaching staff contributes significantly to the success of the model. Moreover, an adequate engagement strategy would identify possible risks and provide directions of action if disruptive events emerge, as in 2020, when approximately 50% of the principals of QIE Transition schools were replaced.

Recommendation 9: Considering the hampering factors, social and child protection measures should be properly carried out in each community, in synergy with efforts undertaken by schools to bring and keep children in class. UNICEF Minimum Package of Services model offers guidance in this direction.

Recommendation 10: Due to the fact that many project activities have been already replicated in other geographical areas or scaled up through their introduction in strategic documents or national programmes (*see conclusion 27*), a scaling up costing analysis at least for the project components that have not been part of QIE (for which scaling up analyses exist) would be much necessary.

Recommendation 11: UNICEF could build up a monitoring system that can fill in the data gaps in the public system, in order to better advocate for improvements of the SIIR and school monitoring process at national level.

Recommendation 12: Future similar projects should place more emphasis on identifying vulnerable children and providing scholarships for them. Further, it should also invest more efforts in trying to scale up this type of support provided to vulnerable children, through advocacy activities.

Recommendation 13: More attention should have been given to identifying children at risk of drop out and providing them the necessary support in compensating for learning gaps, such as remedial activities. A successful transition is directly conditioned by school results, because persistent education gaps may lead to school dropout also after children are enrolled in upper secondary education level (*see also recommendation 4*). Moreover, UNICEF should continue delivering activities developing non-cognitive skills and supporting motivation.

Recommendation 14: More efforts should be directed towards reaching parents or families that are, in general, not in contact with the school. If QIE Transition is replicated, an engagement strategy should be developed as a guidance for parental educators, but also for class masters. Involving school counsellors and school mediators and, where relevant, other important community actors should be part of this strategy.

Recommendation 15: A smoother exit strategy is required as to contribute to the maintenance of project results in schools and motivation of teachers to continue in the same vein as in the last years. A suggested solution is organizing annual meetings, following 3 to 5 years after the project conclusion, with the participation UNICEF experts, implementing partners and representatives of the schools, for sharing recent experiences related to QIE Transition activities and still conducted in schools and the bottlenecks encountered.

Recommendation 16: As the replication of the model or its scale up it is done by component, UNICEF should conduct additional advocacy activities in order to ensure the integrated implementation of the components, covered by different policies / initiatives, in as many schools as possible.

1. Evaluation background

1.1. Object of the evaluation

According to the UNESCO document on the development objectives for the current millennium, the quality of education is the key to combating poverty and social exclusion. Inclusion and equity are the basis of quality of education. The combination of the three concepts - quality, inclusion, equity - represents currently a transversal axis of all international and European educational policy documents, thus also an important target for all education systems. At the same time, inclusive education systems are considered the most certain path to social inclusion.

Aspects related to discrimination and segregation are a constant concern in UN human rights documents and the World Declaration on Education for All¹ (Jomtien, 1990) and the Salamanca Declaration² (1994) are considered the main impulses in the global recognition of the fact that inclusive education is an important prerequisite for ensuring equal educational rights for all individuals and groups, especially those in risk of segregation, regardless of special needs, sex, ethnicity, culture, environment social, etc. The definition of the concept, from 2008 refers to the inclusive education as an “ongoing process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination” (UNESCO-IBE, 2008, p.3)³.

The **transition from disability to diversity** has broadened the scope of the concept of inclusion, bringing a much more complex context and implications for implementation and practices. The inclusion of all children and ensuring the educational progress of each student implies a wide change in the policies, the structure of the education system and the mentality / behaviour, as presented by the strategy of well-known Index for Inclusion⁴ for learning development and participation in schools (Booth, Ainscow).

Quality Inclusive Education Transition model is a continuation of the Quality Inclusive Education package implemented during 2015 and 2019 in the Bacău County. QIE package model was continued with a very specific component aimed to focus on: **helping disadvantaged students to compensate for learning outcomes gaps so that they are well equipped for the national evaluation at the end of grade 8**. The model was implemented over a period of 4 years in 55 schools from Bacău County some that were also participating in QIE. The target group of the education transition model included children aged 13-16. QIE Transition model focuses on:

- **Helping disadvantaged students to compensate for learning outcomes gaps:** based on the students’ average scores during grades 5-8 and their educational choices, schools from the rural and peri urban areas offered free tutoring to children at risk of drop out. School principals, teachers school counsellors and other education professionals (e.g., the school mediator, etc.) created professional teams to device a tracking and early warning system for students at risk and supported them in enrolling in this new programme. The intervention focused on increasing students’ literacy and numeracy skills, so that they are expected to be equipped for the national evaluation at the end of grade 8. Moreover, students have been

¹ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000127583>

² UNESCO. 1994. “ The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education.” In WORLD CONFERENCE ON SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION: ACCESS AND QUALITY, SALAMANCA, JUNE 7-10. Paris: UNESCO

³ http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Policy_Dialogue/48th_ICE/CONFINTED_48-5_Conclusions_english.pdf

⁴ Booth, T., and M.Ainscow. 2011. INDEX FOR INCLUSION. DEVELOPING LEARNING AND PARTICIPATIO IN SCHOOLS. 3rd ed.[city: Bristol]: Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education (CSIE), pentru varianta în limba română vezi <https://www.eenet.org.uk/resources/docs/Index%20Romanian.pdf>

supported by school counsellors in improving their self-efficacy: as a result, students have been expected to acquire an in depth understanding of their potential, increase autonomy and resilience.

This component is based on the results of QIE and the literature. QIE benefits for schoolchildren were acknowledged at the socio-emotional level, interaction and teaming pointing out the dimensions of a quality Curriculum, as defined by Philip Stabback (2016, p.19-20) in the UNESCO document "What Makes equality Curriculum". In this vein, the author refers to inclusion and differentiation (in the sense of differentiated learning), promoting new roles for teacher, from 'I am here to teach' to 'I am here to lead and enable effective learning.' "With this approach come new, personalized teacher-schoolchild relationships in which the teacher recognizes values and teaches to differences between schoolchildren, encourages effective learning in each individual, and promotes discussion, inquiry and curiosity."

- **Motivating adolescents to continue their education and increase their resilience and non-cognitive skills** essential for continuing an educational path: schools team-up with parents, adults and students who have succeeded through education ("role models"). Students from the 7-10 grades have been provided with mentoring opportunities in this context.
- **Supporting parents of adolescents to help their children continue schooling:** schools developed parenting education programmes focusing specifically on parents of adolescents to motivate them to support their children's education. This activity was based on the data showing that 50% of children decide on their educational pathway after consultations with parents. Support groups also brought together parents of students from the lower and upper secondary education level to share solutions related to the educational pathway of children. This component is based on the recognition of the family's role in education; knowing that "parental interest in children's activities at school is correlated with children's higher academic motivation and increased satisfaction with life (OECD, 2017). Putnam argued that if he were to choose 10 % budget for school or 10 % to increase parental involvement, he would choose the involvement of parents. Bogenschneider and Johnson mention that when parents were involved in teens schooling, there were benefits for both boys and girls, *as parents' involvement is positive even when parents do not have studies, even in the situation of vulnerable children.*
- **Improving teachers' on-the-job training:** based on international good practices, UNICEF proposed a training focusing on concrete tools and methodologies helping teachers to support pedagogically the children at-risk of dropout, develop a more inclusive ethos in the classroom and devise personalized learning pathways. The capacity building exercise included a training needs analysis, while considering the changes entailed by the new curriculum, focused on core competencies, social and emotional skills. Specific modules addressed non-cognitive skills, as well as teachers' role and motivation. Common trainings will also be organized, bringing together school principals and teachers from grades 7 ,8, 9 and 10.
- **Providing 2 types of microgrants to schools and high schools to support school participation of adolescents and student scholarships** (to cover transportation costs for vulnerable students from rural communities to have access to high-schools):
 - o Microgrants type 1, to devise projects that carry out extracurricular activities and support transition from lower to upper secondary education (organize high school visits and student driven activities that valorise their potential, developing their

interactions with the educational setting), devise innovative tools for enhancing the participation of students in decisions affecting their educational pathway.

- Microgrants type 2, to devise projects that carry out extracurricular activities, mentoring activities and support participation in upper secondary education, activities that ensure a smooth transition, devise innovative tools for enhancing the participation of students in school life and the decisions affecting their future.

This model was developed, implemented, and monitored together with the **Ministry of Education**, as well as the county and local authorities. The knowledge of NGOs, specialized public institutions (such as the Institute of **Educational Sciences, Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-university Education**) was harnessed, and partnerships with the media and corporate sector as well. At local level, the partnerships among high schools and lower secondary schools were a critical component.

The activities conducted under the project by each implementing partner and the related target groups are presented in the table below.

Table 1. The activities undertaken in the framework of the project, the partner’s involvement and the target groups directly and indirectly involved

RESPONSIBLE PARTNER	ACTIVITY	TARGET GROUPS DIRECTLY INVOLVED	TARGET GROUPS INDIRECTLY INVOLVED
Together Agency	- Revision of IDPs for the introduction of the inclusive education component	School managers	Teachers
	- Technical support for writing projects and attracting funding	Teachers	Children in school Children at risk of drop-out
	- Technical meetings with education experts		
	- Meetings at county level to document and promote the QIE Transition model		
Institute of Education Sciences / Unit for Research in Education	- Pedagogical training for teachers in Roma history, interculturality and sociology of music	Teachers	Children in school Children at risk of drop-out
	- Mentoring	Children	Teachers
	- Scholarships	Children at risk of drop-out	Parents
	- Microgrants		
Institute of Education Sciences / Unit for Research in Education	- Risk factor sheets	Teachers / class masters	Children in schools Children at risk of drop-out
	- Methodological support for school counsellors	School councillors	Teachers Children in school
	- Methodological support for school managers, including the revision of PDIs	School managers Teachers	Teachers Children in schools Children at risk of drop-out
		Teachers	Children in school

	- Pedagogical training in mathematics, the Romanian language, chemistry, and physics		Children at risk of drop-out
HoltIS Association	- Parental education - Adolescents' clubs - Summer schools	Teachers / parental educators Children in schools Teachers Children in schools Teachers	Parents Children in schools Children at risk of drop-out
School of Values	- Counselling and professional guidance - Camps	Teachers Children in schools Teachers Children in schools	Children in schools Children at risk of drop-out

Source: Data processed by the evaluation experts based on partners progress reports and the data collected through scoping interview

The total initial budget of the project is 3,855.000 Euros, with a contribution of UNICEF of 1.050.000 Euros and the contribution of the donor, Botnar Foundation of 2.805.00. Euros.

Definition of “vulnerable groups” according to QIE Transition model

According to UNICEF QIE Transition Model, the main category of vulnerable children that are addressed by the project and thus, for whom the intervention aims at generating a positive change in their educational paths is represented by **children being at risk of dropout**. The project document identified different profiles of vulnerable children at risk of school dropout, such as:

- Roma children,
- children with disabilities,
- children from rural areas,
- children from poor families.

Also, the project documents emphasized that, in relation with the children that must commute to high schools or vocational schools, which area usually in urban area, in some cases there is no public transportation system, or it is too expensive for their families to pay for transportation. Other elements that lead to dropout during lower secondary school level or early upper schools' level is represented by supplementary hidden costs, such as school supplies, food, clothing, tutoring and other, which have an important negative influence on school participation. While the financial resources of the families are very important, also the capacity of children that graduated lower secondary school in rural and disadvantaged areas to cope with the requirements of the upper secondary education becomes key in the successful transition process. This idea is also stressed by the school performance / results registered in rural, poor areas or Roma communities, which is lower than the average, mainly due to the fact that highly qualified human resources (teachers) are difficult to be attracted and maintained.

The project included a specific instrument for assessing the risk level of dropping out for children enrolled in the schools included in the model (taken-up from its predecessor- QIE package), namely the risk factors fiches (one synthetic and 2 detailed ones). The synthetic fiche had to be filled in by

class masters at the beginning of each school year, for all children and covered the following types / categories of risks:

- **individual risk factors**, such as: health status, child with SEN, level of self-esteem, attitude towards school, violent, inadequate behaviour towards colleagues and teachers, motivation level for learning, belonging to disadvantaged or unfit groups or entourages, educational and professional aspirations and trust in their own competences and skills;
- **family related risk factors**, such as: interest of the family towards education, dropout at the level of family members, differences between teaching language and native language, communication with other family members, level of family's implication and support regarding school participation, education level of parents, performing activities in the household, taking care of younger siblings, single-parent families, parents working abroad, precarious economic situation of the family, extreme poverty, frequent change of residence/repeated transfers from one school to another, socio-emotional family environment, accompanying parents outside the town;
- **school related risk factors**, such as: poor school performances, difficulties in graduating school classes, difficult access to school (due to long distances or lack transportation means), lack of school mediator, lack of support teachers for children having learning difficulties, poor opportunities within the school in organizing mitigating actions, poor implication in extracurricular activities, school absenteeism level, difficult transition from one level of education to the next one (from kindergarten to elementary school or from elementary school to secondary school).

For the purpose of this evaluation, it is important to make the distinction between vulnerable / disadvantaged children and disadvantaged schools. While the identification of the vulnerable children in the project has been made based on the assessment based of the risk factors fiche, the initial logic of the project did not clearly define the characteristics of the schools that were to be included in the model. But the project documents show that at the beginning of the project an assessment of the status of the addressed schools was made, based on an index comprising: a) the importance of school population (dimension), b) the score obtained when evaluated by the implementing partners (within QIE package) in terms of responsiveness and level of involvement in project's activities c) the transition rates.

1.2. Context of the intervention

Overview of the education system in Romania in terms of school participation and transition rates (initial problem and inequities at the national level)

The Country Report 2022⁵ respectively the Council Recommendation on the 2022 National Reform Programme of Romania⁶ identified the main systemic problems that determine the low performance in education:

- Early school leaving remains high, particularly in rural areas (23.2%) and among the Roma, with consequences for their labour market and social inclusion.
- Attracting highly qualified teachers to disadvantaged schools and ensuring sufficient support specialists remain challenging.

⁵ Commission Document : Country Report Romania 2022 https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2022-06/2022-european-semester-country-report-romania_en.pdf

⁶ Recommendation for a Council Recommendation on the 2022 National Reform Programme of Romania [https://www.cdep.ro/afaceri_europene/CE/2022/SWD\(2022\)%20624_EN_autre_document_travail_service_part1_v8.pdf](https://www.cdep.ro/afaceri_europene/CE/2022/SWD(2022)%20624_EN_autre_document_travail_service_part1_v8.pdf)

- The low passing rate at the baccalaureate exam, as well as the low participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds contribute to low higher education attainment.
- The pandemic has negatively impacted students from disadvantaged backgrounds and risks worsening educational outcomes and inequalities, including Roma and those from rural areas, were particularly affected.
- Public spending on education is one of the lowest in the EU (3.7% of GDP in 2020, compared to EU states: 5.0%).⁷

During the 2018/2019 school year, almost all (99.2%) of the students who had been enrolled in 8th grade the previous year moved on to either high school or vocational education, which was a significant improvement compared to the previous school year. The transition rate to high school was higher for girls, while the transition rate to vocational education was higher for boys.⁸

In recent school years, the high school enrolment rate registered a slight increase, from 85.6% (2015) to the value of 75.2% in the 2019/2020 school year. The gender distribution in this case reveals a higher participation rate of girls 80.3%, compared to boys 70.4%, the difference reaching approximately 10 percentage points. The value of the gross coverage rate in urban areas is 100%, and in rural areas the downward trend continued, reaching 76.4%. The difference by residence environment is increasing, for the first time exceeding the value of 23 percentage points against the rural environment⁹

According to National Institute of Statistics data, in the period 2015-2020, the value of the high school transition rate decreased from 78% to 73.2%. The re-establishment of vocational education in the 2014/2015 school year and the orientation of part of the 8th grade graduates towards this training route led to this decrease. The transition in high school education, the transition rate to vocational education has increased significantly from one school year to another, starting from 2014/2015. In the 2019/2020 school year, 22.1% of 8th grade students opted for vocational education. **The gender difference was maintained in favour of the male school population** (by more than 12 percentage points), compared to the female school population.

In secondary education for the 2019/2020 school year, the participation rate in secondary school was 84.4%, with 0.7 percentage points lower than the previous school year. The discrepancy between the value of the indicator on the area of residence is as follows: **70.1% rural** and 99.1% urban. Additionally, the share of students who exceed the official age corresponding to secondary school education is still high: 11.1% of 15-year-old children and 3.4% of 16-year-old children are included in secondary school education.¹⁰

In secondary education at the end of the 2019/2020 school year, the school dropout rate was 1.2%, and it decreased by 0.8 percentage points compared to 2015¹¹.

At the end of the 2015/2016 school year, 3.5% of students who were enrolled in school ended up dropping out. By the end of 2020, the dropout rate has decreased to 1.9%. Over the analysed period, there has been a consistently higher rate of boys dropping out of high school compared to girls.

⁷ EUROSTAT General government expenditure by function

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/gov_10a_exp/default/table?lang=en

⁸ Raport privind starea învățământului preuniversitar din România 2018 – 2019

⁹ Raport privind starea învățământului preuniversitar din România 2019 – 2020

¹⁰ Raport privind starea învățământului preuniversitar din România 2019 – 2020

¹¹ https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/fi%C8%99iere/Minister/2021/Transparenta/Stare%20invatamant/Raport_s tare_invatamant_preuniversitar_RO_2020_2021.pdf

The situation in Bacău County in the field of education, based on QIE Transition baseline report

During the 2014-2015 school year, the school district in Bacău County consisted of 189 schools (91 in urban areas and 98 in rural areas); in the education year 2021/2022, the network at the county level consists of 192 schools (101 in urban areas and 91 in rural areas).

The percentage of students transitioning from lower to upper secondary education in Bacău County tends to increase over time, ranging from around 88% to 96%. These values are significantly lower than the national average for this indicator, which ranges from 3-6 percentage points. There is only one exception to this trend, which occurred in the 2017/2018 school year when the transition rate in Bacău County was higher than the national average by 2 percentage points (95.6% compared to 93.7% - national level). The gender differences are relatively insignificant – 1-2 p.p.¹²

The high school transition rate in the 2019/2020 academic year is 62.4%, 7 percentage points less compared to the 2015/2017 academic year. The trend is also present for girls, even to a greater extent - by 9 p.p. (from 78.3% to 69.0%) and in boys, but to a lesser extent - by 4 p.p. (60.5% to 56.1%).¹³

The transition rate for Bacău County is lower than the national average and has been decreasing, which is particularly concerning as a significant portion of the population eligible for gymnasium level education seems not to be enrolled in the education system. This is supported by the declining gross enrolment rates for gymnasium, which range from approximately 80% to 71%. These rates are lower than the national rates by 12-14 percentage points - 91.5% compared to 79.6% in 2015/2016, and 85.1% compared to 71.3% in 2018/2019¹⁴.

The enrolment rate in secondary education in Bacău County was between 73% and 75% from 2014 to 2018. The enrolment rate is still lower than the national average by 11-12 percentage points, indicating a low level for the county. In high school education, the gross rate is between approximately 61% and 63% (62.3% in the last year), approximately 14-15 p.p. below the national average.

At the county level, dropout rates are between 2.5-2.9% in the case of high school (slightly higher for boys - 3.5%, compared to 2.5% for girls, in 2018/2019) and are similar to those registered at national level, both in total and by gender.

The participation rate in upper secondary education is significantly lower in Bacău County compared to the national average, by about 12 percentage points - 74.8% compared to 86.2% in 2018/2019. This is also true for high school, where the participation rate is lower by 13-14 percentage points - 62.3% compared to 75.3% in 2018/2019.

Vocational education in Bacău County has a slightly higher participation rate than the national average, by about 2 percentage points - 16.8% in Bacău County compared to 14.5% nationally in 2018/2019. The dropout rate in high school is slightly higher in Bacău County compared to the national average, at 2.9% compared to 2.5% in the 2017/2018 school year, but it is lower for vocational education - 3.2% in Bacău County compared to 3.9% nationally in the same year.¹⁵

Overview of the institutional and policy framework for education and legislative changes during the implementation of the project

¹² Anuarul Statistic al județului Bacău, editia 2020

¹³ Ibidem

¹⁴ Ibidem

¹⁵ Ibidem

In Romania, the education system is managed by the Ministry of National Education at the national level and at the central level in collaboration with other ministries (e.g., Ministry of Public Finance) and institutions subordinate to the government. School inspectorates (i.e., County Directorates of Pre-university Education since September 2023) are subordinated to the ministry. The Law of National Education (Law No. 1/2011)¹⁶, in its latest form in place since September 2023, establishes the legal foundation for Romanian citizens to exercise their fundamental right to lifelong education.

Law no. 56/2019¹⁷ for the amendment of the National Education Law no. 1/2011 provides for the extension of the duration of mandatory education in Romania, by adding to it the years of kindergarten and the last two years of high school. Therefore, after the application of this amendment, mandatory education includes: preschool education, primary education, secondary education (grades V-VIII) and upper secondary education (high school education).

According to the new standards agreed at EU level, the law aims at promoting an education based on moral principles, creativity, mental and willpower, as well as on essential knowledge and skills that can be immediately applied in the workplace and in society. As part of its reforms in education and training, the Ministry of National Education continues to ensure an education that fits the market's needs and is focused on personal and social development, thus reducing early school leaving and preventing it.

The restructuring of the national curriculum is in accordance with the latest amendments of the National Education Law 1/2011 and provides for the establishment of the weight of compulsory and optional subjects through the framework plans, so that they are respected both the principle of ensuring equal opportunities and equity, as well as the principle of relevance and decentralization. (Art.66 National Education Law 1/2011).

The National Project "Educated Romania" project presented a consistent framework for government education policies going through a robust process of public involvement.¹⁸ The main changes proposed in this national project compared to the existing structure of the education system are related to the flexibility of the educational paths and the transfer between them, which would allow the student to change a path, once chosen. Part of the provisions of the **National Project "Educated Romania"** were included in the **National Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP)**. The measures within the framework are provided for 10 priority areas for the "Educated Romania" Project: (1) Teaching career and professional path, (2) Education system management and governance, (3) Education system financing, (4) Education system infrastructure, (5) Competency-based curriculum and assessment, (6) Quality inclusive education for all children, (7) Literacy functional, (8) Promotion of STEAM education, (9) Digitization, (10) Resilience.¹⁹

Additionally, the EU-funded **Programme Education and Employment 2021 - 2027**, approved by the European Commission on 9th of December 2022, with a total budget of 395,7 million euros will support the education sector through the following priority axes:

- increasing children's participation in early education (200 million euros),
- preventing early school leaving (497 million euros),
- increasing the quality of the education system at all levels (370.6 million euros),
- increasing the quality and preventing school dropouts at the level of professional and technical education, including the dual education system (360.9 million euros).

¹⁶MNESR (2011), "Legea educației naționale"

https://edu.ro/sites/default/files/fi%C8%99iere/Legislatie/2022/LEN_2011_actualizata_2022.pdf

¹⁷Law no. 56/2019 <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/212314>

¹⁸ Rapoartele celor șapte grupuri de lucru tematice <http://www.romaniaeducata.eu/rezultatele-proiectului/>

¹⁹ Raport Romania Educata - 14 iulie 2021 <http://www.romaniaeducata.eu/rezultatele-proiectului/>

The National Program for the Reduction of School Dropout (NPRSD), approved by H.G. no. 1309/2021, represents a systemic intervention undertaken by the Ministry of Education aimed to combating early school dropout. NPRSD is implemented within the National Plan for Recovery and Resilience of Romania (PNRR). The National Program for the Reduction of School Dropout aims to reducing the risk of dropping out of school in educational units participating in the Program in the period 2021-2026, improving the results obtained by students in national assessments and increasing the percentage of students who complete secondary education and increasing the transition rate from secondary education to secondary education.²⁰

The current **National Strategy on Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction 2022-2027**²¹ continues the parallel approach for child and adult poverty reduction, used in the previous 2015-2020 strategy, but emphasizing the transversal promotion of this approach, at the level of all its strategic objectives. Specific goals include social investments to promote cohesion with the following directions of action: stimulating participation in the care and early education of children, especially from disadvantaged groups, and ensuring a safe, tolerant, inclusive educational environment. In particular, the goal of improving access to and success for Roma children remains key, as participation rates for Roma at all levels of education are significantly lower than for non-Roma children. The most important steps to address these pressing challenges are to improve the ability of teaching staff to effectively provide inclusive education to Roma children and to end segregation, discrimination, and negative stereotyping of Roma children in schools.

National Strategy for Protection and Promotion of Children Rights 2022-2027²² is also convergent with the general directions of the Recommendation for the establishment of a European Guarantee for children, adopted in June 2021, whose objective is to prevent and combat social exclusion by guaranteeing the access of children in difficulty to essential services. Many children continued to experience significant challenges that had a negative impact on their development in the years before the global crisis brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis of the situation supporting this strategy and the evaluation of the previous strategy (**National Strategy for Protection and Promotion of Children Rights 2014-2020**) both demonstrate that the quality and availability of children's services are frequently constrained, and some of the advancements anticipated in the previous strategic planning cycle were occasionally modest or delayed. Regarding the fourth general objective - Increasing participation children to quality inclusive education, the strategy provides for measures to improve access to inclusive education for children from vulnerable groups.

The National Youth Strategy 2015-2020 is a government-led initiative aimed at improving the well-being and opportunities of young people in the country. It outlines several goals and objectives related to youth employment, education, health, civic engagement, and other areas, and it provides a framework for coordinating and implementing programs and policies to support these goals. Besides involving young people, government agencies, civil society organizations, and the private sector, the strategy is designed to be inclusive and participatory.²³

Romania's National Roma Integration Strategy 2015-2020 is a government-led initiative aimed at improving the social and economic integration of Roma people in the country. The goal of the

²⁰HOTĂRÂRE privind aprobarea Programului Național pentru Reducerea Abandonului Școlar <https://sgg.gov.ro/1/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/HG-37.pdf>

²¹ National Strategy on Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction 2022-2027 https://mmuncii.ro/j33/images/Documente/MMSS/Anexa_HG_440_2022_MO_Partea_I_359Bis.pdf

²² Strategy for the protection and promotion of children's rights 2022-2027 <https://mfamilie.gov.ro/docs/20220506-PROIECT-HG-Anexa-nr.1.pdf>

²³ The National Youth Strategy 2015-2020 <http://mts.ro/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Strategia-tineret-ianuarie-2015.pdf>

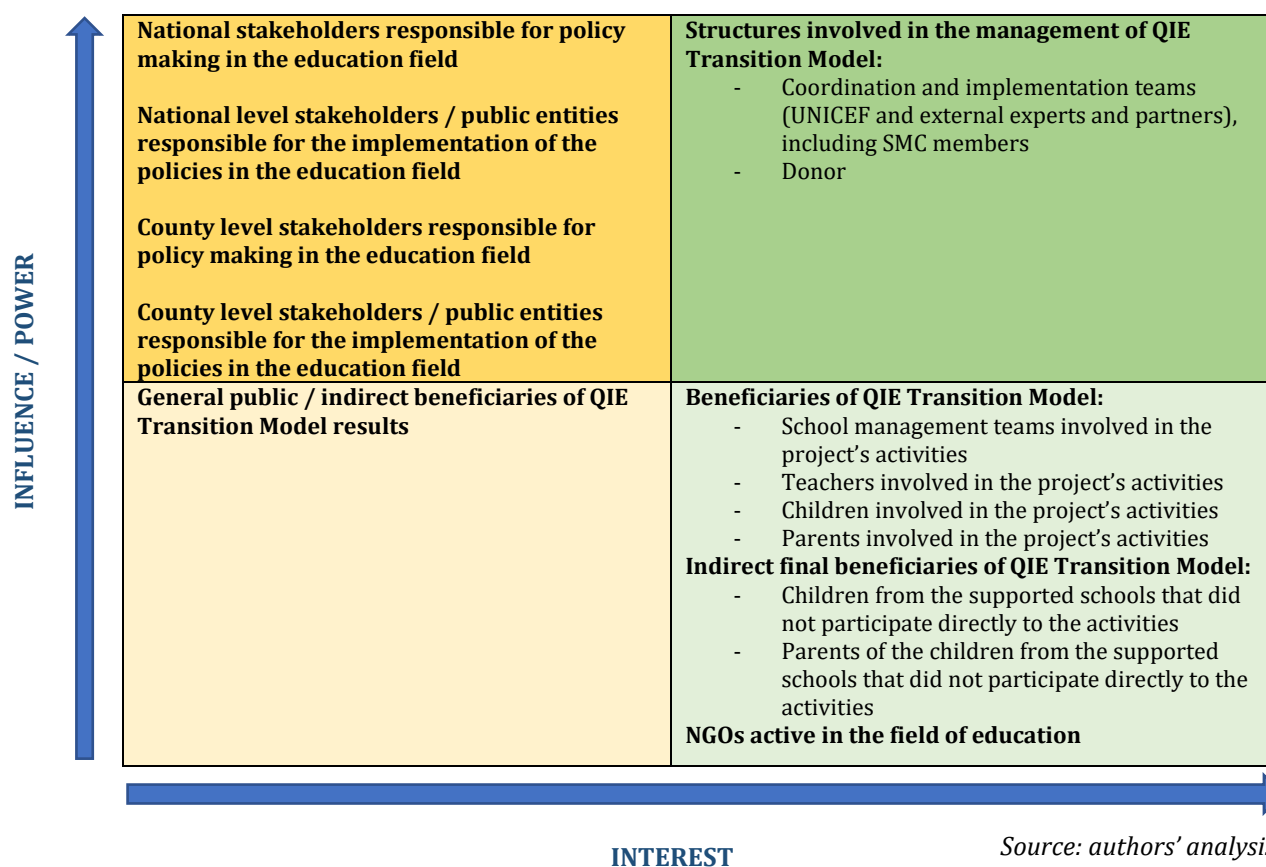
strategy is to reduce the disparities between Roma and non-Roma people and to promote the full and equal participation of Roma in all aspects of social, economic, and political life.²⁴ The objectives of the strategy include ensuring that Roma children go to school, with a special focus on accelerating Roma integration and combating segregation in schools considering the gender dimension and the situation of young Roma. The new **National Roma Integration Strategy 2021-2027** in terms of education, aims to reduce the major discrepancies between Roma children and the majority in terms of school participation, the level of school performance, and school dropout, as well as regarding differential treatment, both in terms of the quality of the didactic act, as well as discrimination and segregation. One of the specific objectives of the strategy provides for ensuring the access of Romanian citizens of Roma ethnicity to quality inclusive education.²⁵

The Theory of change (ToC) of Quality Inclusive Education Initiative (QIE) Transition Model is presented in detail in the section “Relevance” (evaluation question 1).

1.3. Key stakeholders and their contributions

Based on the specific methodology of stakeholder analysis, the evaluation team carried out an assessment to identify the different position and role of actors involved in QIE Transition. They are presented in the figure below.

Figure 1. Stakeholder’s matrix



²⁴ National Roma Integration Strategy 2015-2020 <http://poca.ro/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Strategie-romi-2015-2020.pdf>

²⁵ National Roma Integration Strategy 2021-2027 http://sgglegis.gov.ro/legislativ/docs/2020/11/152nftks6zbd3vpw8_jr.pdf

The results of the stakeholder analysis allowed the evaluation team to ensure the participation of key stakeholders, by involving them in data collection through quantitative and qualitative tools. Thereby the following stakeholders were involved at least once in the evaluation work:

- At community level:
 - professionals in schools: school management teams and teachers
 - children (including at high risk of drop out)
 - parents
- At county level:
 - County Council
 - County Centre for Resources and Educational Assistance (CCREA)
 - County School Inspectorate (CSI)
- At national level (public):
 - Ministry of Education (MoE)
 - Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-university Education
 - UNICEF core team and implementing partners (including experts contracted during the implementation of the project)

2. Evaluation purpose, objectives, and scope

Overall purpose and scope of the evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation was to „*assess if the assumptions underlying and objectives formulated for Education Transition were validated and achieved as well as to ascertain whether Education Transition contributes to promoting the child rights to quality education.*” The assumption of the model is the facilitation of the transition of school children (from the supported schools) from lower secondary to upper secondary school level through several interconnected types of support actions, targeting the schools or high schools (through management and human resources capacity building), children from both secondary schools and high schools and their parents.

The evaluation tested the main assumption of the model by “*assessing how the Education Transition model is addressing the challenges faced by the children and families from 50 schools included in the project*”. The evaluation covers:

- **QIE Transition Model,**
- the period **September 2018 – June 2022 / December 2022,**
- the **inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes** planned by the Theory of Change (ToC) in this timeframe,
- all **55 schools** included in the project.

In line with the purpose and the scope of the evaluation, the expert team focussed the evaluation on the following aspects:

- assessed the QIE Transition **development, dynamics, and results,**
- analysed different components of the model in the period 2018 – 2022 from a **results-based management approach;**
- Identified programme implementation main achievements, against intervention’s **goals, opportunities and constraints and lessons learned;**
- Identified most effective and efficient elements / components for a future **scaled-up intervention;**

- Identified successful elements that should be integrated in the **relevant public policies**;
- Identified **complementarity with other initiatives** and **sustainability opportunities** under the current national framework in education and in line with European guidelines;
- Evaluated Education Transition results also from a **gender and ethnical perspective**;
- Analysed if **ethical aspects** were overall considered and promoted by QIE transition model.

Use of the evaluation

Considering the purpose, objectives and scope of the evaluation, the evidence generated by the evaluation has the following envisaged usage:

- promoting the scale-up of the QIE Transition Model at national level, but also of the QIE package,
- advocating for authorities and stakeholders at local and national levels to incorporate an adequate focus child and family centred and integrated service delivery strategies,
- advocating for and provide technical assistance to the Ministry of Education in developing legislation and policy necessary adjustments related to prevention of dropout, absenteeism and early school leaving,
- mobilizing resources from the national and local budgets, as well as for leveraging funds from the new EU Structural Funds 2021-2027 of the Resilience and Recovery Plan to ensure the sustainability at local level and replicability of the model developed at national level.

As mentioned above, according to the stakeholder analysis carried out, the evaluation and its outputs have 4 main categories of intended users and other 3 categories of interested parties, that have less power as to use the evidence generated in the evaluation process, as it follows:

- (1) **UNICEF** which can use the evaluation to promote and/or reshape other models using a similar approach;
- (2) **2.1. Implementing partners for QIE Transition Model:**
 - a. Împreună Agency
 - b. HoltIS Association
 - c. The Institute of Educational Sciences (ISE) – current Unit for Education Research within the National Centre for Policies and Evaluation in Education (UCE)
 - d. The School of Values
- 2.2. **Experts contracted throughout the implementation of the project**
 - a. Local coordinators
 - b. IT consultancy team of experts
 - c. *Experts from ISE contracted after the reorganization of the entity*
- (3) **National decision makers** (Ministries and national authorities) which can use the evaluation to assess the need, possibilities and solutions to scale up the model;
- (4) **County and local authorities** which can replicate and/or continue the activities of the model at county and local level (County School Inspectorate (CSI), County Centre for Educational Support and Resources (CCREA / CJRAE));
- (5) Schools and high schools included in the project which can understand what the model did for their school and how they need to act further;
- (6) NGOs that can either support local authorities or replicate the model themselves;
- (7) Direct final beneficiaries of the project: school principals, teachers, children, and parents receiving supports through the project activities;

Indirect final beneficiaries of the project are: school principals, teachers, children, and parents benefiting from the changes generated by the project in schools and communities and/or at policy level.

Objectives of the evaluation

In line with the purpose, scope, and envisaged usage, the evaluation at hand has independently:

- Assessed the a) relevance, b) coherence, c) effectiveness, d) efficiency, e) sustainability and f) impact of the QIE Transition Model;
- Identified and document the key elements (external and internal) that contributed to the QIE Transition model success and replicability, as well as main bottlenecks and barriers in implementation;
- Paid particular attention to the assessment of the influence of Covid-19 pandemic in regards with project's results, as according to the existing literature, it has significantly affected the educational system and process;
- Documented key lessons learned in relation to the QIE Transition implementation and proposed recommendations for the improvement of the model;
- Formulated recommendations for further actions related to sustainability, scalability of the QIE Transition Model as a stand-alone intervention or as a component of QIE package, throughout the country;
- Formulated recommendations for further actions related to sustainability, scalability of the QIE Transition Model as whole or by its components, based on their level of effectiveness and interconnection with the other components;
- Identified the way in which the QIE Transition Model is relevant and produced results in addressing issues related to gender equality, equity, and overall advancement of child rights.

3. Evaluation methodology

The evaluation employed a Mixed methods (MM) approach in developing the evaluation at hand. Mixed methods (MM) evaluations seek to integrate social science disciplines with predominantly quantitative (QUANT) and predominantly qualitative (QUAL) approaches to theory, data collection, data analysis and interpretation. The purpose is to strengthen the reliability of data, validity of the findings and recommendations, and to broaden and deepen our understanding of the processes through which program outcomes and impacts are achieved, and how these are affected by the context within which the program is implemented.

In line with the ToR, the evaluation specifically addressed several evaluation questions (as per table below), in order to provide accurate insights related to the evaluation objectives, scope and focus. Each evaluation question was operationalised through judgement criteria and indicators in the evaluation matrix presented in Annex 2.

It is important to mention that no changes in comparison with the ToR were applied to the evaluation questions.

Table 2. Evaluation criteria

<i>DAC criteria</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Question under each criterion (as defined in the Terms of Reference)</i>
<i>Relevance</i>	<i>It measures the extent to which the aid activity is suited to the priorities and policies of the target group, recipient and donor</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are the activities and outputs of the project consistent with the overall goal and its objectives? 2. To what extent has the project been developed and implemented in line with the key criteria for model projects? 3. To what extent is the project relevant to national policies and programmes?
<i>Coherence</i>	<i>It measures the extent to which the intervention is aligned with the national and international policy priorities in the inclusive education area and if the project is complementary with other existing interventions in the area, avoiding duplication of effects.</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. To what extent are the interventions aligned with other interventions in sectors that are influencing? 5. To what extent are the interventions consistent with the relevant national and international norms and standards to which that institution/government adheres? 6. To what extent are the interventions complementing, harmonized and coordinated with others, and the extent to which the intervention is adding value while avoiding duplication of effort?
<i>Effectiveness</i>	<i>It measures the extent to which an aid activity attains its objectives</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Did the interventions of the project address the needs identified at the level of the most vulnerable children? 8. Does the project contribute to the capacity development at school level for the teachers? 9. Which parts of the project are most and least effective? What factors explain success?
<i>Efficiency</i>	<i>It measures the outputs -- qualitative and quantitative -- in relation to the inputs. It is an economic term which signifies that the aid uses the least costly resources possible to achieve the desired results.</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Does the project use resources in the most economical/efficient manner to achieve expected results? 11. What is the value added (in terms of financial value) of the project? 12. Are the cost implications for scaling up considered?
<i>Sustainability</i>	<i>It is concerned with measuring whether the benefits of an activity are likely to continue after donor funding has been withdrawn. Projects need to be environmentally as well as financially sustainable</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 13. What are the interventions modelled that are most likely to continue when external support is withdrawn? 14. Is the project replicable? Are any adjustments of the model needed for replication? 15. What recommendations could be made to the GoR to replicate and scale up such a model?
<i>Impact</i>	<i>It measures the positive and negative changes produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended, or unintended.</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 16. What change did the project determine or influence at the level of beneficiaries (children and their families), professionals, communities, public administration – at local, county and/or national level?
<i>Other questions</i>	<i>The evaluation questions included in this section refer mainly to the factors that have influenced the success of the project and unintended effects generated.</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 17. What are the lessons learned at each level of intervention that should be considered for implementation and further replication of the project? 18. Are there any unplanned outcomes worth considering for filling in capacity gaps and/or addressing remaining bottlenecks? 19. Are all processes based on a child/human rights approach? Are any age and gender issues considered in providing the services?

Source: Perspective of the authors

3.1. Overview of methods used for data collection

In order to collect data from all stakeholders and ensure triangulation, different data collection methods were applied at every identified level. The below table presents an overview of the data collection tools applied during the evaluation process.

Table 3. Methods for data collection

Method Level	Document review ²⁶	Survey	Interviews	Focus groups (FG) conducted as to collect data for the Case Studies
National level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Project documents (Grant Agreement, Partners Programme Documents, donor and implementing partners reports, deliverables) - Reports and studies related with the area of inclusive education - Relevant national legislation and regulatory documents - EU level and international policy documents 	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - UNICEF Romania CO - Ministry of Education (MoE) - Project implementing partners / experts or companies involved in the implementation (The Unit of Research in Education (former Institute of Education Sciences); Impreuna Community Development Agency; HoltIS Foundation; the IT consultancy team; local coordinators) 	
County level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Administrative data collected from the Statistical Yearbook of Bacău County, County Statistics Department 	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bacău County Council - County Centre for Resources and Educational Assistance (CCREA); - County School Inspectorate (CSI); 	
School level / school management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Administrative data collected by the schools - Annual reports developed by the schools included in the analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1 CAWI survey with all headteachers in the 50 schools where the transition model was implemented. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 4 school principals from a sample of the schools included in the project (from which 5 in the schools included in the case studies); - 3 teachers. 	
Teachers' level	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1 CAWI survey applied to all teachers in the targeted schools. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 6 focus groups with teachers
Children level	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1 CAWI survey applied to a sample of about 500 children/schoolchildren, conducted in most schools. 	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 12 focus groups with children
Parents level	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1 CAPI survey with a sample of about 300 parents of school children, conducted in all schools. 	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 6 focus groups with parents

²⁶ For a complete list see Annex 11.

3.2. Quantitative approach

A. Data collection methods

Surveys

In the framework of the evaluation, four surveys were conducted as it follows (see Annex 4 for the related questionnaires and results):

1. a computer assisted web interviews (CAWI) survey with all school principals in the 50 schools where the education transition model was implemented. The total number of collected responses was 30 school principals;
2. a CAWI survey applied to all teachers in the targeted schools. The total number of collected responses was 143 teachers;
3. a CAWI survey applied to a sample of about 500 children/schoolchildren, conducted in most schools. The total number of collected responses was 343 children;
4. a CAPI survey with a sample of about 300 parents of schoolchildren, conducted in all schools. The total number of collected responses was 307 parents.

B. Data analysis methods

Time series analysis of secondary data / quantitative data analysis

Descriptive statistics were used for the following tools according to the needs in the developing the study:

- central tendency measurements: mean, median and mode;
- dispersion measurements: standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis.

The descriptive statistics analysis included cross-tabulations and contingency tables in order to capture variation of situation and results among the schools and children benefiting from the education transition project.

3.3. Qualitative approach

A. Data collection methods

Semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews

The team of consultants used semi-structured interviews and focus groups to collect information from various stakeholders and, in order to identify the relevant evidences to validate (or not), the ToC. This qualitative data collection instrument was separately designed for each group of respondents in order to collect data for all targeted groups (see Annex 9).

Interviews conducted include:

- a) 7 interviews with stakeholders at national level:
 - UNICEF team
 - Ministry of Education (MoE):
 - Project implementing partners / experts or companies involved in the implementation:
 - o The Unit of Research in Education (former Institute of Education Sciences)
 - o Împreuna Community Development Agency,
 - o HoltIS Foundation
 - o Local coordinators (group interview)

- b) 3 interviews with Representatives of the following county level institutions:
- The County Council
 - County Centre for Resources and Educational Assistance (CCREA)
 - County School Inspectorate (CSI)
- c) At community level, 19 interviews were conducted:
- 10 principals (6 principals of the middle schools included in the case studies and 4 high school principals)
 - 9 teachers

B. Data analysis methods

This section presents the research methods and techniques that the proposed team of experts employed in analysing the collected qualitative data and information.

Case study

The case study method involves the in-depth study of a phenomenon in a natural setting, drawing on a multitude of perspectives. These multiple perspectives may come from multiple data collection methods (both qualitative and quantitative), or derive from multiple accounts of different actors in the setting. The phenomena may concern individuals, programmes, organisations, projects, groups of people or decision-making processes. Case studies are described as embedded where there is more than a single focus or unit of analysis. Case studies are used for illustration purpose, which means that a case study is a tool that may be used to add realism to an evaluation if it is presented in a narrative form.

During the process of developing the case studies, the evaluation team aimed at collecting diverse perspectives regarding the relevance, coherence, effectiveness, impact, and sustainability of the model, ensuring involvement of all key stakeholders into the process.

As presented below, **process tracing** was applied for each of the selected schools, assessing the evidence for each element of the theory of change of the education transition modelling project.

General result claim of the model (tested under each CS through Process Tracing method):

If **(a)** children (included in the project) at risk of dropping out are properly and timely identified and they compensate for learning outcomes gaps being well equipped for the national evaluation at the end of grade 8, **(b)** children (included in the project) are motivated to continue their education and increase their resilience and non-cognitive skills essential for continuing an educational path, **(c)** parents of children are supported to help their children continue schooling, **(d)** schools improve their human resources, in terms of better pedagogical skills and inclusive education orientation and management capacity through on-the-job training, **(e)** schools and high schools are supported through microgrants in order to increase participation of children to classes and **(f)** children that were enrolled in high schools are supported through scholarships and mentorship, than **(g)** all addressed children complete compulsory education (*at the time when the model was designed and started the compulsory education was up to the 10th grade*).

The evaluation includes 6 case studies, with the unit of analysis being the school. The selection criteria for the Case Study units were the following:

- Location (urban / rural area)
- Size of the school (no. of teachers, no. of students)
- Average results in terms school year average grades, graduation rates and average scores at National Exam
- Drop-out rates

- Active / less active in the projects (*in order to be able to identify what types of actions worked and what types did not, for whom and why did they work or not*)
- Schools that have not been included in the process of identifying the Lessons Learned of model, conducted between the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022²⁷

For more details, please see Annex 12. Selection methodology for case studies.

The following schools were selected for case studies:

- Scoala Gimnaziala Nr. 1 Sanduleni
- Scoala Gimnaziala 'Gheorghe Nechita' Motoseni
- Scoala Gimnaziala Bogdanesti
- Scoala Gimnaziala 'Mihail Andrei' Buhuși
- Scoala Gimnaziala Nr. 1 Targu Ocna
- Scoala Gimnaziala 'Alec Russo' Bacău

Data used in the development of each case study/each school included in the analysis:

- Secondary data - Relevant project documents (studies and analyses, monitoring, and reporting data, included relevant data from the QIE.ro platform, deliverables developed in the context of the project, relevant administrative data collected from the Bacau County School Inspectorate, SIIR administrative data, school reports)
- Primary data through:
 - 1 interview with school principal
 - 1 Focus Groups with the teachers from the selected school
 - 1 focus group with parents
 - 2 Focus Groups with children from different school generations (different age groups), as it follows:
 - 1 Focus Group with children that are enrolled in high schools or vocational schools, thus, children who graduated and started secondary upper education level (covering both, children just starting high school or vocational school and children in final grades)
 - 1 Focus Group with children that did not start high school or vocational school (from different reasons: fail to finish 8th grade, dropped out, did not pass the national exam, did not pass the admission process at high school level, decided not to continue the educational path)

Theory Based Evaluation - Process tracing

Process tracing is a research method for tracing causal mechanisms using detailed, within-case empirical analysis of how a causal process plays out in an actual case.²⁸ Process tracing requires finding diagnostic evidence that provides the basis for descriptive and causal inference.²⁹ Process Tracing is considered particularly useful for the evaluation of interventions based on ToCs (Theory of Change). Beach and Pedersen (2019) argue that mechanisms should be understood as system of

²⁷ For the development of the report, which was finished in March 2022, 5 school units were chosen, from which: a) 3 schools - Bacău / Octavian Voicu General School, Strugari / Strugari Gymnasium School, Valea lui Ion / Valea lui Ion Gymnasium School and b) 2 high schools - Bacău / Henri Coandă High School and Podu Turcului / Podu Turcului High School.

²⁸ Derek Beach, Process-Tracing Methods in Social Science, 27 January, 2017, available at:

<https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-176>

²⁹ David Collier, Understanding Process Tracing, Political Science and Policies 44, No.4, 2011, available at:

<https://polisci.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/people/u3827/Understanding%20Process%20Tracing.pdf>

interlocking parts that transmits causal forces between a cause (or a set of causes) and an outcome. PC should only not be looking for causes and outcomes, or simply providing a descriptive narrative of events which logically follow in a temporal sequence but rather explaining the process, the causal links, and the relationships between events.³⁰

The analytical added value of process tracing is that it enables strong causal inferences to be made about how causal processes work in real-world cases based on studying within-case mechanistic evidence. But process tracing is a single-case method, meaning that only inferences about the operation of the mechanism within the studied case are possible because this is the evidence gathered through tracing the process in the case.³¹

Document review

The desk research involves the summary, collation and/or synthesis of existing research rather than primary research. Desk-based research is very effective and can be conducted during project starting phase as it is quite quick and efficient. Documents are often readily available and can contain large amounts of information, they can be very useful to triangulate data and are useful to provide context to the research/evaluation. As well, in the case of the reports, the respective documents present an important 'snapshot' of a particular moment in time, but also important developments (for a complete list of documents consulted see Annex 11).

The evaluation considered the existing baselines and used relevant available data collected within the modelling project, such as: school reports, QIE monitoring platform, reporting from local coordinators; monitoring reports, including UNICEF monitoring field trips and experience exchanges.

3.4. Methodological limitations to the evaluation

- As presented in the Initial Report, the counterfactual evaluation was proposed as part of the methodology, additionally to other methods included in the report. In this regard, the evaluators could not access data from existing data bases (i.e., SIIR, ARACIP or County School Inspectorate) to ensure a selection of a control group and the analysis as such, despite constant efforts to do so, through official correspondence and phone interventions.
- The evaluators encountered some difficulties in carrying out interviews with a limited number of stakeholders, such as ARACIP, the County Teacher's Training Houses (CCD) and NGOs (other than the implementing partners). The main reasons relate to availability, on one side, but also to understanding the purpose of the evaluation and interview in itself. The volume of data collected was sufficient, though, for robust findings, conclusions, and recommendations to be formulated.
- Difficulty to ensure the availability of school principals and teachers for data collection during field result, caused mainly by the Mai-June 2023 strike in education but also by their workload and, reportedly, several other data collection initiatives unfolding at the same time as this evaluation (for other projects they participated in, and/or for the Ministry of Education). National Evaluation and Baccalaureate, held immediately after school closure, and the summer holiday, followed by the beginning of the new school year, delayed the data

³⁰ Alix Wadeson, Bernardo Monzani and Tom Aston, Process Tracing as a Practical Evaluation Method: Comparative Learning from Six Evaluations, March 2020, available at: https://mande.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Process-Tracing-as-a-Practical-Evaluation-Method_23March-Final-1.pdf

³¹ Derek Beach, Process-Tracing Methods in Social Science, 27 January, 2017, available at: <https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-176>

process collection. The process was completed at slow pace but in time for this evaluation report to be prepared.

- The difficulty in reaching school principals and teachers trickled to the process of collecting data from students through the survey planned to be conducted through schools. While the focus groups at the school premises were organised without major challenges, the response rate to the survey was very low after three reminders by e-mail. Two phone calls rounds were operated by the evaluation team in order to improve the situation. The direct discussions with the school principals revealed the same issues of overload and of understanding of the purpose of the evaluation and survey, but also issues related to digitisation and access to internet, which is scarce in remote areas. As mentioned above, the final volume of qualitative and quantitative data collected was sufficient, though, for robust findings, conclusions, and recommendations to be formulated.

3.5. Ethical considerations

In order to ensure the integrity of evaluation, special attention was paid by evaluators towards respecting the ethical standards of UNICEF, as presented in the “Procedure on Ethical Standards in Data Collection, Evaluation and Research” (April 2015) and the guidelines of UNEG, as stated in the “Norms and Standards for Evaluation” (2017) and “Ethical Guidelines for evaluators” (2020). Particularly aspects that were concerned are the harms and benefits, informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, payment and compensation, conflict of interests.

The evaluators acted with integrity and honesty in their relationships with all stakeholders and respected the ethical principles of the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) Code of Conduct for Evaluation in the UN System:

(1) Intentionality of the evaluation (Utility and necessity)

The rationale for conducting this evaluation has been clarified at the outset. The stakeholders were fully aware that the evaluation was conducted with the clear intention to use its results in informing decisions and actions and with the purpose to make relevant and timely contribution to the development of legal and institutional framework in the area of child access to education in Romania.

(2) Obligations of evaluators

- **Independence of judgement** - the evaluation findings and recommendations are independently formulated
- **Impartiality** - the evaluators operated in an impartial and unbiased manner at all stages of the evaluation. Evaluators collected diverse perspectives on the subject under evaluation and presented impartial and unbiased opinions on the modelling project strengths and weaknesses. The conclusions and recommendations of the evaluation were discussed within the evaluation team ensuring that the individual opinions of the evaluators are balanced and the result of the evolution is not affected by personal bias.
- **Credibility** - all experts part of the team are highly qualified professionals, able to carry out the assigned tasks within the timeframe set up while maintaining a qualitative standard for deliverables.
- **Conflict of interest** was avoided, in order to not undermine the credibility of the evaluation process. None of the proposed evaluators are in conflict of interest as they were not involved in the implementation, design or previous evaluation of the modelling project. A declaration for avoiding the conflict of interest was filled in and signed by all evaluators.

(3) Honesty, integrity and accountability

- **Honesty and Integrity** – all evaluators are professionals that showed honesty and integrity in their behaviour. They presented accurately the findings and data collected, as well as the limitations and uncertainties in data interpretation and where the risk of bias arises;
- **Competence** – all experts part of the team are highly qualified professionals able to carry out the assigned tasks;
- **Accountability** – The evaluators were aware that they are accountable for the completion of the agreed evaluation deliverables within the timeframe and budget agreed, while operating in a cost-effective manner;
- **Obligation to participants** – The evaluators respected and protected the rights and welfare of human subjects and communities, in accordance with the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other human rights conventions. Evaluators respected differences in culture, local customs, religious beliefs and practices, personal interaction, gender roles, disability, age and ethnicity, while using evaluation instruments appropriate to the cultural setting. Evaluators ensured that all participants are treated as autonomous agents, free to choose whether to participate in the evaluation, and ensured that the relatively powerless are represented. Participation of children in the project activities was made based on prior consent of parents. The information on project objective was presented by using an easy understandable language (as more than one third of parents have a low level of education). Evaluators were aware of and complied with legal codes (whether international or national) governing the interviews with children. **The recruitment of stakeholders from the relevant institutions was made following their informed consent to participate in the evaluation exercise. Participation in the evaluation was voluntarily and no reference was made on the names of respondents.**
- **Confidentiality** - Evaluators respected people’s right to provide information in confidence and informed the participants to interviews, focus-groups of the scope and limits of confidentiality, while ensuring that sensitive information cannot be traced to its source.
- **Avoidance of harm** - Evaluators sought to minimise any risks and harms to, and burdens on, the participants in the evaluation, without compromising the integrity of the evaluation findings.
- **Evaluation process transparency** – The evaluators clearly communicated to stakeholders the purpose of the evaluation, the criteria applied and the intended use of findings. Also, the evaluators ensured that all stakeholders have a clear understanding of the questions addressed and any other documents they are coming in contact with. The evaluation report was written in such a way to make the link between evidence, findings, conclusions and recommendations transparent, persuasive and proportionate to the body of evidence collected.
- **Accessibility to those affected by evaluation** – The evaluators provided information regarding the evaluation process in accord to the contractual provisions agreed with UNICEF. The evaluation report will be made public by UNICEF after the finalization of the evaluation process.
- **Omissions and wrongdoing** - Where evaluators found evidence of wrong-doing or unethical conduct, they will inform UNICEF and will report it to the proper oversight authority.

(4) Evaluation product

- **Accuracy, completeness and reliability of report** - Evaluators ensured that the evaluation report and any other presentations are accurate, complete and reliable. Evaluators explicitly justified judgements, findings and conclusions and showed their underlying rationale, so that stakeholders are in a position to assess them.

Elements related to gender, equity and child rights were considered throughout the evaluation process and in the evaluation report, where relevant and disaggregated data is available.

The evaluation was carried out with a human rights approach and observed the provisions of the respective international regulations, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and UNIDO's Policy on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. In engaging children in the evaluation, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UNICEF guidelines for participation of children served as guidance on the ethical implications of children's participation in evaluation.

The evaluation mainstreamed gender and human rights in the data collection, analysis and presentation of evaluation findings, observing the UNICEF's guidelines on "Ethical Research involving Children" (2013).

In order to ensure representation of different groups in evaluation, the selection of the informants took into account to the greatest extent possible³² the gender balance as well as ethnic representation. An Informed Consent Form was used to ensure the adults agreement for data collection among children (see Annex 12).

4. Main findings – RELEVANCE

4.1. EQ 1. Are the activities and outputs of the project consistent with the overall goal and its objectives?

Based on the reconstruction of the theory of change of QIE Transition model based and on the analysis of its internal coherence, the evaluation led to the formulation of the following main findings:

- The theoretical model of the project covers in a comprehensive manner the problems and their drivers as identified in the needs analysis. While not expected effects are explicitly included in the presentation of the project, there are a natural consequence of the planned activities.
- The model is consistent, being developed on solid links between its elements.
- The model remains relevant during its implementation and where needed, several specific activities were added as to better address urgent needs emerged because of external conditions caused by Covid19 outburst, i.e., lockdown and online education process.
- The system of indicators does not capture all expected types of effects (outputs, outcomes and impact). Especially, in terms of project outcomes, the monitoring system, while it included them in the system of indicators, it does not measure them properly.

Level of coherence of the Theory of Change (causal link between goal – objectives – activities – outputs)

In the process of ToC reconstruction, the following documents were used: project presentation, the LoI of the model and the Programme documents. Further, with the data collected from this secondary source, the process went through 4 steps:

Step 1. Identifying the problems addressed by the UNICEF QIE Transition Model (and their drivers)

Step 2. Reconstructing the structure of the intervention based on the project narrative explicitly (and implicitly) presented in the project document

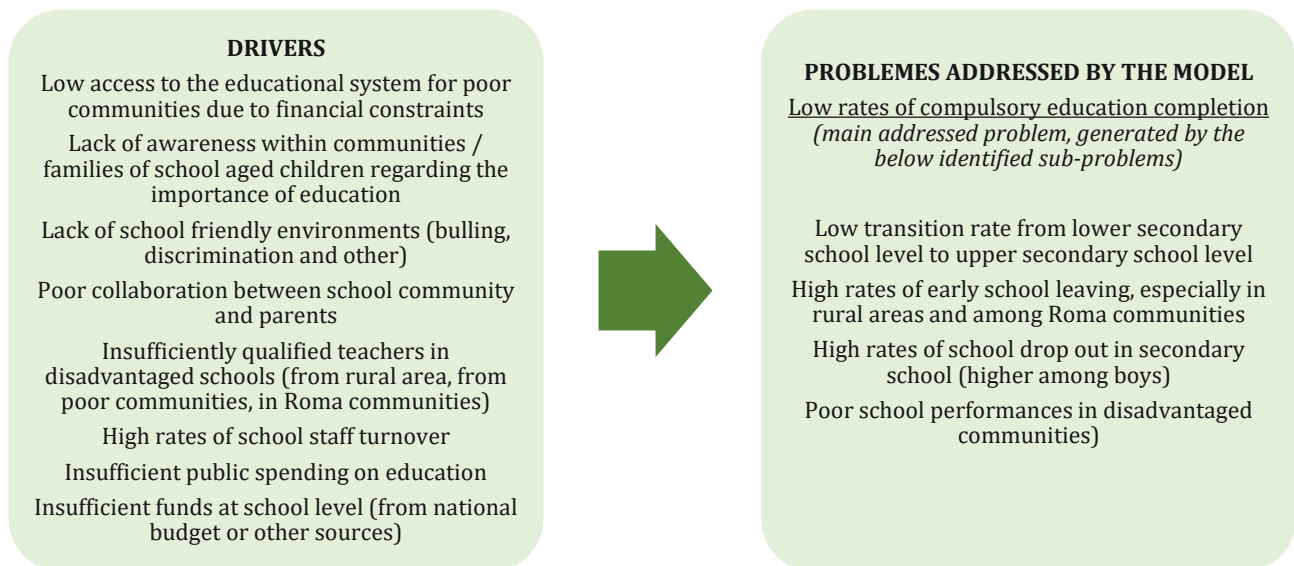
³²Though, the filed situation as it appears, is that the number of women working in care services is much higher.

Step 3. Reconstructing the structure of the intervention based on the milestones and planned outputs of the project as per donor grant agreement and related reports

Step 4. Triangulating the results of the previous 3 steps and integrating the evidence collected through the conducted scoping interviews as to finalize the reconstruction of the ToC

The entire process and the results of each phase are presented in Annex 3 of the report. As the final ToC shows, all problems identified are addressed by the main and specific objectives of the programme. The context analysis highlighted the following main problems and their drivers:

Figure 2. Main problems and their drivers, identified in the context analysis



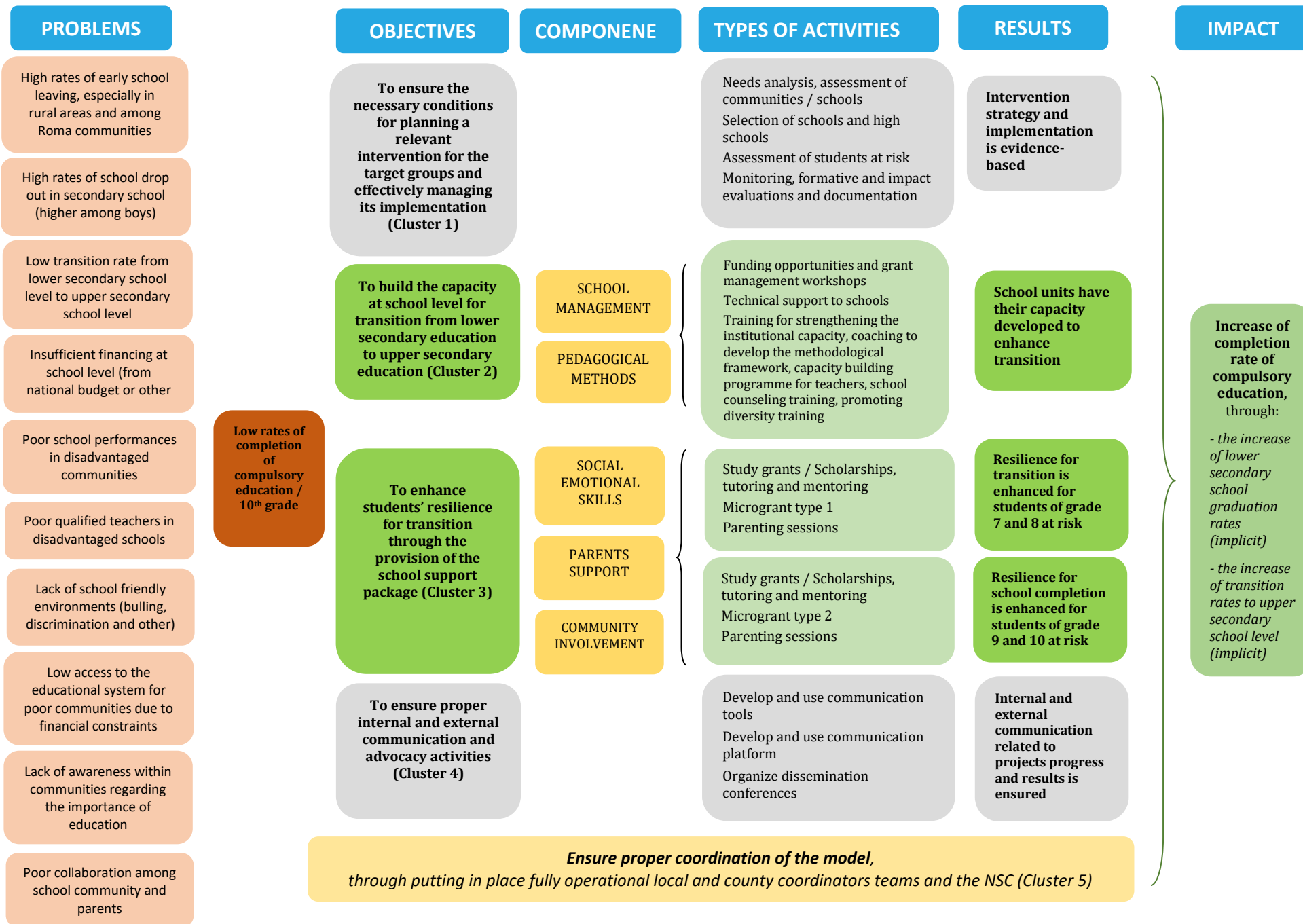
Source: Analysis conducted by the evaluators on project documents and other relevant secondary data

Further, in order to correlated the identified problems with the objectives of the model we list below each specific objective of the proposed model:

- **Helping disadvantaged students to compensate for learning outcomes gaps:** based on the students’ average scores during grades 5-8 and their educational choices, schools from the rural and peri urban areas offered free tutoring to children at risk of drop out.
- **Motivating adolescents to continue their education and increase their resilience and non-cognitive skills** essential for continuing an educational path, through the collaboration between schools, teachers, parents and children.
- **Supporting parents of adolescents to help their children continue schooling:** schools developed parenting education programmes focusing specifically on parents of adolescents to motivate them to support their children’s education.
- **Improving teachers’ on-the-job training:** based on international good practices, UNICEF proposed a training focusing on concrete tools and methodologies helping teachers to support pedagogically the children at-risk of dropout, develop a more inclusive ethos in the classroom and devise personalized learning pathways.
- **Providing 2 types of microgrants to schools and high schools to support school participation of adolescents and student scholarships** (to cover transportation costs for vulnerable students from rural communities to have access to high-schools):

- Microgrants type 1, to devise projects that carry out extracurricular activities and support transition from lower to upper secondary education;
- Microgrants type 2, to devise projects that carry out extracurricular activities, mentoring activities and support participation in upper secondary education.

Since not elements of the ToC were explicitly included in the framework developed by UNICEF, as mention above, the process of reconstruction the theoretical model implied the compilation of different sources of information, e.g., official project description, the ToC developed by UNICEF, the list of interventions and the donor grant agreement. The next figure represents the reconstructed final ToC of QIE Transition model.



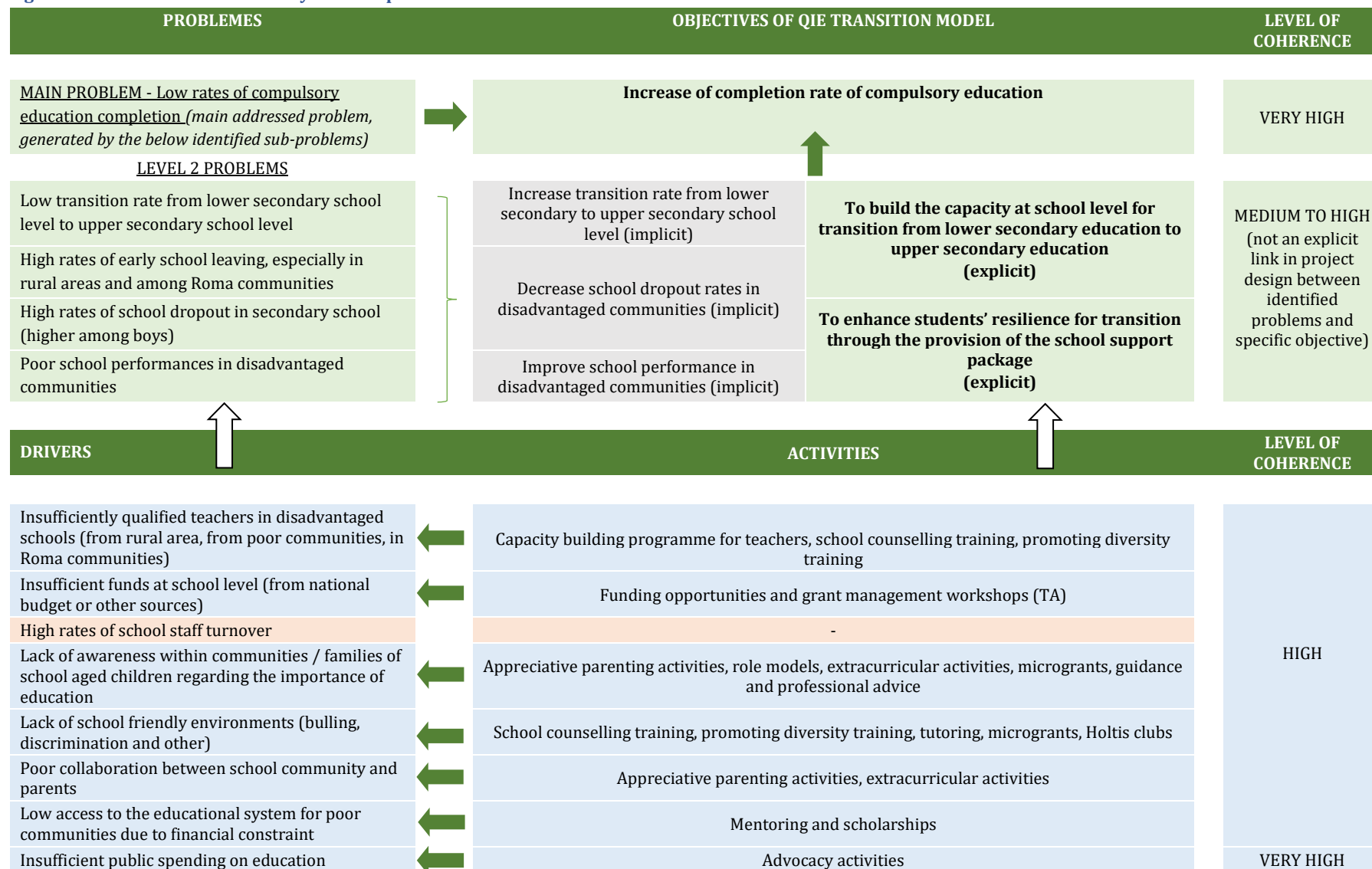
The Theory of Change reconstruction process showed that the design of the project is comprehensive, largely covering the identified problems and their drivers or causes. The experience of QIE model - first phase, which was implemented between 2013 and 2018, led to a broader understanding of the phenomena that lead to poor school performance, low levels of school attendance or drop out. The new acquired knowledge has been transposed in the QIE Transition model, which adequately address the courses / needs of school management, teachers, children and parents as to ensure as much as possible optimal conditions for children to learn in an inclusive environment and compensate for learning outcomes gaps. Moreover, the integrative approach of the model represents by excellence the main value of the model's design. Keeping the children in school especially from socio-economic disadvantaged communities is a complex problem that need to be treated from multiple perspectives and for which slight improvements take time. QIE Transition model included in its intervention, activities addressed to 4 main target groups, principals, teachers, children and parents, and 2 main categories of expected changes: cognitive capacities and non-cognitive capacities. The fact that non-cognitive capacities are place on a similar or even higher level of importance than teachers' and children's performances create the premises of a successful project.

As a limitation of the theoretical model of QIE Transition project, its specific objectives:

- *To build the capacity at school level for transition from lower secondary education to upper secondary education and*
- *To enhance students' resilience for transition through the provision of the school support package*

are not directly linked with the level 2 problems that cause the main problem addressed by the model, *low rate of compulsory education completion*. Thus, while identified problems address the rates of dropout, attendance and school performance of children, the explicit specific objectives of the project only cover improvements in terms of capacity building at school level and resilience of children for transition to lower secondary school level to upper secondary school level. The other indicators related to the performance of education system, even if they are included in the monitoring system, they were collected for the baseline study and included in the situation analysis for developing the model. Below, we present the results of the analysis of the internal coherence of the QIE Transition model, highlighting the few areas where, from the perspective of what the model is explicitly proposing, the strength of the causal links can be improved.

Figure 3. Coherence of the model by ToC components



Source: Analysis of evaluators

On the other hand, even if the design of the project covers of elements of a Theory of Change (needs, activities, outputs, outcomes (results), specific objectives, impact, main objective), in an explicit or implicit manner, one the components of the causal chain, that goes from activities to final expected impact, is rather poorly addressed. While represented in the structure of the model, the expected results are not adequately introduced in the monitoring system, thus they are not systematically measured and reported. An example in this regard is:

- Label of outcome 2 – “Build the capacity at school level for transition from lower secondary education to upper secondary education”;
- Baseline - “55 school units have their capacity developed to enhance transition”;
- Reporting - “55 school units involved in capacity building activities”.

As it can be seen in the above example, while at label level and baseline, the outcome is properly presented, expressing the measurement of a change produced by the activities conducted, when the value registered for the indicator is reported, it covered the total number of attending schools, not the number of schools that improved their capacity. Very few indicators measure indeed the changes produced by outputs, and they are included in the list of outputs reported by the implementing partners, e.g., “% of teachers who have improved knowledge on how to support students to choose their educational pathway and future career” or “Percentage of parents participating in parenting education sessions with improved knowledge on parenting skills.” In a similar manner, all implementing partners should measure the effects produced by the activities conducted by them and report against a target. In general, as included in the narrative reports by the implementing partners, feedback forms / evaluation forms were applied after activities were conducted, but the results are not captured in the monitoring system.

A clearer LOI facilitates a smoother and more adequate monitoring process and traceability of results.

The existing needs of the target groups and the extent to which they were addressed through the project design

The needs of the target groups were well identified from the outset, i.e., when the design of the project was articulated.

Most of the evidence collected through interviews confirm that through the activities carried out under the QIE Transition project, various challenges, and aspects that students faced during the transition were addressed. Additionally, support was provided to help students adapt to new school requirements and responsibilities, promote skill development, and facilitate their integration into the school community. In the table below we present the drivers identified by the evaluation and

their target group, findings that confirm that QIE Transition logic of intervention was adequately formulated, i.e., needs were adequately identified.

DRIVERS	TARGET GROUPS TO WHICH THE DRIVERS REFER TO
Low access to the educational system for poor communities due to financial constraints	Disadvantaged adolescents, economically disadvantaged families
Lack of awareness within communities / families of school aged children regarding the importance of education	Families and communities with limited awareness or understanding of the benefits of education
Lack of school friendly environments (bullying, discrimination and other)	Children aged 13-16 facing bullying or discrimination
Poor collaboration between school community and parents	Teachers, principals, children, and parents
Insufficiently qualified teachers in disadvantaged schools (from rural area, from poor communities, in Roma communities)	Teachers in disadvantaged schools, particularly those in rural areas, and Roma communities.
High rates of school staff turnover	Educational institutions, school staff
Insufficient public spending on education	Educational institutions
Insufficient funds at school level (from national budget or other sources)	Educational institutions, local education authorities responsible for managing school finances.

For children, the need for development of life / practical skills, socio-emotional skills, and access to psychological counselling in rural areas, was emphasized by most stakeholders. While the project addresses these needs, confirming, one more time, its relevance, additional activities related to such skills were considered as necessary. Particularly school principals highlighted the need for an enhanced focus on the individual needs of students.

Regarding the students in the project-involved schools, the evidence collected confirm the needs initially identified by the project. They face various challenges, with the most evident being the socio-economic situation of their families. The lack of material resources for students and their families is considered the main obstacle to participation in education and continuing studies at a higher level³³. The second significant challenge for students relates to their low engagement in the learning process, as well as the gaps in skills, poor results in the National Evaluation, and a lack of appreciation for education.

On the other side, based on the Needs Analysis³⁴ carried out across the 55 schools included in the project throughout its implementation, teachers face a variety of challenges particularly during the organization of distance learning activities, i.e., difficulties related to organizing online activities, using various programs and applications, functionalities of online platforms, as well as access to necessary equipment, devices, and resources. They also (still) face challenges related to motivating and engaging students in class, as well as maintaining their attention. To adequately answer these challenges, teachers needed support for planning, organizing, and conducting online activities and

³³ Based on the data collected through the focus groups conducted under the farmework of the case studies.

³⁴ Apostu Otilia, Horga Irina, Fartușnic Ciprian, Needs analysis of teachers in the 55 schools participating in the project

adapting to different learning needs of students, access to equipment and material resources, tools/support to improve collaboration between teachers and parents, support with their own socio-emotional needs but also skills to answer to student's socio-emotional needs (although the latter seem somewhat undervalued by teachers at both primary and lower secondary levels).

According to the survey among school directors, as regards the factors contributing to low student attendance or school dropout, firstly, a lack of motivation for learning and family problems are considered major factors (53.85% of respondents). Insufficient support from teachers and peers seems to have a lesser impact on low attendance or school dropout (46.15% of respondents). At the same time, the long distance between home and school appears to have a moderate influence, with 38.46% of respondents considering it. Financial issues and lack of family support, although are among the primary reasons for drop out and lack of transition, rank behind the reasons listed before (30.77% of respondents).

In summary, based on initial and evolved needs identified by the evaluation, *the project design was largely adequate* as it extensively took into consideration these needs, i.e., no significant gaps existed in the needs underpinning the project design.

The extent to which activities carried out addressed initially identified needs

The evaluation finds that the planned and implemented activities adequately addressed the needs of the target groups. This finding is based on several evidence collected through surveys, interviews, and case studies (including focus groups).

As such, the results of surveys among principals demonstrate a significant alignment between the activities carried out within the QIE Transition project and the needs of the target groups. The methodological support for school managers (i.e., through new school management methods introduced) and the improvement of Institutional Development Projects (i.e., through practical tools) was appreciated as answering the existing needs by 92.31% of the respondents. The technical support for project writing and fundraising effectively addressed the needs of 85.62% of school principals surveyed. Similarly, 84.62% of principals agree that the project met the technological needs of participating schools (i.e., through IT Support).

Among the activities assessed in the survey among teachers, the highest percentage of this target group considered that "writing projects" (to a large extent: 38.98%) and "IT support" met the needs to a large extent (44.92) or to a very large extent (27.97%). At the same time, the methodological support met expectations to a large extent (35.90%), similar to management activities (meeting needs to a large extent by 37.82% of respondents).

The survey data triangulated with data collected through focus groups with parents suggests that most parents, both those with children in grades 9 and 10 and those with children in grades 7 and 8, consider that parental education sessions provided information and skills needed at the time to improve their relationship with the school and their child/children. (i.e., 25.34% (to a very large extent) and 37.67% (to a large extent) of parents of children enrolled in the 9th and 10th grades found parental education relevant; 26.71% (to a very great extent) and 50.93% (to a great extent) of parents of children enrolled in 7th and 8th grades were of a similar opinion).

Interviews carried out confirm that the project's goal of preventing school dropout and ensuring compulsory education completion is aligned with the main challenge identified in the project Theory of Change, which is "Low rates of compulsory education completion." By focusing on the transition from lower secondary to upper secondary school, the project specifically addresses the challenges evident of this critical stage.

Stakeholders agree that the focus on the needs of adolescents is in line with the identified need to increase awareness of the importance of education within the community and among families. The

introduction of the mentoring program reflects the need to support younger students in adapting to the high school environment, contributing to the prevention of school dropout and the improvement of the transition.

From the teachers' perspective, parental education has corresponded to a very large extent to existing needs in the school as regards better collaboration between parents and children, but also between parents and school. Similar is valid for the pedagogical courses for Romanian language and Mathematics and the professional guidance workshops for teachers. However, courses on interculturality, pedagogical courses for physics, and pedagogical courses for chemistry are perceived to have addressed the needs to a more moderate extent.

In a context in which, for many children, educational opportunities are limited due to family issues and attitudes, i.e., children need to help with household chores, engage in physical labour, and miss classes. Activities such as the CareerBus, mentoring programme, visits to high schools are perceived as highly relevant by children and teachers alike (also by parents, but to a more limited extent), as they have been an encouragement for some children who have discovered their potential and aspire to pursue highly skilled jobs. Children gained a clearer idea about the professions they want to follow and were determined to continue studying for them: pilot, doctor, psychologist, waiter.

National interviews carried out further confirm evidence collected from parents and schools. Stakeholders underline that QIE Transition was designed to address the specific needs of the target groups and respond to the identified challenges within the education system. The project's design was grounded in a well-thought-out theory of change that clearly identified major issues within the education system, including low completion rates of compulsory education, school dropout during the transition from lower to upper secondary school, and the specific challenges faced by disadvantaged communities. This ensured that the planned activities were aligned with the identified needs.

Moreover, by including innovative components aimed at developing socio-emotional skills for both students and parents and teachers, the project took a holistic approach to education. This helped address the complex issues students face during the transition from lower to upper secondary school. Additionally, the project introduced a mentorship program, being an initiative in which older students provide support to younger ones. This approach offers essential support for new students to adapt to the high school environment, particularly in rural areas.

Continued relevance of the intervention

The evaluation finds that the initially planned activities remained relevant for the target groups throughout the project, as needs did not evolve significantly³⁵. Additional activities were organised when a new need was identified, the most important one being the remote education during pandemic times. This finding is supported by the feedback obtained from the stakeholders during the conducted interviews and through surveys confirming that the project's objectives and activities remained in alignment with the needs and expectations of the target groups.

An important part of children (58%) considers that professional counselling and guidance activities and scholarships are the support they need to further and improve their school itinerary. Notably, career guidance, mentorship, and extracurricular activities, as well as activities targeting the development of their socio-emotional skills and the scholarships, received a high level of recognition in the focus groups carried out. On the other side, most parents participating in the survey (78.88% combined from "to a very large extent" and "to a large extent") seem to perceive the activities within

³⁵ For example, almost half of the principals surveyed (50%) consider that the causes of low student attendance or dropout remained the same between the 2022/2023 and 2018/2019 school years, 19.23% of them consider the reasons somewhat similar and 7.69% consider them very similar.

the project as beneficial and relevant in strengthening relationships with their children and supporting their educational path.

According to surveys conducted among teachers, the QIE Transition Project has significantly addressed the needs of the target groups. Specifically, the project has responded to the needs of the involved students to a large very large extent (75%). It has also addressed the needs of the participating parents to a large and very extent (57% and 30% moderate extent). The project has satisfactorily met the needs of school principals to a large and very large extent (69%). Finally, the project has corresponded to the needs of school counsellors to a large and very extent (67%).

The survey results, triangulated with evidence collected from interviews and focus groups, indicate a largely positive perception QIE Transition continued relevance, as the educational and developmental needs of diverse stakeholders remained valid, and still substantial, by the end of the project.

Additional activities need for the achievement of the objectives of the model

Based on interviews, focus groups and surveys carried out, the evaluation identified a (rather limited) series of additional activities needed in order to fully achieve the model's objectives. The most important ones: hot meal programs to support remedial activities, better promotion of the educational offer of high schools by their representatives, extracurricular activities with former students who are in high school, practical workshops/laboratory activities, more activities focused on personal development, for all target groups, additional financial incentives for students transiting to high school, merit-based, as well as for extra-curricular activities (i.e., in the form of very small grants, of an average value of even 100€). Regarding the latter, activities to increase fund-raising capacity at students' level would have been beneficial, too, also from a sustainability perspective (particularly for Holtis Clubs).

The rural areas, particularly where towns or cities are further away, more needs exist (or the same needs are significantly higher) compared to urban areas and in the latter various opportunities are available. The need of parental education is significantly higher (although the resistance to participation may also be high, at least in some cases), and the same is valid for extra-curricular activities, which may imply also a stringer involvement of the city-hall in making available the necessary infrastructure (e.g., small concert/events hall/cultural centre) and minimum funds for activities teachers, children and parents want to organise. Extra-curricular activities could contribute to building life and practical skills that children very much need. Additionally, there is a high, unmet, yet, demand for access to counselling particularly in rural areas.

For example, the need to focus more on activities that promote the socio-emotional development of children, parents and teachers was identified in Sănduleni. The case study highlights the importance of balancing a focus on academic outcomes with initiatives that address the socio-emotional well-being of stakeholders. Such a balance is essential for achieving positive outcomes not only in children's well-being but also in their school performance.

4.2. EQ 2. To what extent has the project been developed and implemented in line with the key criteria for model projects?

The answer to this evaluation question will directly contribute to knowledge creation and management at UNICEF level as regards the design of and implementation of modelling projects.

The analyses to be conducted consider the criteria defined by UNICEF for the QIE transition modelling project, namely:

- 1 - 1.1 The existence of a clear Theory of Change. 1.2. The level of clarity and the existence of a common/ shared understanding of the ToC among partners and stakeholders³⁶
- 2 - 2.1. The existence of a baseline for the evaluation of the model. 2.2. The extent to which the existent baseline is useful for the present evaluation
- 3 - 3.1. The extent to which all relevant partners were involved in the design and implementation of the model.
- 4 - 4.1. The involvement of appropriate human resources in the implementation of the model, according to the objectives set.
- 5 - 5.1. Existence of a resource management plan (general, referring to human, financial, organizational resources) developed by UNICEF and partners, with a view to scaling up the model.
- 6 - 6.1. The existence of a monitoring and evaluation system and a documenting plan/strategy for the model & 6.2. Existence of evaluations and documenting papers
- 7. The existence of a termination and exit plan/strategy
- 8. The existence of a dissemination plan/strategy
- 9. The extent to which human and child rights are represented in all existing model plans/strategies³⁷

The evaluation is based primarily on the project documentation and qualitative data collected through interviews at the national and county level.

The QIE Transition model was developed, implemented, and monitored in close partnership with the **Ministry of Education**, as well as the county and local authorities. The knowledge of NGOs, specialized public institutions (such as the **Institute of Educational Sciences/Unit of Research in Education, Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-university Education**) was harnessed. Involving relevant partners in all project phases proved crucial, ensuring effective collaboration and implementation. Adaptation to community needs, such as transitioning to high school and parent training, reflects a personalized and effective approach. At local level, the partnerships among high schools and lower secondary schools were a critical component.

Human resources organisation followed the previous model, i.e., QIE, with best practices being continued. Overall, evidence collected indicate that human resources involved in the project management and implementation, at all levels, were adequate. The presence of local coordinators brought a major added value, as in the case of QIE. However, the effectiveness of this strategy decreases the more schools one local coordinator manages. High workload also hampers their effective coordination.

Documents consulted indicate that a comprehensive plan was in place for the monitoring of the project activities and results. The plan aimed to use field visits, surveys, and reports to analyse the existing/evolving situation, gather baseline data, and understand school and student vulnerabilities. Additionally, good practices were also collected. The transition from lower to upper secondary education was monitored based on national data made available by the Ministry of Education. An independent formative evaluation (mid-term) was planned and carried out and allowed for adjustments through corrective actions, namely the study *Good Practices and Lessons Learned. Qie Transition*.

The interviews carried out confirm that the project's monitoring and evaluation process was received as complex. A need for a balanced approach between quantitative and qualitative analysis was identified. On the qualitative side, feedback forms and involvement of local teams enhance understanding the model functioning and results, including factors that contribute in this regard.

³⁶ Addressed under the previous evaluation question.

³⁷ Addressed fully under EQ 6.

Despite data collected on key transition related indicators with the support of the Ministry of Education, the monitoring system is not fully clear (i.e., outcome indicators are not properly reported and do not cover in a comprehensive manner the project expected effects). While important amounts particularly of qualitative information was collected, it was not always clear what is its use.

On the other side, although the partners recognize the importance of monitoring and evaluation, and contributed greatly in this regard, there is significant room for improvement as regards ex-post monitoring (and/or ensuring that data continues to be collected for ex-post assessment of impact and sustainability to be facilitates).

On a positive note, a baseline was created when the model was designed, with a strong emphasis on quantitative data. While the existence of the baseline has had added value for subsequent measurement and analyses, qualitative analyses before the intervention would have been beneficial, too. Nevertheless, a comprehensive need analysis was carried out and finalized in 2021 by the expert from the former Institute of the Educational Science. But conducted even earlier, a qualitative baseline study could have provided valuable data for reflecting on the effectiveness of the model.

According to the data collected, the project dissemination strategy could and should have receive more attention overall. Initially, when the project was designed, a dissemination plan was put in place. However, during project implementation, it seemed that this plan was not systematically implemented, with negative consequences as regards a unitary perception of the project, i.e., in several interviews and focus groups at local level teachers and children seemed confused about the components of the project, considering that some of them are independent initiatives of the partners involved. UNICEF, as a brand, remains very well known, but in a more abstract rather than concrete manner, i.e., activities carried out and benefits obtained. While internal communication among project partners functioned well and facilitated, to a certain extent, their coordination, external communication and particularly dissemination was limited. Instruments used were rather passive and included logos, press releases, publications on UNICEF web page.

The national interviews indicate that the model demonstrated flexibility and adaptability, particularly during pandemic times. The model was designed from the beginning having in mind that all the lessons learned, methodologies, training packages and working procedures would be promoted for scale up at regional and national level. Several initiatives under which QIE Transition components were taken up were identified by the evaluation (and are presented in detail under the criterion “Sustainability”).

4.3. EQ 3. To what extent is the project relevant to national policies and programmes?

Level of alignment of QIE Transition with the relevant national/sectoral/cross-sectoral strategies and policies

QIE Transition is much aligned to all key strategies in place in Romania focused on education or with an education component/objective (i.e., Strategy for reducing early school leaving, the Strategy on Poverty Reduction and Social Inclusion 2015-2020, National Strategy for Protection and Promotion of Children Rights 2014-2020, National Strategy for the Protection and Promotion of Children’s Rights 2023-2027 and National Roma Integration Strategy 2015-2020). As QIE Transition is grounded in key challenges in the educational area in Romania, pursues similar or identical objectives as this strategic framework in place, through the same or more innovative measures and activities and an integrated approach.

The *Strategy for reducing early school leaving* is structured around three key pillars: Pillar 1: Ensuring access to education and quality education for all the children; Pillar 2: Ensuring that all children complete compulsory education; Pillar 3: Reintegration of early school leavers into the system of education.

This strategy is based on the concept of a comprehensive response involving policies and services from various sectors such as education, health, and social protection. This approach emphasizes both horizontal and vertical coordination among relevant public and private stakeholders. The strategy focuses on increasing enrolment rates in early education, primary education, and lower secondary education. Additional results on enrolment in primary and lower secondary cycles are also proposed to address learning outcomes asymmetries for the four selected target groups: children aged 11-17, those in economically disadvantaged rural areas, Roma children, and other minority groups.

In alignment with these strategic directions, the QIE model addresses the challenges identified by:

- Providing an integrated suite of services (education, health, and social protection) that cover a wide range of child and adolescent needs. The QIE Transition model addresses various aspects of children's needs, including managerial and pedagogical practices, school counselling, parental education, and community activities.
- Fostering coordination and collaboration among a diverse array of local professionals and institutions, connecting teachers, school counsellors, mediators, school administrators, and parental educators in the best interests of the child.
- Targeting all children and adolescents in the community, with specific support tailored to those from vulnerable groups.
- Raising family awareness regarding the child's interests and encouraging family involvement in educational activities, starting from early childhood.
- The QIE transition model has as one of its strategic objectives the building of capacity at the school level, which aligns with the measure of the Romanian strategy to establish a system of continuous professional development for teachers. This includes developing and delivering a special continuing professional development program for teachers, especially those working with vulnerable groups or in vulnerable communities.
- The QIE Transition Model enhances student resilience by providing a school-based support package. Activities within the Strategy for reducing early school leaving in Romania include granting funding for events that promote the values of social inclusion and overcoming prejudices, supporting mediators and school principals in creating a balance in the classroom and developing the issue of diversity in the national curriculum.

*The Strategy on Poverty Reduction and Social Inclusion 2015-2020*³⁸ clearly outlines the government's commitment to ensuring equal opportunities for all children to receive quality education. The specific objectives of this strategy include increasing the participation rate and improving the results achieved by all children included in primary and secondary education and increasing the access of children from vulnerable groups to education quality (including Roma children, children with special educational needs, children from rural areas and marginalized urban areas).

QIE Transition model responds to these priorities particularly by:

- The QIE Transition model has played a crucial role in increasing awareness of the roles of school counsellors and community mediators within the school and the local community, respectively. Additionally, it has introduced practices for educating parents within the community and enhanced the role of parents as educators.
- Designing and implementing interventions primarily focus on the most disadvantaged areas, with a special emphasis on selecting disadvantaged communities and schools based on relevant sociological criteria. This means that the project's main target group primarily resides in rural areas or peripheral or semi-peripheral urban regions.

³⁸ The Strategy on Poverty Reduction and Social Inclusion 2015-2020
<https://www.mmuncii.ro/j33/images/Documente/Familie/2015-DPS/2015-sn-is-rs.pdf>

The general objective of the *National Strategy for Protection and Promotion of Children Rights 2014-2020* was to enhance children's overall well-being by enhancing their access to quality services. This involves expanding their access to education, creating more recreational and leisure facilities for children, improving the quality of educational services, and enhancing the capabilities of the workforce in social services, education, and healthcare for children.

The strategic objectives of the National Strategy for Protection and Promotion of Children's Rights 2014-2020 align with the QIE Transition model's strategic goals as follows:

- *Providing adequate support to children with parents working abroad*: this corresponds to the QIE Transition model's goal of building capacity at the school level to compensate for the lack of support generated by the absence of parents.
- *Development of mechanisms to ensure children's participation in activities*: this aligns with the QIE Transition model's aim to enhance students' resilience through diverse forms of children's participation in educational and extracurricular activities can contribute to their overall well-being and preparedness for transition.

As a continuation of the previous strategy, the *National Strategy for the Protection and Promotion of Children's Rights 2023-2027*, entitled "*Protected Children, Safe Romania*" aims to ensure the protection and promotion of children's rights, focusing on social inclusion, health, education, child-friendly justice, and cross-cutting dimensions. The strategy includes 20 targets, such as reducing the number of children affected by poverty and social exclusion by 400,000 by 2027.³⁹

The strategic objectives of the Strategy for the Protection and Promotion of Children's Rights 2023-2027 align with the QIE Transition model's strategic goal as follows:

- *OS.1.2 - Increasing the degree of active and inclusive participation of children in all stages of decisions that concern them*: This corresponds to the QIE Transition model's goal of building capacity at the school level to support children's transition from lower secondary education to upper secondary education. Active and inclusive participation of children in their educational decisions is an important aspect of their transition by the following measure: *Measure 1.2.8 - The inclusion in the training programs of parental educators on Increasing the level of children's participation in decision-making*. This aligns with the QIE Transition model's emphasis on parental education.
- *OS.4.1. Improving access to inclusive education for children from vulnerable groups: rural areas, CES/disabilities, Roma and others*: This objective corresponds to the QIE Transition model's goal of Enhance students' resilience for transition through the provision of the school support package, through several measures (for a complete list see Annex 8):
- *OS.4.2 - Increasing the quality of the educational process, including measure 4.2.1 - Increasing the skills of teaching staff in the field of curriculum application focused on skills training and inclusive education*. This aligns with the QIE Transition model's objective of building capacity at the school level to ensure a smooth transition, as it involves enhancing the skills of teaching staff to better apply the curriculum and provide inclusive education.

The *National Roma Integration Strategy 2015-2020 in Romania* outlines a plan for guiding public policies aimed at enhancing the social inclusion of the Roma community. Its objective is to reduce poverty and social exclusion progressively through the implementation of policies addressing

³⁹ Hotărârea Guvernului nr. 969/2023 privind aprobarea Strategiei naționale pentru protecția și promovarea drepturilor copilului „Copii protejați, România sigură” 2023—2027 <https://copii.gov.ro/1/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Monitorul-Oficial-Partea-I-nr.-942Bis.pdf>

education, employment, healthcare, and housing. The strategy's objectives encompass ensuring access to education for Roma children, with a particular emphasis on girls, and addressing the issue of school segregation.

The strategic objective "Promoting inclusive education and reducing cases of discrimination and segregation in schools based on ethnicity, social status, disabilities, or other criteria affecting disadvantaged groups, including Roma" within The National Roma Integration Strategy 2015-2020 and The Romanian Government's strategy for the inclusion of Romanian citizens belonging to the Roma minority for the period 2022-2027 is relevant to the QIE Transition model. This objective involves several activities complementary to those in the QIE transition model:

- Organizing initial and continuous training courses for teachers in the field of intercultural education, diversity, non-discrimination, and equal opportunities.
- Continuing the implementation of training programs for teachers working in educational institutions with Roma minority students, including those who teach Roma history and culture.
- Developing counselling and orientation activities as well as tutoring with specific content tailored to children from disadvantaged groups.
- Monitoring cases of school dropouts and providing counselling services to Roma students at risk of dropping out, along with support for their families.

The complementary element is particularly observed in the QIE Transition model project, where one of the project's partners, Agentia Împreună, organized pedagogical courses for teachers in subjects such as Roma history, interculturality and sociology of music.

*The county strategy for the development of social services 2014-2023*⁴⁰ aligns with the key focus areas outlined in the QIE Transition model (social inclusion of children facing vulnerabilities, child engagement in community activities). The specific goals of this strategy include enhancing educational access for all children, facilitating children's participation in recreational and leisure pursuits, bolstering beneficiaries' ability to utilize integrated community services for children and families, and establishing a system to evaluate and monitor adherence to children's rights.

Level of alignment of project's objectives with Government programmes in the education sector

Reducing the rate of early school leaving is a top priority outlined in the "Romania Educată" (Educated Romania), which serves as the national strategic framework for education leading up to 2030. This effort to reduce early school leaving rates is also significantly supported within the framework of the National Resilience and Recovery Plan (NRRP). QIE Transition is more than aligned to these two programmes, it actually inspired the design of similar interventions under NRRP, as detailed below.

Educated Romania is a strategic national document that outlines the vision for education in Romania until 2030. It focuses on several key principles, including equity, excellence, integrity, wellbeing, professionalism, respect, flexibility, diversity, transparency, and collaboration. The strategy aims to reduce gaps in the system and ensure quality education for children and young people from all backgrounds. It also emphasizes the importance of maintaining high standards in teacher training and education provided to students.

Educated Romania has two strategic objectives that largely coincide with the goals of QIE Transition: 1. Reducing the dropout rate from the education system and 2. Reduce early school leaving, aiming

⁴⁰ The county strategy for the development of social services 2014-2023 <https://www.dgaspcbacau.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Strategia-de-dezvoltare-a-serviciilor-sociale-2014-2023.pdf>

to reduce early school leaving and the dropout rate from the education system. They involve the following activities:

- Providing free psycho-pedagogical counselling and professional guidance for pupils/students, as well as counselling for parents and teachers. This allows potential risk situations to be quickly identified and the best solutions to be applied in time.
- Developing life skills, civic spirit, and environmental protection among students. This involves supporting extracurricular activities aimed at encouraging the civic and social involvement of students (e.g., ecology clubs, debate and oratory club, legal education club, etc.).

These objectives align with the strategic objectives of the QIE Transition model, which implemented similar activities in the schools involved.

The National Program for Reducing School Dropout (NPRSD), adopted in December 2021, represents one of the most critical educational measures within the NRRP. As part of the NRRP, at least 2,500 public-funded primary and secondary schools with many pupils at high or medium risk of school dropout will receive grants of up to 200,000 EUR (based on MATE methodology presented in the section below).⁴¹

The NPRSD program is expected to enhance pupils' performance in national assessments. Furthermore, it aims to help more students complete lower secondary education and participate in the national assessment (in the case of 8th-grade graduates), as well as successfully pursue upper secondary education. It targets students at risk of dropping out, especially students belonging to vulnerable groups, Roma minority students, students from rural and small urban areas, students with disabilities or special educational needs (SEN), students from economically disadvantaged communities, children at risk of social exclusion due to poverty, lack of housing, single-parent families, disorganized families, students exposed to other social risks.⁴²

QIE Transition has similar objectives and activities carried out in its framework, with a view to reach these objectives, were replicated in the list of eligible activities under NPRSD, e.g. NPRSD provides for activities to reduce absenteeism in the classroom such as using active and inclusive learning techniques, but also complementary measures such as improved infrastructure and equipment and consumables.

A third programme QIE Transition is complementary with is the *Romanian education programme* funded through the EEA Grants and operated by the National Agency for Community Programmes in the field of Education and Professional Training (ANPCDEFP). The objective of the program was to improve human capital and knowledge base and in this context one of the specific objectives was to increase the institutional capacity of schools to ensure the effective inclusion of Roma children. The program aimed to achieve a 15% decrease in discrimination faced by Roma students in the 35 schools participating in the projects.⁴³

⁴¹ Education and training monitor 2022 <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/6a29fe32-66f9-11ed-b14f-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

⁴² https://www.edu.ro/comunicat_presa_26_2022_finalizare_selectie_runda_1_PNRAS

⁴³ <https://eeagrants.org/news/programme-agreement-signed-education-programme-romania>

Level of alignment of project's objectives with other national Programmes that address the educational sector, funded by the EU, WB and EEA and Norway grants (2014-2021)

QIE Transition model is also aligned with the objectives of other national Programmes that address the educational sector, funded by the EU, WB and EEA and Norway grants (2014-2021).

The Human Resources Operational Programme 2014 – 2020, funded by the EU through the European Structural and Investment Funds, encompasses, in the social integration area, two strategic objectives relevant for QIE Transition. Firstly, Objective 6.3 focuses on reducing early school leaving by implementing integrated prevention measures and ensuring equal opportunities for students in vulnerable groups, with emphasis on students from the Roma minority and those in rural areas or socio-economically disadvantaged communities. Secondly, Objective 6.6 aims to enhance the skills of teaching staff in pre-university education, ultimately promoting quality educational services that are tailored to students' needs and fostering inclusivity.

These strategic objectives align with the objectives of the QIE Transition model as this is designed to strengthen school-level capacity for the transition from lower secondary education to upper secondary education and focused through numerous activities, on students in different vulnerable situations.

In this context, the EU-funded project mostly quoted in interviews and focus groups as complementary with QIE Transition is “Curriculum Relevant, Open Education for All” – CRED. CRED and QIE Transition model have a child-centred and competency-cantered didactic approach, the former also aiming to prevent early school leaving through innovative and sustainable measures of applying the new national curriculum, focusing on increasing access to quality learning experiences for students in primary and secondary education. The specific objectives of the project include facilitating a unified and coherent curricular approach cantered on competencies among decision-makers and educational partners, promoting competency-cantered didactic approaches through the creation and use of relevant open educational resources, and enabling 55,000 teachers from primary and secondary education for a methodological approach cantered on key competencies. The project also provided two types of microgrants to schools and high schools to support school participation of adolescents and student scholarships to cover transportation costs for vulnerable students from rural communities.

Further than EU-funded programmes and interventions, the World Bank has implemented a number of key initiatives focusing on education. The development of the *Early Warning Mechanism in Education (MATE)* in Romania was initiated due to the consistently high rate of early school dropout in the country. The World Bank, in collaboration with the European Commission, devised a tool based on a vulnerability index (which itself relies on criteria such as schools with a high number of substitute teachers, a high dropout rate, low participation rate, and poor student performance in national assessments). Using these criteria, schools are categorized into three priority levels for intervention: high, medium, and low. Depending on their classification, schools become eligible for grants under the National Program for Reducing School Dropout Rates, funded through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP). Schools are required to take responsibility for student outcomes and provide regular updates on their progress, transferring this information to the MATE data collection system. MATE identifies schools that may require additional resources or support measures. The methodology and tool were employed to support schools at risk of dropout during the 2021/2022 school year, allocating financial resources for the implementation of investment I4 from the NRRP.

At the same time, from 2015 to 2022, the Ministry of Education in Romania is implementing the *Romania Secondary Education Project (ROSE)*, which is funded by a loan agreement between Romania and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. The project's activities are focused on school education and include providing funds to underperforming high schools through a grant scheme. The aim of these grants is to decrease the school dropout rate, increase the high school graduation rate, and enhance performance at the Baccalaureate Examination.

Subcomponent 1.1 of the ROSE project involves interventions at the school level by providing grants to less performing high schools in the public education system. These grants support various school-level activities such as: extracurricular and informational activities such as research visits/trips, internships, participation in competitions, and the creation of school networks are also supported, counselling, vocational guidance, mediation in Roma communities, extracurricular and informational activities like research visits/trips, training internships.

When comparing this with the QIE Transition model, there are several similarities and complementarities:

- Both models emphasize the importance of personal development activities and extracurricular activities in fostering student engagement and success.
- Both models recognize the importance of counselling and vocational guidance
- The QIE Transition project is complementary to ROSE because QIE Transition supports the educational path of students, QIE Transition supports the transition from lower secondary education to upper secondary education, while ROSE supports the transition from upper secondary education to tertiary education.
- In essence, both the ROSE project and the QIE Transition model share a common goal of reducing early school leaving and improving the quality of education through a comprehensive approach that includes a variety of supportive activities and interventions.

Additionally, the *case studies* carried out for the purpose of this evaluation, in six communities where QIE Transition was implemented, reveal that the project activities were considered compatible with any type of intervention aimed at promoting inclusive practices and quality enhancement in schools:

- In a broader context, the experience and perceptions of school principals suggest that the QIE Transition project is considered complementary to other national (Operational Programme Human Resources 2014 – 2020 or the National Programme for reduction of School Dropout, EduNetworks) or international initiatives (Erasmus+). This underscores the importance of a holistic approach that combines both "soft" interventions, like training and support programs, and "hard" investments in infrastructure to achieve positive and sustainable impacts on the educational system.
- Alecu Russo School actively participated in various projects, predominantly focusing on soft activities, such as those funded by Human Resources Operational Programme funds, the National Program for Reducing School Dropout, and EduNetworks by the Association for Values in Education (AVE). Additionally, teachers in school benefited from training sessions provided by the Bacău town hall. Notably, the trainings delivered through the UNICEF QIE Transitions project were consistently regarded as the most relevant, well-organized, and impactful, providing significant value to the school.
- In the 2018-2019 school year, the "Mihail Andrei" School from Buhuși was selected - along with four other schools - as a partner in the IDEA project - Inclusion, Dignity, Education, Equity, Aspiration, along with four other schools from the county and Bacău. The project was financed by the Program for Education, Scholarships, Apprenticeships and Youth Entrepreneurship in Romania, financed by the EEA Grants - Financial Mechanism 2014-2021.
- Sănduleni School No. 1 has benefited from the following complementary interventions:

- Fundația "Nouă ne pasă" initiated the creation of an after-school center for 33 children starting in 2020. This center help children discover their learning potential, integrate into the school community, and recover from academic challenges. The program's objective is for all these children to successfully complete the lower secondary school cycle and continue their studies.
- The use of platforms through World Vision's "School in a Suitcase" project. Another intervention involved the arrangement of the schoolyard "bird-friendly" with the support of the Romanian Ornithological Society.
- Participation in the SHINE project by the Terre des hommes Foundation.
- TACT - Active Youth for the Community project, carried out by the Romanian Youth Movement for Democracy, financed by the Romanian Active Citizens Fund, supported by the EEA Grants 2014-2021⁴⁴.

5. Main findings - COHERANCE

5.1. EQ4. To what extent are the interventions aligned with other interventions in sectors that are influencing?

Level of alignment of the modelling project to child and social protection existing interventions

QIE Transition is complementary and thus has the potential to create synergies with the Minimum Package of Social Services, piloted by UNICEF and in the process of being scaled up at national level, but also with interventions in the social field implemented through Norway and EEA Grants. More importantly, complementarity exists with numerous new interventions implemented by the Government of Romania (School after School and Hot Meals in Schools), however, in this regard the evaluation identified little synergy (see also the sections on "Effectiveness" and "Impact").

UNICEF's "Social inclusion through the provision of integrated social services at community level" modelling project in Romania implemented between 2014-2018, had two main pillars.

- a) The Minimum Package of Services (MPS) model, which was an integrated approach to providing community-based services in health, education, and social protection to children and their families. The aim of the MPS model was to reduce equity gaps and deprivations of children in the targeted areas. It was designed to address problems such as violence, poverty, early pregnancy, preventable disease, lack of access to cash benefits, and school dropout.⁴⁵
- b) Quality inclusive education (QIE): a package of interventions targeting the quality and inclusiveness of education, so that all children complete compulsory education and are equipped with basic academic, social and life skills.

The QIE Transition Model is the follow up of QIE and as it focuses on supporting vulnerable adolescents during their transition to high school, continues to complement the MPS model. This is

⁴⁴ The TACT - Active Youth for the Community project was carried out by the Romanian Youth Movement for Democracy and is financed by the Romanian Active Citizens Fund, supported by the EEA Grants 2014-2021. Beneficiaries of the TACT-Active Youth for the Community project were 360 young participants in the training sessions in soft skills, media education and critical thinking. between the ages of 13 and 20 from Zemeș, Sănduleni, Sascut and Moinești, Bacău county, and 16 teachers, who participated in the training delivered in the school. Through the activities proposed within the project, there is a synergistic alignment with UNICEF's Quality Inclusive Education (QIE) and QIE Transition projects.

⁴⁵ <https://www.unicef.org/romania/reports/minimum-package-services-evaluation>

particularly true as the key challenges leading to school drop-out, early school leaving, including uncomplete transition are of social nature (as presented under “Relevance”).

It is important to underline that in 2020, the Romanian Parliament amended the social assistance law to create the legal framework for the application of the model represented by the Minimum Package of Service at national level, by completing the Social Assistance Law no. 292/2011, which provides the granting of a minimum package of social services to each child and his family, a package that includes basic services and information in the field of health, education and social protection.⁴⁶ In this context, at least the framework for a strong collaboration between social and education services is created, collaboration which should contribute to tackling school drop-out, early school leaving and uncomplete transition.

Based on interviews carried out, QIE Transition is complementary or creates synergies with other various interventions in child protection and social protection implemented at the national level. For example:

- The pilot project “Masa caldă în școli” (Hot Meal in Schools) is set to double the number of participating pre-school and school institutions to 350 starting from the 2022/2023 school year¹. This program provides a hot meal to students, contributing to their overall well-being and potentially improving their academic performance.
- The “Nouă ne pasă” program has been operational since 2016, offering a hot meal three times a week and additional Romanian language and mathematics courses in the afternoon. This program provides both nutritional and educational support to children.
- In 2021, over 225,000 children were enrolled in the “Școala după școală” (School After School) program, which offered additional face-to-face courses. This program provides additional learning opportunities for students after regular school hours. Despite the number of support measures to help early school leavers return to school, the distribution of these programs is uneven between urban and rural areas, with more programs in urban areas, even though the demand is much higher in rural areas. The ongoing program for identifying and collecting information about disadvantaged schools will contribute to improving resource allocation within the school network.

These programs, in conjunction with the QIE Transition Model, provide a comprehensive approach to addressing early school leaving and school dropout rates in Romania. They focus on different aspects of the issue, from providing hot meals to offering additional educational support, making them complementary to each other.

On the other side, the Local Development Programme and QIE Transition are aligned as regards the specific goal of improving the educational system to ensure inclusive and quality education, but also as regards their focus on vulnerable categories, including Roma and tackling social causes of school absenteeism, drop-out and early school leaving.

As regards the EEA and Norway Grants, the Local Development Programme in Romania, adopted in 2018 and operated by the Romanian Social Development Fund (RSDF) expected several outcomes in the social area, e.g., enhanced inclusion and empowerment of Roma, enhanced social inclusion of children and youth, *strengthened capacity of the educational system to ensure inclusive and quality education*, increased use of social services by disadvantaged groups etc.

The programme was implemented through 4 pre-defined projects on integration through sport, inclusion of children and youth at risk, improving local public administration, and capacity building of public governance. In addition, calls for proposals addressed local development, poverty

⁴⁶ <https://www.unicef.org/romania/press-releases/romania-every-child-new-unicef-initiative-benefit-vulnerable-children>

reduction, Roma inclusion, children and youth at risk, human rights. Two small grants schemes supported Roma inclusion and local development. The main target beneficiaries included: persons belonging to vulnerable groups and communities in disadvantaged situations, Roma populations at risk of poverty and social exclusion, children, and youth at risk (including children with disabilities, special educational needs, detainees, etc.), etc.

5.2. EQ5. To what extent are the interventions consistent with the relevant national and international norms and standards to which that institution/government adheres?

Level of consistency with international and European strategies and policies

QIE Transition is fully aligned to key international norms, European strategies, policies, and recommendations in place as it was designed and implemented in the spirit of this framework, taken into account also in current⁴⁷ and previous UNICEF Country Programmes.

The QIE Transition model aligns with several of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

- **SDG 4 - Quality Education:** The core of the QIE Transition model is focused on improving the quality of education. It aims to ensure the necessary conditions for increasing the transition rate of children from lower secondary level to upper secondary level, thereby promoting lifelong learning opportunities.
- **SDG 5 - Gender Equality:** While not explicitly stated, the principles of inclusive education within the QIE Transition model promote gender equality by ensuring that all students, regardless of gender, have equal access to quality education.
- **SDG 10 - Reduced Inequalities:** The QIE Transition Model addresses the educational inequalities that persist among disadvantaged groups, such as ethnic minorities and young people in rural areas. By working to reduce these inequalities, it contributes to SDG 10.
- **SDG 17 - Partnerships for goals:** Effective implementation of the QIE transition model, collaboration and partnerships between various stakeholders including partners, public authorities, schools, communities and families, was essential. This aligns with SDG 17, which emphasizes the importance of forming partnerships to achieve sustainable development.

At the same time, the QIE Transition project is in line with the *OECD "Learning Compass 2030"* framework. Both the QIE Transition model and the OECD Learning Compass 2030 share an aspirational vision for the future of education. They aim to provide quality education that equips students with the necessary skills and knowledge for their future. The OECD Learning Compass 2030 emphasizes individual and collective well-being. Similarly, the QIE Transition model focuses on ensuring the well-being of students by providing them with a supportive and inclusive learning environment. The OECD Learning Compass 2030 also supports the wider goals of education, including inclusivity.

The QIE Transition model aligns with *common European values*, which include promoting respect for human and child rights, fostering social cohesion, embracing diversity, ensuring fairness, and combating discrimination. It also operates with a broad concept of inclusion and focuses on addressing the needs of disadvantaged groups facing persistent inequalities. These groups include ethnic minorities like the Roma community and young people in rural and remote areas who often underperform in education. Furthermore, in line with the specific guidance provided by the

⁴⁷ Available at [Romania country programme document | UNICEF Executive Board](#).

European Commission, the QIE Transition model project aims to implement a comprehensive approach that spans across various levels, including the family, school, and the community.

As such, at EU level, the most recent policy developments underline the need to ensure that children's access to and participation in school, in particular the transition of children (from supported schools) from lower secondary education to upper secondary education. The Council's recommendation on "Pathways to school success" has a wider scope compared to previous policy documents, as it simultaneously addresses the two objectives at the EU level regarding basic skills and early leaving, education, and training and provided that all learners have the opportunity to succeed and reach their potential, irrespective of their personal characteristics, family, cultural and socio-economic background. This is also reflected by Principles 1 and 11 of the European Pillar of Social Rights.⁴⁸

At the same time, the *Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)* is designed to support EU Member States' efforts to improve national education and training systems with complementary tools at the level of EU, mutual learning, and exchange of good practices. One of the five strategic priorities of this framework is "Improving quality, equity, inclusion, and success for all in education and training". This directly aligns with QIE Transition strategic objectives, as both focus on ensuring inclusive education and equal opportunities for all.

At the same time, the strategic framework of the *European Union Youth Strategy for the period 2019-2027* adopted on November 15, 2018 establishes an objective according to which it aims to contribute to the eradication of poverty among young people and all forms of discrimination and to promote the social inclusion of young people. This objective is also reflected at national level, under the field of intervention "Inclusion" in the *National Youth Strategy 2014-2020* with the following measures: i.e., development and implementation in partnership with all responsible institutions from all sectors of special support measures for socially vulnerable youth groups, directing non-formal education towards the social reintegration of socially excluded young people, ensuring the maintenance or restoration of access to formal education in parallel with a real promotion of non-formal and informal learning and the recognition of acquired skills.⁴⁹

At a more operational level, the EU Semester Country Report for 2023⁵⁰, as well as the Council Recommendation on the 2023 National Reform Programme of Romania, highlight the primary systemic issues that contribute to the underperformance of the education system and identifies the main systemic problems that determine the low performance in education. They are confirmed by the Education and Training Monitors, i.e., early school leaving continues to be a problem in the educational system in Romania as well as ensuring education in the language of the national minorities in Romania; participation in school, especially minorities from disadvantaged backgrounds, is hindered by the lack of resources and staff sufficiently didactic. Teacher recruitment and retention policies face significant challenges. Poor learning outcomes recorded in Romania are the highest in the EU (EU average: 19.3 percentage points).⁵¹

⁴⁸ The European Pillar of Social Rights in 20 principles - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission (europa.eu) https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:3605c49b-f881-11ec-b94a-01aa75ed71a1.0021.02/DOC_1&format=PDF

⁴⁹ <https://municipiulbacau.ro/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/strategia-de-tineret-bacau-2019-2023.pdf>

⁵⁰ Recommendation for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on the 2023 National Reform Programme of Romania and delivering a Council opinion on the 2023 Convergence Programme of Romania https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-05/RO_SWD_2023_623_en.pdf

⁵¹ Country Report in the Education and Training Monitor 2022 <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/6a29fe32-66f9-11ed-b14f-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

In view of the above, we consider that the purpose of the QIE Transition model, together with the objectives assumed, are fully aligned to these European coordinates and respond to the challenges and recommendations of the country, as detailed below:

- The QIE Transition model's primary goal aligns well with the European Commission's recommendations. The model aims to increase the rate of compulsory education completion at the level of the schools included in the model.
- The primary focus of the intervention centers on the lower secondary school level, with the goal of establishing essential conditions to boost the transition rate of students from lower secondary to upper secondary education.
- The objectives of the QIE Transition model are fully aligned with the European Commission's recommendations, which emphasize: reducing low-achievers and early leavers, promoting inclusive education which encompasses equity, quality, academic performance, engagement, well-being at school, and respect for diversity.
- The QIE Transition model targets at the same time, the development of quality education, and the school participation for all children, especially of those who are vulnerable. Those interventions insist on preventing non-schooling, school absenteeism and dropout, as well as on increasing learning outcomes and the competences acquired by the children.
- Facilitates the transition of school children (from the supported schools) from lower secondary to upper secondary school level, through several interconnected types of support actions, targeting the schools or high schools (through management and human resources capacity building), children from both secondary schools and high schools and their parents.

Elements regarding human and child rights and equity incorporated in the ToC

The QIE Transition model, implemented by UNICEF in Romania, is deeply rooted in the principles of human and child rights and equity. The QIE Transition model is designed to ensure that every child has the right to quality education. This is in line with Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recognizes the right of the child to education. The model emphasizes inclusion and equity, aiming to reach the most vulnerable children and ensure that all students complete compulsory education. This aligns with the principle of non-discrimination, as stated in Article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The model adopts a holistic approach, addressing children's needs across education and social sectors. This reflects the recognition of the interconnectedness of children's rights - the right to education is closely linked with other rights, such as the right to health and the right to social security.

The child rights approach was embedded already in the project's ToC, stating that QIE Transition is developed in an integrated manner, by adding education interventions to child protection, inclusion and equity interventions. The education component addresses bottlenecks and barriers in access to and retention in education for children and adolescents in risk. Special attention is paid to working closely with teachers to ensure that: the right to education of every child is observed without discrimination. The ultimate outcome is directly related to children's right to education (Art. 28 of Convention on the Rights of the Child): "All children are enjoying their right to education, are completing compulsory education and are equipped with basic academic, social and life skills."

Solutions developed through Theory of Change (ToC) address issues of equity and human/child rights associated with inclusion at different levels of intervention. These involve motivating adolescents to continue their education and building resilience and non-cognitive skills essential for continuing an educational path

In addition, interventions emphasize the active involvement of parents in their children's school life and education through the development and implementation of parenting programs specifically targeting parents of teenagers to motivate them to support their children's education.

The ToC incorporates improving the on-the-job training of teachers: based on international good practices, UNICEF would propose training focused on concrete tools and methodologies to help teachers pedagogically support children at risk of not continuing their education beyond the low secondary level.

In addition, there is a community-oriented approach, including the promotion and training of mediators and school counsellors. Overall, these strategies aim to create a comprehensive framework that addresses equity and human/child rights issues associated with inclusion at multiple levels of intervention.

In accordance with the ToC of the project, all the activities implemented within the project considered the rights of the child, especially from the perspective of art. 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (the right to education), as well as SDG No. 4 – Quality Education. Parental education also contributes to the parents' responsibilities and duties to provide, in a manner compatible with the child's developmental capacities, appropriate guidance and direction in the child's exercise of the rights recognized in the Convention. The Convention on the Rights of the Child mandates that all States Parties must take appropriate measures to safeguard children against any form of discrimination or punishment based on their status, activities, expressed opinions, or the beliefs of their parents, legal guardians, or family members (Article 2, (2)). In this context, the Quality Inclusive Education (QIE) Transition included activities explicitly promoting inclusion, non-discrimination, tolerance, and children's rights, serving as an exemplar in implementing these values.

Stakeholders consulted identified the promotion of tolerance and equity as significant achievements of the intervention. The active involvement of vulnerable children in both school and extracurricular activities ensured inclusivity and non-discrimination.

Additionally, children participated in extracurricular activities aimed at skill development and fostering civic spirit, particularly through HoltIS clubs engaged in fundraising for charitable endeavours. This aspect was confirmed by students in focus groups and interviews, aligning with Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recognizes every child's right to rest, free time, and participation in cultural and artistic activities.

Regarding the monitoring of the gender dimension, the fiche with risk factors developed by the (previously) Institute of Education Sciences, as a project partner, for the identification and assessment of the profile of the student at risk of dropping out, collect data disaggregated by gender and by all the categories of vulnerable children recognized in the methodologies of the Ministry of Education. Within the project, one of the implementation partners, Holtis Association, developed a research report about gender equality issue.

5.3. EQ6. To what extent are the interventions complementing, harmonized and coordinated with others, and the extent to which the intervention is adding value while avoiding duplication of effort?

Based on the interviews and focus groups carried out, the added value of the project firstly resides in the results it obtained. QIE Transition increased the desire of children to attend school and has helped parents understand the efforts the school is making for their children. This has resulted in greater parental involvement and trust in the school. At the same time, the project helped teachers understand the value of learning through play and its impact on children's attitudes towards school.

The artistic workshops have been particularly beneficial for children from the Roma community. These workshops have helped them feel appreciated and have improved their relationship with the teachers and peers. The project helped address situations of discrimination and has improved the conditions for children who were being discriminated against. Several schools reported that, because

of the project, they take a proactive approach when a child is absent for a few days, visiting their home to understand the situation.

Underlined by a majority of stakeholders consulted for this evaluation, is the fact that collaboration with UNICEF also opened doors to additional funding and international partnerships, thereby strengthening the capacity of schools to provide quality education and ensure the protection of children.

Additionally, the integrated approach of the Quality Inclusive Education (QIE) Transition project is highly beneficial from the perspective of both beneficiaries and partners. The QIE Transition project, therefore, represents a win-win situation for all involved. Through collaborating with other partners during QIE Transition model, UNICEF shares specific responsibilities and tasks within projects or programmes. This reduces the risk of duplication and ensures that each organization contributes its distinct expertise and resources. UNICEF and its partners regularly monitor the progress of interventions, through constant annual activity reports, potential overlaps or areas requiring adjustments are identified to ensure efficient use of resources and avoid duplication of efforts.

The interviews with the stakeholders highlighted another important aspect: UNICEF is a trusted partner of the Ministry of Education and of the educational system, with a long history and experience, always positively approaching the collaboration and emphasizing the needs and desire to support the development of educational initiatives. The Ministry of Education has benefited from UNICEF's expertise in developing crucial areas and UNICEF's support has been crucial in addressing the problems of dropout rates and poor academic performance among pupils.

6. Main findings – EFFECTIVENESS

6.1. EQ7. Did the interventions of the project address the needs identified at the level of the most vulnerable children?

The evaluation led to the formulation of the following 4 key findings regarding the effectiveness of the project for children and especially vulnerable children, for which we further present evidence.

1. The **available data does not allow a detailed and exhaustive analysis on the effects generated by the project at the level of vulnerable children**, firstly because a clear and complete identification of vulnerable children at the level of lower secondary education included in the project was not systematically conducted. Secondly, for several activities focused on vulnerable children, monitoring data is not available (such as: number, activities from which they benefitted from, educational path). But all collected information from principals and teachers indicated that in general the children most in need for support were involved in various activities, were given tasks and responsibilities, even coordination jobs as to improve their involvement in school life, increase their self-confidence and their motivation to continue their education.
2. As regards the **general effectiveness of the project for children**, according to the monitoring data for the activities that reached directly pupils, the targets were achieved or surpassed; moreover, according to the target groups perspectives, all of them generated the expected types of effects - better school results, increased motivation to continue school and pursue a profession, increased self-confidence, increased proactivity, responsibility and ownership of their decisions. However, this occurred to different extents, depending on the pace and frequency with which activities were carried out in schools. In regards with the activities that were meant to help parents better guide and support their children in their educational path, they are of utmost importance based on the needs that they address and the effects that they generate. Nonetheless, while in general parenting sessions and partially extracurricular activities managed to bring parents close to school and more interested on

their children's educational paths, almost in each in-depth analysed case there was still a (rather large) category of hard-to-reach parents for whom the effectiveness of the project was limited.

3. The evaluation showed that QIE transition project was effective for **children being at risk of dropout**, due to its integrated approach, where applied properly. While quantitative data is not available (e.g., in regards with the percentage of vulnerable children that were involved in the project and received the necessary support), the majority of collected and analysed perspectives showed that vulnerable children were the focus of the teachers that coordinated UNICEF activities in schools. Not all cases could be solved by school staff, but many of them were identified and important steps were taken by teachers as to avoid dropout and increase the school performance of vulnerable children, such as: remedial actions, discussions held with their families, involvement in extracurricular activities, discussions among teachers for better addressing together the problems.
4. The **gender sensitive approach** was ensured by the project to a large extent. But, not for all implemented activities the achievements were reported taking into consideration gender differences (e.g., remedial activities, participants to role model activities or participants to Career Bus components, where data are partially available). Activities such as: microgrants ensured an approximately equal number of boys and girls beneficiaries. The activities where less balance was registered were: mentoring programme, scholarship programme, HoltIS clubs. In these cases, more girls have benefitted from the project than boys. Differences between genders were identified especially in regards with dropout risk. Girls are still more likely to remain at home, to take care of their younger family members or they get pregnant or married (especially within Roma communities) and decide not to continue school even if they have the possibility according to the legislation.

Support received by vulnerable children (participating or benefitting from project activities) helping them to better integrate in the school environment and be more resilient to changes and requirements of the transition process

In order to assess the extent to which the project managed to address most vulnerable children and generate changes for them in terms of school performance, limitation of dropout, increase of graduation rates and successful competition of compulsory education (10th grade according to the legislation in place when the project started), the research started by analysing the extent to which the necessary data regarding the vulnerable children covered by project activities is available. **As a preliminary finding in regards with the focus of the project on vulnerable children, the analysis was affected by the fact that for two key activities data is not available or it is incomplete, i.e., the number of vulnerable children identified in each school included in the projects and their educational path until the competition of secondary school and the number of children benefiting from remedial activities during 7th and 8th grades.** Filling out the fiches for vulnerable children at the beginning and end of each grade was one of the least effective activities conducted under the project. While taken over from the previous QIE project phase, where it encountered similar problems (e.g., lack of time and motivation for teachers that needed to fill out the fiches), in QIE transition applying this tool became more limited and less results were achieved. Thus, there is little information on vulnerable children that were involved in the project at lower secondary school level, information that cannot provide a general understanding of the project effectiveness based on:

- The percentage of identified children as being vulnerable from the total number of enrolled children in 7th and 8th grades during the implementation period of the project;
- The percentage of vulnerable children who benefitted from the project from the total number of vulnerable children identified or monitored;

- Which activities addressed more vulnerable children than students enrolled in lower secondary education in general.

It is important to mention that several schools thoroughly monitored the situation of vulnerable children, starting with the initiation of the first phase of QIE project or even since before. But because this is not a generalized situation, an overall analysis for the children enrolled in all 35 lower secondary schools could not be conducted. The below table shows the number of children that were identified as being at risk of dropout during project implementation period and were supported and further monitored through the specific fiches. Even if the table shows that the number decreased every year, this does not mean that the number of vulnerable children decreased. The information collected from UNICEF and implementing partners staff indicated that rather their monitoring become less effective towards the end of the project.

Table 4. Number of children identified as being at risk of dropout, supported and monitored during the implementation of the project

SCHOOL YEAR	CHILDREN IDENTIFIED AS BEING AT RISK OF DROPOUT AND SUPPORTED
2019 – 2020	744 children at risk of drop out (in grades 7 and 8) identified
2020 – 2021	534 children at risk of drop out (grades 7th and 8th) identified, supported, and monitored
2021 – 2022	347 children at risk of drop out (grades 7th and 8th) identified, supported, and monitored

Source: Doners reports drafted by UNICE CO Romania (2019 - 2022)

As an examples, in school year 2020 – 2021, only for 42,41% of the children enrolled in 8th grade in the school units included in the project fiches, that were initially identified as being at risk or dropout fiches were filled out and updated, thus for the other children the monitoring process was not continued.

Moreover, remedial activities were monitored as outputs of the project only between 2018 and 2019, by the (previously) Institute of Education Research. Thus, while this activity represents a very important component of the project that contributes directly to increasing the chances of children to improve their school performance, graduate 8th grade and pass the National Evaluation, incomplete information on the number of children that benefited from this activity is available. Moreover, because remedial activities were not included in the monitoring system of QIE Transition, throughout its entire implementation period, they were associated less than other activities (such as extracurricular activities or microgrants) with the project. This also led to less frequent mentioning of remedial activities during interviews and focus groups conducted with project target groups.

The following analysis presents the effectiveness of the project as regards the activities addressing children in general, emphasizing specific elements related to vulnerable groups, where possible. The below table includes all project activities in which children were involved (i.e., microgrants, teenagers' clubs, mentorship, scholarships, counselling professional guidance, remedial activities, school trips other than those organized within the microgrants or HoltIS clubs) and the registered achievement rates. According to the intervention logic, only some activities were explicitly focused on vulnerable children, such as: remedial activities, scholarships, and mentorships. As the field research indicates, the other activities developed under the framework of the project offered access to all those who wished to participate, regardless of whether they were at risk of dropping out of school or not.

As project documents shows, most of the targets initially set were surpassed, thus in terms of expected outputs, overall, the project registered a very high level of achievement rate.

Table 5. Project achievements in regards with activities addressed directly to children as covered by the monitoring system of the project

PROJECT COMPONENT	INDICATOR	PROJECT TARGET	ACHIEVED	ACHIEVEMENT RATE
Mentorship and scholarship programs	No. of mentee students	350	353	100,86%
	No of high school students at risk of drop out receiving scholarship (200 lei/month)	350	353	100,86%
	No. of mentorship workshops provided	44	53	120,45%
	No. of mentors participating in initial training	350	418	119,43%
HoltIS clubs	Activities organized by teenagers` clubs in Bacau County	350	402	120%
	No. of clubs for teenagers organized/consolidated	68	68 (1258 active members)	100%
	Number of students from the Club Boards participating in workshops organized during summer schools	320	320	100%
Career guidance and career counselling	No. of students equipped with tools and knowledge to make informed decisions about their educational pathway	1.854	2.302	124,16%
	No. of students participating in offline and online workshops strengthening motivation for learning and making informed decisions on making informed career	750	1.055	140,67%
	No. of students participating in the workshops organized by the trained teachers on making informed decisions on making informed career	450	506	112,44%
Interculturality	No. of students participating in activities on Roma history and Interculturality	750	2214	295,2%
Microgrants	No. of students benefiting of microgrants activities	2000	2484	124,2%
Appreciative parenting component	Number of teenagers participating in national events on developing life skills.	10.000	0	0%

Source: Monitoring data processed by the evaluators

Remedial activities

Remedial activities held with children represent one of the key support activities conducted for children being at risk of dropout. Based on project design, several steps needed to be conducted before as the remedial activities to be implemented in adequate conditions. The Unit for Education Research (former Institute of Education Science) implemented the relevant component, which included: training needs analysis for the teachers from lower secondary schools and high schools, trainings with teachers for the school subjects: mathematics, Romanian language and sciences focused on increasing the performance of children at the National Evaluation. The available reports mention that 78 teaching staff, who participated in trainings, conducted remedial sessions for over **400 students preparing for the national assessment exam and for other 150 high school students**. But, the number of children participating in remedial sessions was not a project indicator throughout its entire implementation period and the reports drafted by the responsible partner do not present achievements in a unitary manner or by gender. On the other hand, even if complete data is not available, during interviews and focus groups, teachers emphasized the importance of remedial activities for children with poor school result. The needs analysis conducted under the framework of QIE Transition, but also the evidence provided by the implementation of the previous QIE project phase, confirms that there is a direct link between the socio-economic environment in which the children's family lives and the school performance. But, in order to decrease the risk of drop out for

vulnerable children, besides other support that they need (e.g. socio-emotional support, professional guidance and counselling and financial support), they also need to first cover their learning gaps.

Interviews indicate that most vulnerable children managed to improve their school results due to remedial activities conducted by the trained teachers. Also, not only the teachers trained under the project spent additional time with school children in order to prepare them for the National Evaluation. In general, as an overall finding based on the information gathered from the 6 schools included in the case studies, but also from teachers and principals of other 7 lower secondary schools and high schools, while having poor school results, difficult family situation is the main cause for school dropout; this referring to: lack of support for continuing their education, difficult financial situation, or specific traditions of the community (e.g., Roma community where girls get married very early). Thus, where needed, school performance was improved, and repetency was avoided, children graduated lower secondary and continued at high school or professional schools based on their results at the National Exam.

The administrative available data regarding the school performance of children enrolled in the 35 lower secondary schools included in the project, shows an increase of the percentage of children that enrolled in the National Exam and received an average score equal or higher than 5. Between 2018 and 2022, the percent of children that passed the National Evaluation increased with 7,60 percentage points, from 66,6% to 74,2%. If we analyse the difference between the first year of project implementation and the last year we observe an even higher difference, of 10,3 percentage points. But the in-depth analysis at school level showed that not for all schools, remedial activities have been effective, leading to improved school results for their children. On the other hand, a broader analysis indicates a higher or equal improvements registered at the level of the county, as the below table shows.

Table 6. National Evaluation passing rates in Bacău county between 2018 and 2022

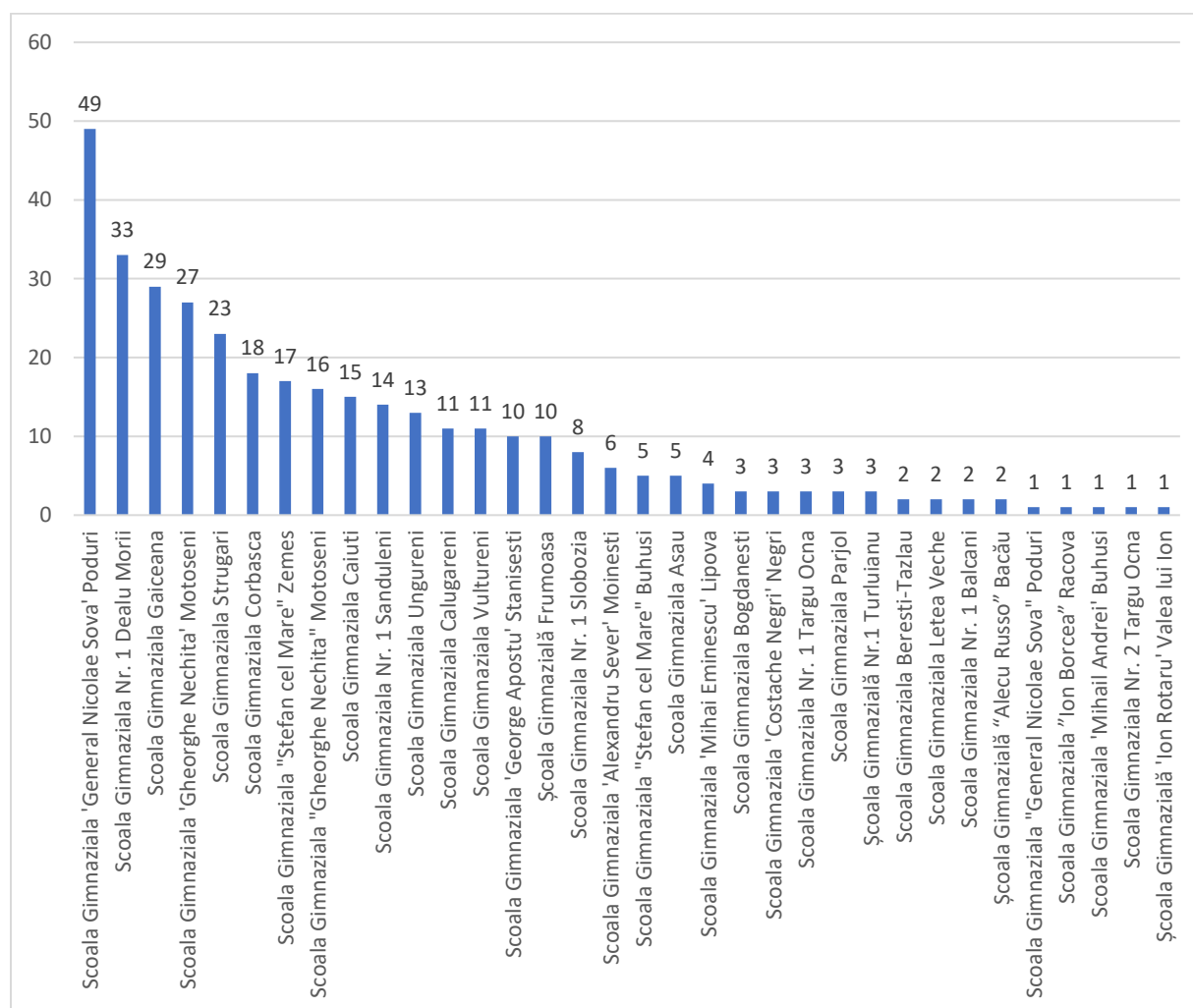
YEAR OF THE NE	BACĂU COUNTY			QIE TRANZITION PROJECT
	TOTAL	RURAL	URBAN	
2018 (before QIE transition)	72,9%	60,7%	86,6%	66,6%
2019	71,9%	58,6%	85,9%	63,9%
2020	75,0%	61,7%	87,6%	69,9%
2021	74,9%	59,8%	88,9%	63,5%
2022	82,3%	71,1%	92,8%	74,2%
Evolution between 2018 - 2022	9,40	10,40	6,20	7,60
Evolution between 2019 - 2022	10,40	12,50	6,90	10,30

Source: Baseline report, Annex 3

Mentorship and scholarship programmes

353 students benefited of mentorship. The same students received a monthly scholarship, in the amount of 200 RON, for two years (9th and 10th grades). From the 353 children that were enrolled in high school and were mentored by their older colleagues, 255, representing 72,23%, were girls and 127 boys. Based on the location of the lower secondary schools from which they graduated, 18 students were coming from urban area and 334 from rural area.

Figure 4. Mentorship and scholarship number of beneficiaries by graduated school



Source: Monitoring data processed by the evaluators

During this activity, Agenția Împreună held mentorship workshops, with approximately 20% above the target, for 418 mentors, also with 20% above the target of 350 students. Based on the data collected through surveys, 80% of middle school teachers and all high school principals consider that mentoring and scholarships had to a large and very large extent a positive influence on students' educational path. 50,17% of the surveyed children shared the same perspective regarding the mentorship programme in which they were involved. From the surveyed students, 31,96% did not received a scholarship. From ones that did receive this financial support through the project, 73,03% expressed the opinion that the scholarship helped them to a very high or a high extent to continue their education. 61,46% of the respondents to the survey addressed to parents consider that mentorship helped their children in the transition phase and 63,00% consider that the scholarship received by their children was to a very large or large extent useful for them. Only 4% mentioned that the scholarship was very small for their needs.

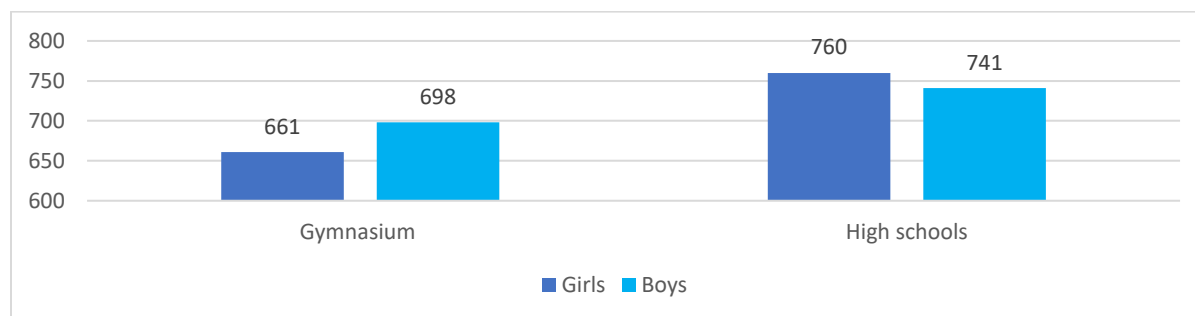
As the discussions held with high school pupils and teachers show, in general, the mentorship programme was effective, but not in all cases. In many cases this project activity was very effective. For example, principals from Alecu Russo School and from Gheorghe Nichita School from Motoşeni underlines the very important support that was received by their 8th grade students from their older colleagues. Through this collaboration many children gained trust that they can graduate and they

can enrol in high school. But, while the majority of interviewed persons stated that this programme helped children integrated better, gain self-confidence and easier solve the problems encountered when starting high school (mainly, in regards with administrative responsibilities) there were also cases where the mentors were students in 12th grade, who had little time at their disposal for communicating with the mentees, due to their overcrowded schedule related to the final exam preparation. Some interviewed students mentioned that they have become mentors without any training and their responsibilities in regards with this role were not very clear. For example, in the case of Karpen High school from Bacău, during the discussions held with students, very effective, but also less effective cases of mentorship were identified. A similar finding can be formulated in regards with the utility of high school scholarships, because most of the teachers interviewed emphasized that children from vulnerable communities need to access this kind of financial support as to be able to attend high school. But, at the same time, some perspectives collected indicate that not in all cases the scholarship is utilized as it was initially intended, parents using that money to meet their own needs.

Microgrants

In total 2484 children participated to the microgrants that were implemented in schools, representing 124,2% of the project target. From the involved children 1364 were girls and 1359 were boys, thus the gender representation was balanced. Also, 1359 children participated when they were in 7th and 8th grades, thus when they were enrolled in lower secondary school. From them 661 were girls and 698 were boys. From high school (including all grades from 9th to 12th grade) participated 1501 children, from which 760 girls and 741 boys.

Figure 5. Children' participation in microgrants, by education level and gender

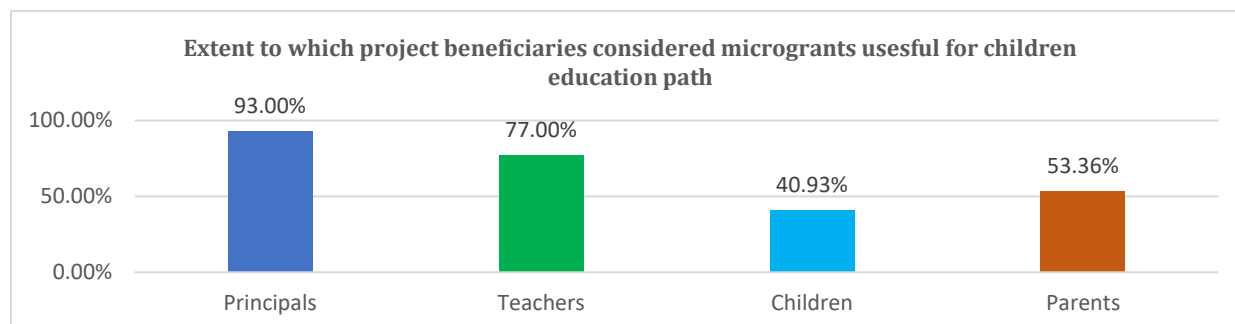


Source: Monitoring data processed by the evaluators

As the data collected from principals, teachers and students showed, microgrants were one of the most effective components of the project. They generated rapid and visible effects for the school and the activities that were organized with the support of these grants contributed significantly to the development of non-cognitive skills of the children involved, such as: planning an activity, working with others, identifying problems and looking for solutions and support or resource persons from school and outside the school. These effects for children were observed also in the case of Holtis Clubs members. According to the results of the surveys conducted with principals, 96,00% of respondents from lower secondary level and all respondents from high schools consider that microgrants had to a very large and large extent a positive influence on the educational path of their students. In the case of the surveyed teachers, 77,00% of the respondents shared the same perspective. But only 40,93 of the children that were involved in the data collection process and were involved in microgrants activities considered that they were useful for their school activity. Also, 55,36 parents of children enrolled in middle school and high school found that microgrants activities were a large and very large extent influential for their children educational path. The fact that children and parents value less this activity when asked through a questionnaire, may support the idea that they make less the

distinction between the project activities, because when interviewed their perspectives have changed in a positive manner. Also, when asked in general regarding extracurricular activities, most of the children and parents considered that they were useful and very useful.

Figure 6. Extent to which project beneficiaries considered microgrants useful for children education path



Source: Surveys conducted under the framework of the evaluation

Moreover, teachers emphasized that through microgrants they managed to organize trips outside the village or city for children and their parents who would not afford to these types of activities otherwise. In all analysed cases, parts of the microgrants addressed children coming from disadvantaged families or environments. Microgrants was one of the project components that even if it was open to various types of activities (including purchasing equipment and supply), it focused to a large extent to the involvement of vulnerable children.

As an overall finding, this component was very effective in improving the proactivity and resilience of children and created synergies in the schools where they were implemented. On the other hand, for schools with low financial resources, microgrants constituted an important support for purchasing ITC equipment and supply for the activities conducted with children, as principals and teachers from Târgu Ocna No. 1 School, Alecu Russo School, Bogdănești Lower Secondary School emphasized. In the case of Târgu Ocna School, children with a poor family financial situation were provided with tables purchased through microgrants after the Pandemic outburst.

Role models

The project monitoring system includes only the number of participants to the national conference on role models and the number of related advocacy events that were conducted. While the targets for both indicators have been achieved and even significantly surpassed in the case of the first indicators, these achievements do not provide information regarding the number of specific sessions organized for children or the number of participants.

Table 7. Achievements of the project in regards with role models components based on the set indicators and targets

INDICATOR	PROJECT TARGET	ACHIEVED	ACHIEVEMENT RATE
No. of public and private experts attending 1 national conference on role models	150	550	366,67%
No. of advocacy events organized for the promotion of the role models approach	6	6	100%

Source: Data processed by evaluation based on project monitoring reports

Nevertheless, role models component of QIE Transition project perceived as very important, based on types of all perspectives collected – teachers, children (examples starting with proximity, as an argument, but outside the project area, going to locals that managed to pursue their dreams and have a successful career to public figures who visited the school). The majority of interviewed persons emphasized the importance of this project component, due to the fact that models, and especially

proximity models, are very important for motivating children to finish their education and pursue a career. In the absence of good examples in the family, relatives or neighbours, QIE is bringing to these children a motivation element, key in their educational and professional path. On the other hand, several school teachers mentioned that also outside the community, well-known figure, visiting the school and speaking with children is another key way through which both teachers and children can be motivated.

Holtis clubs

The project managed to reach the target of 68 adolescents' clubs organized or consolidated in Bacău County by its end. 1.258 active members were registered in the 68 clubs. From them, as the last report of HoltIS states, 406 are boys (32,27%) and 852 girls (67,73%). Further 107 active HoltIS Clubs coaches have been recruited. Since the beginning of the project the approach towards the activities conducted within the clubs has been developed. After establishing the clubs, developing a team of active members and a pattern of planning and implementing activities, the role of coaches decreased and students took over most of the responsibilities, including filling out the QIE platform during the reporting phase (including project ideas, implementation and results obtained). In several cases, like in Henri Coanda high school from Bacău, students were involved in the process of selecting and recruiting other members of the Club, which increased their autonomy and responsibility. Coaches that participated in the conducted focus groups and interviews positively appreciated, first of all, the important role of the activities developed within the club for the development of its members from a socio-affective perspective, self-confidence and motivation for constantly planning for their future, including their educational path, being the first two effects mentioned in most of the conversations held with clubs' coordinators. Further, the teachers emphasized the proactivity of the children that are members of the clubs, which has been developed due their participation in the clubs and based on which the activity of the clubs continues after the finalization of UNICEF project.

As part of this component Holtis organized summer schools. The monitoring indicates that in total 320 children from Holtis clubs participated in the activities organized during summer schools.

Principals and teachers that participated in the survey conducted under the framework of the evaluation highly valued the importance of Holtis clubs in the education paths of their students. 56,27% of the surveyed children considered that extracurricular activities that they have attended to due to UNICEF project helped them to very large or large extent in school. Parents valued even more this component of the project, 76,71% of the participants in the survey, considered that it had to a very large and large extent a positive influence on the educational path of their children. Further, it is important to mention here that extracurricular activities that involved teachers, children and parents (not only organized under the adolescents' clubs, but the main part of the activities organized), outstands from all project components due to their capacity to:

- Increase the enthusiasm of the children towards school;
- Bring parents close to school and changed their perspective regarding the school staff, especially after observing the benefits that their children have by attending school;
- Increase children's motivation to make efforts to plan their educational and professional path, due to the fact that they discover their potential, they go through new experiences that they would not have had access to otherwise (especially through trips) and they manage to establish more realistic goals.

Holtis clubs became of great interest for children. When deciding what high school to apply for they were asking their teachers where are other clubs organized, like in the case of George Nichita Lower Secondary School from Motoşeni, but not only. On the other hand, at both lower secondary schools and high schools, adolescents' clubs become an important element in the promotion of their

educational offer. In this regard some examples are: Henri Coandă High school from Bacău, Alexandru Vlahuță High School from Podu Turcului, Karpen High school from Bacău.

Career guidance and career counselling

In regards with the career guidance and counselling, 2.302 children participated in the sessions conducted by school counsellors or principals, 24% above the target set initially. Further, 1055 students (140% of the target) participated in workshops for learning motivation strengthening and making informed decisions on career pursuing, held by School of Values trainers and 506 (112,44% of the target) participated in the same workshops that were held by the school teachers that were trained during the project implementation period. Thus, in terms of indicator achievements, all targets were surpassed. The available provides partially information on children participation by gender. While some reports include this information, other do not. Thus, a clear imagine of the proportion of boys and girls that benefited from this activity could not be recreated. Moreover, due to the restrictions determined by the Covid19 pandemic, some of the trainers and workshops were held online; nevertheless, the effectiveness of the sessions according to the participants remained high. The reports drafted by the implementing partner, School of Value, emphasize several cases in which their presence in the school mean a real support for children that had less trust in school and less future development perspectives. Many participants in the workshops conducted under Carrer Bus component were illiterate. Some could not fully attend the sessions due to the school bus schedule or initially did not think that school cannot help them succeed in life, having in their proximity examples of people that did not attend school but who were considered to be successful, mainly due to their earnings. During workshops the trainers made efforts as to properly address each specific issue or need that was identified.

The survey addressed to principals, place counselling and professional guidance 2nd when it comes to their actual usefulness in positively influencing the educational paths of school students, after microgrants. 84,07% of the surveyed teachers consider that the counselling and professional guidance activities had a positive influence on children educational path. Less children, 57,60% of the surveyed ones, consider that counselling and professional guidance activities helped them in school. But more parents have valued this component of the project. 81,51 of the parents that had children in middle school participating in the project considered that career guidance activities had a positive and positive influence (parents that appreciated that this was true to a very high and high extent) on their educational path. When it comes to parents of children enrolled in high school, the proportion of parents that had the same positive perspective decreased to 65,11%.

The feedback received from children that participated to these activities was very positive. Students appreciated that they have learned new things about their self by playing. Several mentioned that they have chosen the field of study at high school based on the results of the tests that they were given during professional counselling and guidance sessions. Also, teachers appreciated to a large extent the way in which these activities were conducted by the trainers and the response of their students. According to the results of the feedback survey conducted with children, the specific approach of the 5 workshops (Value Based Education - Learning autonomy aka Choice; Value Based Education - Learning autonomy aka Choice; Value Based Education - Personal & Universal Values; SDS interpretation, counselling and orientation; Career Bus – board game), related to participants engagement, learning by playing, team work was considered to be very appropriate and effective by participants.

Availability of data referring to project achievements related to vulnerable children.

In order to assess the extent to which vulnerable children have benefited from project activities we zoomed in into data bases of children that were involved in different activities conducted under the framework of the project.

Based on the available data base with children's participants in QIE Transition activities, from the 353 children that benefited from mentoring and scholarship programmes, only 30 of them, representing 8,50%, were involved in microgrants activities or were members of Holtis clubs.

Table 8. Correspondence between the beneficiaries of scholarships and mentorship and the other activities organized within the project

PARTICIPANTS IN MENTORING AND SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMMS (vulnerable children)	FROM WHICH	
	PARTICIPANTS IN MICROGRANTS	PARTICIPANTS IN HOLTIS CLUBS BOARDS
353 children	31 children (8,50%)	2 children (0,57%)

Source: Monitoring data processed by the evaluators

No other information related to the names of the participants in the other conducted activities were available as to make a more comprehensive analysis. Nevertheless, the current figures indicate a very low rate of involvement of vulnerable children in other activities than the ones that were explicitly addressed to them. Several evidence in this regard were identified also during field work. For example, Adolescents clubs usually recruit their members through a clear procedure, which for vulnerable children or those that do not attend school frequently may be discouraging or not accessible. In several cases, at both lower secondary schools and high school, only 3 or 4 club members were vulnerable children or coming from QIE school units, in the case of high schools. On the other hand, in the case of microgrants, as previously mentioned, many activities are addressed directly to vulnerable children, thus by making this objective explicit, more children being at risk of dropout can be reached.

The following list includes key indicators that express outputs generated for children, for which data regarding achievements was not systematically collected and / or reported as per the standard reporting template for each implementing partner:

- Vulnerable children included in the project,
- Vulnerable children participating in project activities,
- Number of students participating in remedial activities,
- Number of students participating in tutoring sessions,
- Role model events and number of participants.

Further, Where the outputs referred to participants, data by gender was not reported, with the exception very few cases.

Support received by parents of vulnerable children through project's activities addressed directly or indirectly to them, helping them to better guide and support their children in their educational path

In order to assess the extent to which the project managed to address most vulnerable children and generate changes for them in terms of school performances, reduction of dropout, increases of graduation rates and successful completion of compulsory education, the analysis aimed to also look at the extent to which the parents of vulnerable children benefitted from project activities, especially support for helping their children finishing compulsory education and how effective was this support provided to them. Nevertheless, the project monitoring data provides only general information on the total number of parents that have participated in the project. Information regarding the extent to

which the beneficiaries of parenting sessions were the one that needed the most this support was collected during interviews and focus groups, for several cases, and cannot be generalized at project level.

As showed by the following tables, with two exceptions, all planned outputs of the project QIE Transition were generated according to the initial planning, most of the targets being surpassed.

Table 9. Achievements registered under the parenting education component based on project indicators

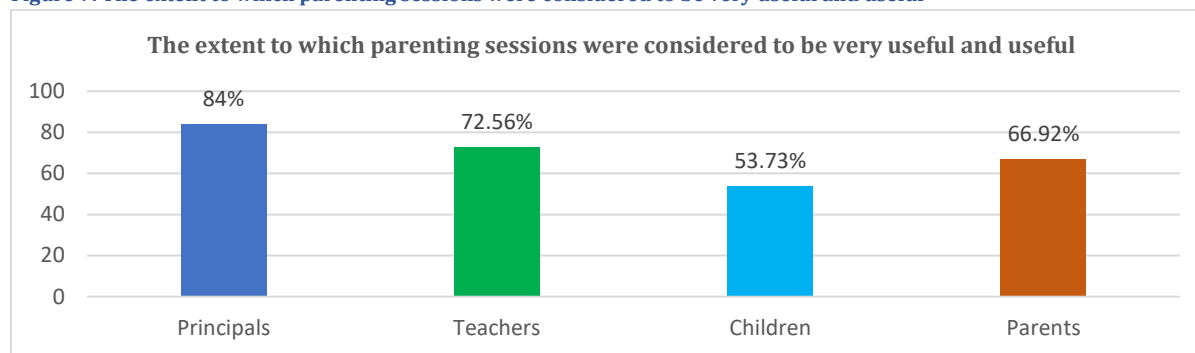
INDICATOR	PROJECT TARGET	ACHIEVED	ACHIEVEMENT RATE
Number of parents participating in new 2 modules on Appreciative Parenting	4000	14.156	101,11%
Number of parents participating in online Appreciative Parenting national events	10.000		
Needs analysis of parents' current needs - national level	2.000	3.751	187,55%
Percentage of parents participating in parenting education sessions with improved knowledge on parenting skills.	60%	60%	100%

Source: Monitoring data processed by the evaluators

The activities that involved parents were seen as key for improving the school situation of vulnerable children. Principals and teachers unanimously considered that this approach is essential in supporting children that are at risk of drop out, from various causes. Bringing the parents closer to school and making them more aware of the impact school completion in their children's lives can significantly contribute to a successful educational path for their children. In all cases that were in-depth analysed, the teachers stated that the relationship and collaboration with parents have been improved due to QIE project. Some examples where parenting sessions were considered to be the starting point in developing a long lasting and effective relation between school and parents and also one of the most important activities of the project are: Alecu Russo School from Bacău, Gheorghe Nichita School from Motoșeni, Strugari Lower Secondary School or Răducanu Rosetti School from Căiuți. On the other hand, an often-emphasized problem is related to the extent to which the schools, through this activity, managed to reached the parents that are least interested in their children's education. In various cases, while this part of the project was very effective, there were still isolated cases or groups of parents that did not participate, thus for them and their children the project had not effects in this regard, like in the cases of Târgu Ocna No. 1 Lower Secondary School or Bogdănești Lower Secondary School. But it is important to emphasize that the approach of teachers towards parents and their way of communicating with them and involving them in their children school live has been improved to a large extent.

The survey addressed to school principals, 88,00% of respondents from middle schools and 80,00% respondents from high schools considered that parenting sessions were useful to a very large or large extent to parents and students. Also, 72,56% of the surveyed teachers have the same opinion. Nevertheless, according to the survey addressed to children, only 53,73% of respondents consider that parenting sessions were useful for their parents. The majority of parents that participated in the sessions (63,02%) consider that their relation with their children enrolled in middle school has improved to a high and very high extent. Even a higher proportion of parents that have children enrolled in high school (70,81%) appreciate in the same manner the importance of parenting sessions.

Figure 7. The extent to which parenting sessions were considered to be very useful and useful



Source: Surveys conducted under the framework of the evaluation

In addition, several other components of the project effectively brought parents close to school, such as extracurricular activities organized within microgrants, trips, Holtis clubs and other. Both teachers and students appreciated the fact that they had the opportunity to spend more time with parents, communicate more or collaborate. Nevertheless, one of the findings which came out from the field work was that in each in-depth analysed case, there was still a category of parents left out from project activities, due to the fact that they are very hard to reach, and the efforts made to bring them to school in different circumstances did not lead to any positive result.

6.2. EQ8. Does the project contribute to the capacity development at school level for the teachers?

As the evaluation question implies, the following analysis is focused on the effects generated by each project component at school personnel level. Thus, even if various activities of the project generated effects for more than one target group, their effectiveness level from the perspective of children and parents is addressed under the previous evaluation question.

Achieved and planned results related to the capacity development in term of school management

The following table presents the main achievements in relation with the relevant QIE Transition components: technical assistance for improving the Institutional Development Plans (IDPs), technical assistance for project writing, microgrants and IT support. In the case of technical assistance for project writing the project achieved its targets and even slightly surpassed the expected number of workshops on project writing and implementation with 1 workshop. For the number of updated IDPs, only 36 plans were revised out of the 50 that were initially planned. The data provided by the responsible implementing partner shows that in general principals that did not request support for IDPs revision, motivated their decision based on the lack of time due to the many school responsibilities that they have or based on the fact that the mandatory period set by the Ministry of Education for updating the document is far from this time of the year, thus this activity did not represent a priority.

Technical assistance

Table 10. Achievements of the project in regards with the TA component

INDICATOR	PROJECT TARGET	ACHIEVED	ACHIEVEMENT RATE
No. of workshops organized for updating Institutional Development Plans	3	3	100%
No. of updated Institutional Development Plans	50	36	72%
No. of workshops on project writing and implementation	12	13	108,33%
No. of project proposals submitted by implementing schools/mayoralities to leverage external funds	11	21	190%

Source: Monitoring data processed by the evaluators

In regards with the Technical Assistance provided by the Together Agency to principals and teachers, both types of activities, management support and project writing trainings, were considered to be very effective. Main findings, based on target groups perspective, in relation to the effects of the project towards school capacity building indicate that the project led to:

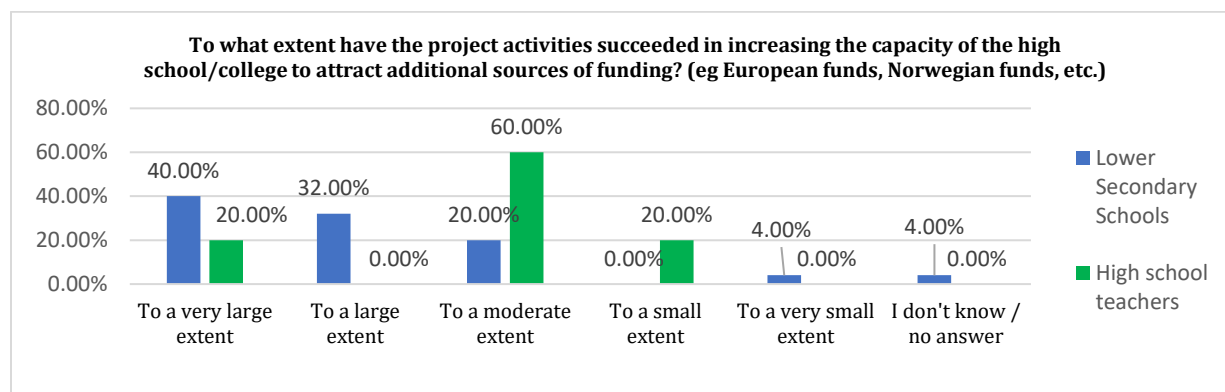
- increased capacity of drafting well-grounded and realist IDP and monitoring them,
- increased capacity in accessing external financing sources,
- increased capacity in organizing extracurricular activities and collaborating with children, their parents and relevant local actors,
- increased school capacity for organizing online classes.

Highly positive feedback was received from principals regarding the sessions for Institutional Develop Plants improvements. The quality of the human resources that provided the trainings / advisory sessions was the first issue mentioned by the interviewees. School principals explained that after the attending the dedicated sessions they understood how to improve the development plans, especially in terms of relevance (assessing and addressing the real needs at school level), prioritization and feasibility of the proposed measures. 92,00% of the surveyed principals and 69,03% of the surveyed teachers consider that management activities and the support received by principals have led to a very large or to a large extent to an improvement in school management.

The TA team provided support to 16 schools for 21 applications for non-refundable financing, out of which 6 were approved (all ERASMUS projects), 8 were rejected due to insufficient funds (also ERASMUS), other 3 were rejected due to low scores received and 4 were still in the appraisal phase (for the National Programme for Reduction of Schools Drop Out). In addition, the schools that were in-depth analysed provided evidences on the fact that several other external funding sources were accessed after the TA components of QIE Transition was conducted and microgrants were implemented. Alecu Russo School, accessed also EU funds provided under Human Resources Operational Programme and The National Programme to Reduce School Dropout or ERASMUS plus projects. The application process had been supported by UCE experts even if their responsibilities in regards with TA components had ended by the time when the schools applied for financing. Several other schools, where the capacity of attracting external or alternative financing was developed as a consequence of the TA components of the project are: Gheorghe Nichita Motoșeni or Târgu Ocna Nr. 1 Lower Secondary School. The effects of this activity can be measured only by the applications made for projects with significant budgets funded through the European Union, but also by the number of partnerships agreements established with NGOs, number of sponsorships received from private companies or financial support received from the local authorities. In this regard, from the schools from which qualitative data was collected through interviews and focus groups, Lower Secondary School from Strugari, Gheorghe Nichita School from Motoșeni and Lower Secondary school from Bogdănești outstands due to their various implication in many projects and competitions and their good collaboration with local authorities and local private sector. Almost all schools and high schools that were involved in the data collection phase of the evaluation, are implementing project / parts of projects / activities with external financing.

72,00% of the principals from middle schools and only 20% principals of high schools consider that the project succeeded to a very large or a large extent in increasing the capacity of the high school/college to attract additional sources of funding. As the figure below shows, the TA components has been more effective in the case of lower secondary school units than in the case upper secondary level.

Figure 8. Extent to which principals consider that the TA activity for project writing was effective



Source: Survey addressed to principals

Microgrants

Microgrants were accessed by both lower secondary schools and high schools included in the project, between 2020 and 2022. The total number of implemented grants is 155, which represents 158,16% of the target.

Table 11. Achievements of the project in regards with microgrants component

INDICATOR	PROJECT TARGET	ACHIEVED
No. of microgrants developed and implemented	98	155

Source: Monitoring data processed by the evaluators

While some schools and high school benefitted from more than one microgrants, other did not apply at all, due to lack of capacity, especially insufficient human resources.

Table 12. Proportion of microgrants awarded to the schools included in the project, by number end education level

No. of microgrants	Nr. of benefitting school units	% from the total nr. of schools	Out of which lower secondary schools	% from the total nr. of lower secondary schools
5 microgrants	2	3,64%	1	2,86%
4 microgrants	2	3,64%	1	2,86%
3 microgrants	14	24,25%	11	31,43%
2 microgrants	19	34,55%	13	37,14%
1 microgrant	8	14,55%	2	5,71%
No microgrant	7 (out of which 6 did not apply)	10,91%	3	8,57%

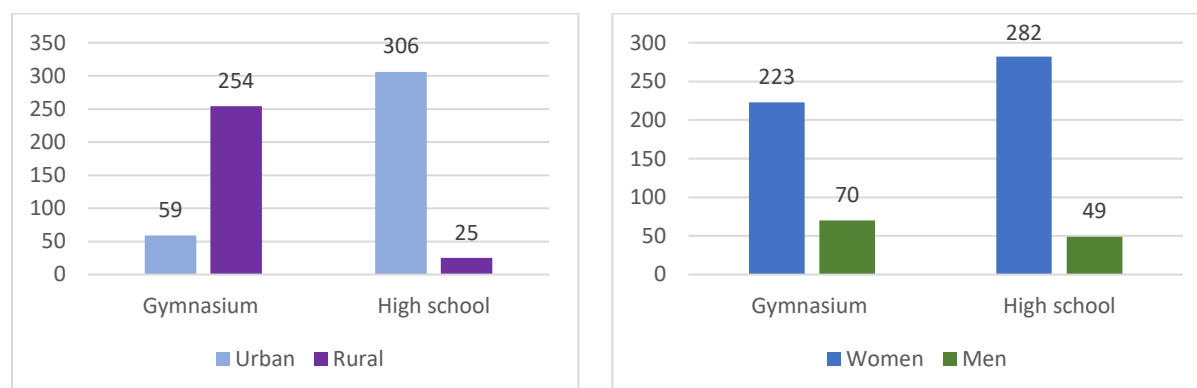
Source: Monitoring data processed by the evaluators

From the 35 lower secondary and 20 upper secondary school units, in total 45 schools benefited from microgrants, from which 18 high school and 27 lower secondary schools. The total number of microgrants beneficiaries is 4.735, including children, teachers, and parents. In regards with teacher participation the monitoring data indicates the following:

- in total 624 teachers participated in the activities organized under the framework of the microgrants, from which 505 female teachers and 119 male teachers,

- in the 25 lower secondary schools covered by the project, 223 women and 70 men participated to microgrants; in high schools that received microgrants from the participating teachers 282 were women and 49 men,
- In total, 279 teachers from rural area participated to microgrants and 365 from rural area.

Figure 9. Participants to microgrants by rural / urban, school level and gender



Source: Project monitoring data processed by expert team

Microgrants were considered to be one of the most useful components of the project, by principals, teachers, and children. Based on the surveys addressed to principals (84,61%) and teachers (77,00%), microgrants and the extracurricular activities conducted under the framework of the received grants or other UNICEF components were considered to be most effective and most important for motivating children to continue their education. The main benefits of the microgrants, as they were mentioned by teachers and principals during field works, were:

- School environment improved through new equipment;
- New spaces for learning or relaxation were set up in school buildings or in school yards;
- Extracurricular activities were developed, including trips outside the community, with the participation of children and their parents, in some cases;
- Funding opportunities for similar activities were attracted by schools.

On one hand microgrants provided timely financial support for purchasing equipment and supply, which in most of the school units could not be accessed from other sources, and on the other, provided the opportunity for strengthening the collaboration and communication: a) among teachers, b) among children, c) between teachers and children, d) between teachers and parents and e) between children and their parents.

In most of the analysed cases, the managerial team / principal, and the teaching staff, included in the school portfolio of activities recurrent extracurricular events similar with the ones implemented through microgrants and accessed additional sources of financing in order to develop them, such as Local Council or Local enterprises willing to make rather small donations for the school.

IT support

The principals stated that UNICEF was the first real support received when the pandemic started and the classes moved to online. The first sets of tablets received for the vulnerable children as they could attend classes were given through the project. Moreover, ITC trainings and support provided to the teaching staff were timely provided by the IT team. Afterwords, teachers participated in several other trainings for using e-learning tools.

Table 13. Achievements of the IT component of the project

INDICATOR	ACHIEVED
No. of workshops conducted jointly by IT consultants	5
Ensuring uniform IT support in school units involved	34 school units involved
Consulting for the directors of the mentioned educational units and the persons responsible for the administration of the educational platform implemented in the school, teaching staff	220 teaching staff respectively, 7 auxiliary teaching staff

Source: Monitoring data processed by the evaluators

IT support has also been appreciated by principals and teachers. The assistance provided in this field has been given to schools based on their specific needs. When principals were asked how important was the support received for schools' management, 72,00% of the respondents considered that IT support has been to a very large or to a large extent useful for the school. Only 4% responded that the received support in this area was useful to a small extent.

Achieved and planned results related to the capacity development of teachers

The following tables, which presents the achievement rates of the project I regards with the planned outputs for teachers' capacity development, shows that the project reached its initial targets to a high extent. Only in three cases, namely: *resource teachers with competences to provide personalized support to children facing transition to upper secondary level and carry out remedial activities, No. of teachers conducting at least 1 support and counselling group session for students, No. of parent educators trained at national level (updated curricula)*, the targets were not met.

Table 14. Project achievements in regards with the trainings addressed to school staff

COMPONENT	INDICATOR	PROJECT TARGET	ACHIEVEMENTS	ACHIEVEMENT RATE
School subjects	Training session: Romanian language	-	19 teachers from schools and high schools in Bacău county and 2 specialists inspectors from ISJ Bacău	-
	Training session: Mathematics		41 teachers from schools and high schools in Bacău county and 1 specialized inspector from ISJ Bacău	
	Training session: Integrated mathematics-science activities		18 teachers from schools and high schools in Bacău county.	
Counselling	Training session: School counsellors	37	37 counsellors from schools in the network, as well as from other rural and urban schools in Bacău County	100%
	Resource teachers with competences to provide personalized support to children facing transition to upper secondary level and carry out remedial activities	120	115	95,83%
Management	Training session: Educational management	-	42 representatives of management teams, 26 representatives of secondary schools and 16 representatives of high schools in the network	-
Interculturality	No. of teachers trained in Roma history	32	34	106,25%
	No. of teachers trained in Interculturality/ diversity teaching	310	328	105,81%
	No. of new developed and adjusted didactic materials for building socio-emotional skills on students	15	15	100%

Professional guidance	No. of teachers trained and provided with tools (including Career Bus Board Game Kit) to guide students in their educational pathway	231	255	110,39%
	% of teachers who have improved knowledge on how to support students to choose their educational pathway and future career	90%	100%	111,11%
	No teachers involved in receiving the Career Bus Board Game Kit	140	301	215,00%
	No. of teachers conducting at least 1 support and counselling group session for students	90	42	46,67%
Appreciative parenting	Total number of teachers participating in the online session training in Appreciative Parenting sessions- updated version	410	2.386	581,95%
	No. of parent educators trained at national level (updated curricula)	2.000	1.532	76,6%
	Number of consultations at national level	1	1	100%
	Number of modules on appreciative parenting implemented	2	2	100%

Source: Monitoring data processed by the evaluators

Trainings

Trainings were very appreciated by the teachers that participated due to two main characteristics: the expertise of the human resource that was involved in delivering the trainings and their applied approach, both outstanding them from the multitude of trainings that teachers attend to.

The general perspective shared by the principals and teachers that were interviewed was that the trainings provided by UNICEF left very pleasant memories for the participants and changed their perspective and approach towards vulnerable children. As an example, case of Târgu Ocna nr. 1 Lower Secondary School, the teachers highlighted the importance of developing the fundamental writing, reading, and mathematics across all disciplines. The principal's perspective shifted, appreciating the need for these skills in all subjects, not just exams. Courses in Mathematics, Romanian Language, Chemistry, Physics, the history of the Roma community, interculturality, and sociology of music were all deemed valuable in contributing to teachers' abilities. Changes in the mentality of teachers some teachers from viewing certain children as „problems” to how to intervene to help the children.

Moreover, the trainings delivered on National Evaluation subjects, counselling and on interculturality were attended by both school staff (management and teaching personnel) and representatives of key stakeholder at county level (County School Inspectorate and County Center for Educational Resources and Assistance). This approach facilitated the development of a common understanding of the issues addressed through the trainings and the possibility of taking up several practices, methodologies, and teaching materials by the CSI Bacău and the CCERA Bacău for further dissemination among all lower secondary schools in the county.

Interculturality

In regards with this activity, the project reached or surpassed all its targets. 34 teachers were trained in Roma history, 328 teachers were trained in Interculturality/ diversity teaching and 15 didactic materials for building socio-emotional skills on students or developed or updated. The perspectives collected from training participants indicate that, on one hand, this type of training was very important for improving the inclusiveness level in their school and remained important until the end of the project, especially when face-to-face classes were resumed. Main benefits of these trainings for teachers were:

- Access to guidance in regards with the way in which discriminatory attitudes should be approached,
- Developed capacity to better and timely recognize and address discrimination cases,
- Support materials for sessions held with children.

Also, teachers mention that the received material were used in class in specific sessions or whenever an ad-hoc problematic situation occurred.

Counselling and professional guidance

Out of the 4 output indicators related to professional guidance component of the project, for three of them, *teachers trained, teachers that improved their knowledge and skill and teachers receiving Carrer Bus kit*, the targets were surpassed. Only for the indicators of *teachers conducting at least 1 support and counselling group session for students* the achievements were less than expected, 46,67% of the target. It is important here to emphasize that through the trainings conducted by the School of Values partners, all teachers have improved their knowledge on how to support students to choose their educational pathway and future career. On the other hand, as also the field work highlighted, less visible effects were registered regarding the extent to which teachers continued to apply the methods learned in class.

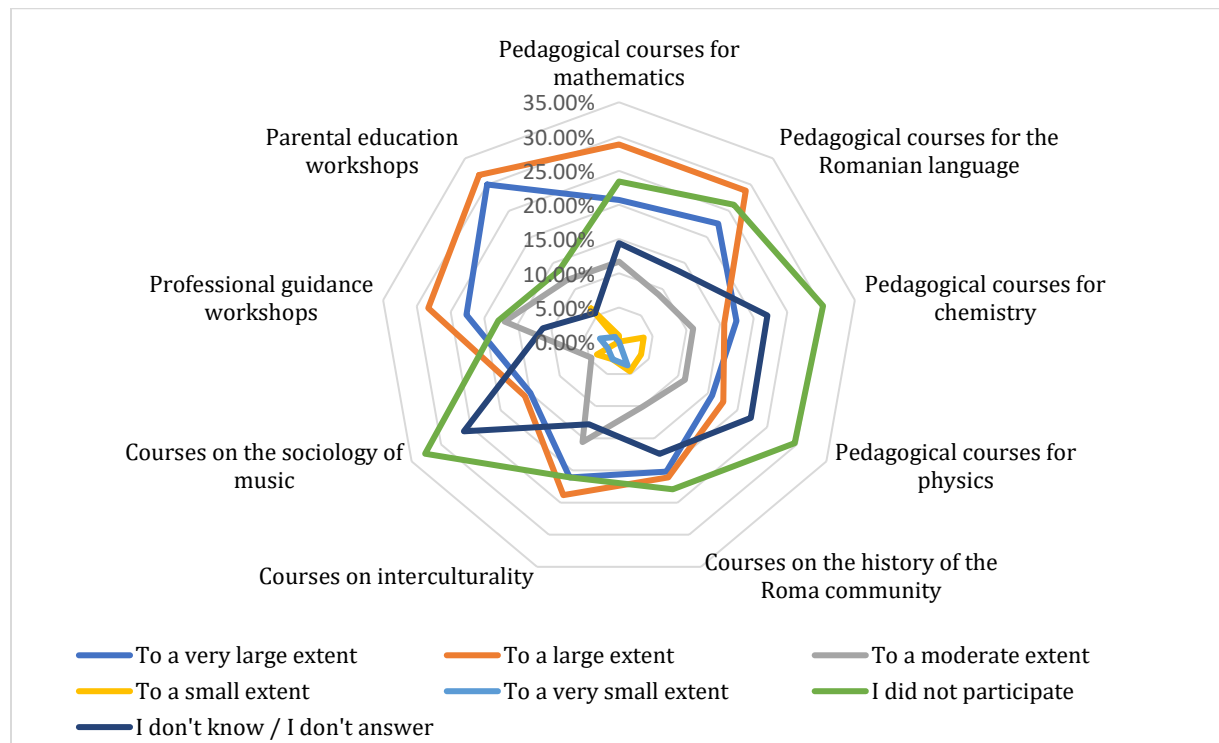
Appreciative parenting

Through this activity 2386 teachers attended the online sessions held on appreciative parenting (481,95% more than initially planned) and 1532 teachers were trained at national level (23,3% less than planned). As previously mentioned, (*under EQ 7*), the parenting component of the project is considered to be, by school staff, one of the most needed and effective part of QIE Transition project. Most of the schools included in QIE Transition project have more than one accredited parental educator. In the case of the Gheorghe Nichita School from Motoşeni 6 parental educators were accredited or in the Alecu Russo School from Bacău 4 parental educators were accredited. But, not in all cases was clear how many parenting educators were accredited during QIE Transition project or in the previous phase of QIE model.

Nevertheless, the collected evidence indicates that where teachers / class masters participated to training and were accredited the manner in which meeting with parents are conducted changed. Teachers try to create a more relaxed atmosphere, address also other subjects than school results and administrative issues and are focused on maintain a close relationship with the families. Also, teachers often mentioned that through parental education sessions found out key information regarding the difficulties that children face at home, such as: domestic violence, parents alcohol addictions, sever financial situations. This made them realize that some children need support from school or from their teachers in various directions: counselling, socio-emotional pillar, financial or even legal. Thus, the most important aspect through which this component remains one of the most effective ones is the accreditation process, which requires the teacher to go through an entire parenting module of 10 sessions along with the addressed parents.

As the results of the survey addressed to teachers indicate, most appreciated training that were provided to them were on the following topic: parental education, pedagogical courses in Romanian language, professional guidance and mathematics.

Figure 10. Perspective of teachers regarding the usefulness of the trainings provided to them through the project



Source: Survey addressed to teachers

6.3. EQ9. Which parts of the project are most and least effective? What factors explain success?

Level of effectiveness per project's component

This comparative analysis of the effectiveness level of QIE transition components is based on the information presented under EQ7. The present findings were developed based on the following criteria: frequency with which targets groups representatives that were interviewed mentioned these activities, order in which they mentioned most effective activities that were organized or of which they have benefitted.

Thus, based on the triangulation of perspectives collected from lower secondary schools' and high schools' principals and teachers and from children that participated in the project when they were enrolled in 7th and 8th grade and their parents, the **most effective activities conducted under the framework of UNICEF QIE transition project** were:

- Microgrants
- Extracurricular activities
- Adolescents' clubs and trips / summer schools
- Parenting sessions
- Trainings for teachers for school subjects and
- Technical assistance / trainings for project writing

Nevertheless, also examples of other project's activities being very effective in several schools were identified, but at the same during field work, in other schools less effective cases were registered related to the same activities. Thus, activities for which the available reporting and monitoring data

and the collected perspectives **vary from a school unit to another in terms the importance and magnitude of the produced effects** are:

- Professional guidance and counselling,
- Mentorship programme,
- Scholarships.

In these cases, due to the fact that perspective varies, we consider that several improvements in terms of design, frequency and monitoring should be made as to ensure an approximately similar level of effectiveness across the treated schools.

Based on principals' views, 76,92% of the middle schools' surveyed management staff consider that microgrants and extracurricular activities were the most important for teachers to help students complete secondary school and continue school, second important being counselling and professional guidance (53,85%). Teachers that participated in the project also valued the most microgrants (46,02%) and extracurricular activities (44,64%) based on their influence on the educational path of students.

In the case of the following two activities, while they are at most importance for the final objective of the project, a lack of clear implementation, reporting and monitoring procedures, led to less effectiveness, thus the **generation and registration of little effects or the impossibility of quantifying the effects**:

- Remedial activities,
- Monitoring of children being at risk of dropout or trainings / technical assistance in the school management area.

Level of integration of project's components into the model

The analysis conducted led to the formulation of the following main findings in regards with the integration of projects components in the QIE Transition model:

1. The integrative approach is coherent and very effective when implemented adequately. All components included in the model were relevant for the problems identified at the level of the school communities covered by the project. As the effectiveness analysis showed, many activities created synergies, thus contributed together to the same expected result, such as: increase the interest of parents in the education path of their children, increase the trust of parents in schools and what education means for their children's future or increase the self-confidence of children and trust in their capacity of pursuing the educational and professional paths that they desire.

According to the analysis conducted by the Education Research Unit, from the National Center for Policies and Evaluation in Education (the former Institute of Education Sciences), the most important bottlenecks face by children enrolled in lower secondary education, in the schools included in the project were addressed by QIE Transition, as per following table.

Table 15. Challenges faced by children enrolled in the lower secondary schools addressed by the project QIE Transition

challenges	AVERAGE SCORE		CORRESPONDING QIE TRANSITION COMPONENT	EFFECTIVE IN ADDRESSING THE IDENTIFIED PROBLEMS
The precarious socio-economic situation of the family	2.8	70%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Scholarships - Extracurricular activities, such as trips and summer schools, that could not be afforded otherwise by the families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To a large extent scholarships were effective, nevertheless, it is not clear how where the children selected given the fact that the component of monitoring children at risk of dropout was not implemented as planned. Some cases where children did not need the scholarships or were not involved in the project before enrolling in 9th grade were identified during fieldwork. But a quantitative assessment in this regard could not be done due to lack of data. - Extracurricular activities are considered to be very effective, some of them addressing explicitly vulnerable children and offering them the possibility to accumulate various experience that were not accessible for their families.
Poor involvement of parents in learning	2.5	62.5%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parenting sessions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Very effective, as the general perspective of project's target groups shows.
Gaps in the level of competences with which the eighth-grade ends	2.4	60%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teachers' trainings - Remedial activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - As most of the participants in trainings emphasized, the sessions conducted stood out due to the expertise and experience of trainers, their structure and their applied approach (especially in regards with the possible subjects for the National Evaluation). - Remedial activities, while rather more effective than not, did not generate significant changes in regards with the average results of children at the National Evaluation, for the schools included in QIE Transition model in comparison with the entire population of lower secondary schools from Bacău County. The rate of National Exam passing increased with approximately 8 percentage points since the beginning of the project, with is lower than the evolution registered at county level.
Poor results on the National Assessment for 8th Grade Graduates	2.4	60%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teachers' trainings - Remedial activities 	
Lack of valorisation of education	2.4	60%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parenting sessions - Professional guidance and counselling - Role models - Microgrants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - All the mentioned project components had an important role in changing perspectives of children and their parents regarding the importance of school and education. Several examples are presented under EQ 7 and the 6 drafted case studies.
Difficulty accessing high school/vocational school due to long distances	2.1	52.5%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Scholarships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Effective to a large extent (<i>please see the explanations from the first row</i>).

Low school attendance	1.9	47.5%	- Extracurricular activities organized through grants, Holtis clubs, trips, summer schools	- Extracurricular activities are considered to be very effective because they increase the enthusiasm of children towards school and their motivation to continue their education but also, they improved to some extent the perspectives of parents in regards with the benefits of the schools for their children.
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Source: UCE / ISE project report December 2020, data collected through the survey regarding the identification of the training and development needs of the teachers in the schools involved in the project

2. Nonetheless, not in all cases, the model was implemented as designed. In general, where the activities were not implemented with the recommended pace and frequency and where very few school staff members were constantly involved, the overall effectiveness of the project remained limited. For example, UNICEF activities conducted after 2018 in Bogdănești Lower Secondary School were less frequent or the participation and interest of teacher seemed to be lower. Consequently, the coherence of the model in this school was affected to some extent. Further, as the analysis drafted on this case shows, the effectiveness of the UNICEF model at school level can be consider limited. In this case, the school did not access microgrants, the activities of the project were not implemented for a period of approximately 2 years, due to changes in the school management and only 3 children benefited from the scholarships and mentorship programs after enrolling in high school. While several positive results were registered, various problems related to school performance of children, school attendance, interest of parents for their children education, efforts made by teachers for supporting children in need are still present in school.
3. The connection between the activities, even if some activities related to personal development did not directly help the children to achieve better school results and thus be able to continue school or reach a high school, in general it was observed that the collaboration between teachers and students outside of class hours gave the students confidence and courage to address a professor when they have problems, they opened up to them and thus they could be helped. In general, it is observed the coagulation of small teams of teachers who come to the aid of the children and make efforts to solve problems such as: reduced financial resources, parents' reluctance to continue school or the child's lack of confidence in his own abilities. Cases in which children's problems were discovered precisely as a result of the closeness between students and teachers, and sometimes also between parents and teachers, were mentioned in many interviews, and as an example we can mention: Alecu Russo Lower Secondary School, Strugary Lower Secondary School or Răducanu Rosetti Lower Secondary School from Căiuți.
4. Several examples where extracurricular activities organized within the project and continued afterwards based on the UNICEF Transitions model, filled out the gap of missing social events in the communities where the schools were located, like in the case of Strugari Lower Secondary School or Alexandru Vlahuță High school from Podu Turcului. This aspect was key in increasing the role of the school in the community and the trust of parents in school institutions. While this can be considered an objective of the project, which has not been explicitly stated, this type of key effects has happened in several case, first of all where this gap existed and second o all where a strong school team took over UNICEF QIE activities that proposed to organize activities with a great with a great visibility, beyond the school community.

Hampering and facilitating factors which influenced the success of the model

The following list of factors that have facilitated the effective implementation of the project or hampered its success is developed based on the evidence collected from:

- The data provided in the reports drafted by UNICEF and by the implementing partners;
- The interviews conducted with the coordination and implementation teams (including UNICEF CO Romania staff, implementing partners staff or the local coordinators);
- The interviews and focus groups conducted with members of school community: principals, teachers, children and parents.

Table 16. Factors facilitating and hampering the effectiveness of QIE Transition project

Facilitating external (context) factors	Hampering external (context) factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interest and dedication of the school human resources that were involved in the project. - Stable management teams set up in schools, that took the responsibility of the implementation of QIE Transition model. - The interest of the School Inspectorate of Bacău County and the effective collaboration between them and project staff. - The expertise and long-lasting experience of each implementing partner in their areas. - In some cases, good relationship between school units and public local authorities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Community traditions / culture - Several school staff that were interviewed emphasized that in disadvantaged communities, especially Roma families, usually boys have a higher level of education than girls. - Financial situation of families – lack of financial resources is one of the most important causes for which children do not continue their education. On one hand they start working and earning money for the family at very early ages. On the other hand, parents do not have enough money for cloths, food, school supplies and transport - Lack of success examples in regards with school competition and professional development, first of within the family, then in the community. As the collected data from teachers, parents and children, models represent the main factor that can ensure a normal educational path for children. Existing good examples in the proximity of the children, close family member, other relatives, neighbours of friends. Without them - School management changes during the project implementation period and personnel turnover. - Public monitoring system lacks in coherence, reliable data, and availability. - Illiteracy of the children participating in projects activities, such as the Career Bus components, hampered the optimal running of the workshops. Implementing partners state that in various cases the students enrolled 7th and 8th grades who participated in the project did not know how to write or read. This factor may be viewed from an internal perspective, linked with projects design, if we take into consideration the lack of adaptation of the activities carried out to the specific needs of the target group - The pandemic outburst and the online school that affected in a significant manner the effectiveness of the educational process, deepened the gap between disadvantaged communities and the other communities, disrupted the connection between parents and the school and the connection and collaboration among children, led to isolation of children, anxiety, and other mental health problems very difficult to be properly addressed in disadvantaged environments. - Overload of school staff.

Facilitating internal (project related) factors	Hampering internal (project related) factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Project approach – integrative approach which is coherent and very effective when implemented adequately. - The continuation of the approach from QIE, in the same schools, based on the existing evidences related to the effectiveness of the model. - Professionalism, expertise, and dedication of UNICEF partners. - Structure of the model: UNICEF CO team – implementing partners – local coordinators and coordinating staff from schools. - Flexible system of implementation and less burdening reporting model for both partners and schools. - The microgrants model which generates rapid and very visible effects at school level with relatively limited budgets. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Very limited effectiveness of the project component related to filling out fiches for the identification and monitoring of children being at risk of dropout. - The lack of systematization for the monitoring system. A common database with all achievements, by gender where relevant, can improve the overall view of project effectiveness. - Lack of clear implementation, reporting and monitoring procedures for several components of the project. - Lack of clarity in the overall objective of the project and its components and in the planning of activities for several schools. - Lack of clarity related to the responsibilities of mentorship coordinators in high schools. - Lack of financial incentives for the schools’ staff that coordinated different activities of the project. - Trainings delivered under the framework of the project did not have credits for the participants. - Physical presence of UNICEF experts in schools, which was very much valued, equally, by teachings staff and children.

Source: analysis conducted by the evaluators

7. Main findings - EFFICIENCY

7.1 EQ10. Does the project use resources in the most economical/efficient manner to achieve expected results?

Extend to which the project used resources in the most efficient manner to achieve expected results from an economic perspective

In order to assess if the project used resources in the most efficient manner to achieve expected results, the evaluation computed average expenditure per unit (participant to training/micro-grant/teenage club/workshop/etc.). The evaluators compared the average expenditure of QIE Transition with the average expenditure of QIE. The qualitative evaluation (based on interviews and case studies) has been used to understand the dynamics between provided and needed resources of all types. The evaluators calculated the average expenditure by dividing the approved expenditure for an activity by the final output. In cases where data on approved expenditure was unavailable, estimated average expenditure was computed by dividing the allocated budget for an activity, as outlined in the detailed financial planning, by the final output. This approach allowed for a comprehensive assessment of expenditure patterns across various activities within the evaluated scope.

Table 17.

Activities	Partner	Total	Expenditure	% Expenditure	Achieved	% Achieved	Unit cost
Preparing and delivering workshops for education stakeholders	Împreună	278.880,00	268.500,40	96,28%	177,00	107,93%	1.516,95
Organizing 12 workshops for project writing and implementation for schools and local authorities	Împreună	255.088,00	258.820,00	101,46%	13,00	108,33%	19.909,23
Support (training and guidance) for school principals in 50 schools to update Institutional Development Plans	Împreună	67.460,00	67.460,00	100,00%	41,00	82,00%	1.645,37
Teachers' training in Roma history and interculturality for 60 teachers from 25 high schools	Împreună	118.181,00	121.095,00	102,47%	80,00	133,33%	1.513,69
Organize training for 40 educators from 20 high schools	Holtis	89.730,00	60.794,95	87,06%	66,00	165,00%	921,14
Organise appreciative parenting sessions in schools	Holtis	112.950,00	107.008,95	94,74%	393,00	98,25%	272,29
Organise appreciative parenting sessions in high schools	Holtis	135.700,00	135.700,00	100,00%	779,00	97,38%	174,20
Preparing and delivering workshops for teachers - Career Bus	School of Values	258.600,00	258.600,00	100,00%	255,00	101,11%	1.014,12
Set-up for and delivery of Online & Offline workshops for students - Career Bus	School of Values	681.200,00	681.200,00	100,00%	1661	100,53%	410,11

Source: Analysis conducted by expert team

The first type of expenditure for which calculations were computed are **trainings/workshops**. Starting Împreună Association, the **average expenditure** per training participant that attended sessions of diversity teaching, was 1.516,95 RON. This type of training was attended by three types of stakeholders, namely directors, teachers, and students. A target has been established for each type of stakeholder. The target set for teachers to attend the sessions was not achieved, i.e., 46,25% was the realisation rate. The target set for school principals has a 100% achievement rate, while the target for students was overachieved, i.e., 233,32%. The total budget execution for this type of trainings is 96,28% of the total budget. Therefore, a balance can be noted between the achievement in terms of outputs and the budget execution.

Regarding the average **estimated expenditure** per participant for trainings offered by Împreună Association on updating the Institutional Development Plans, the project team managed to attract 41 principals to the face-to-face events of a target total of 50, resulting an estimated average cost unit of 1.645,37 RON (the margin of error could come from number of hotels rooms booked; however, it is marginal). Despite the fact that 41 principals received training on updating the Institutional Development Plans, only 36 principals updated their plan (out of 50 targeted schools).

The **average estimated expenditure** per teacher that attended training session in Roma history and interculturality was 1.513,69 RON. The initial budget for this activity was 118.181,00 RON, however, the amount that was planned by Împreună for expenditure was 121.095,00 RON. The target of the output indicator for this activity was 60 teachers. The project managed to provide trainings in in Roma history and interculturality to 80 teachers, representing an achievement rate of 133,34%. If analysed separately, the **average estimated expenditure** per teacher that attended training session in Roma history was 2.023,86 RON, with estimated total expenditure standing at 44.525,00 RON. Regarding the **average estimated expenditure** per teacher that attended training session in interculturality was 1.320,17 RON, with estimated total expenditure standing at 76.570,00 RON, and total indicator contribution to 22 teachers. **The average unit cost of the trainings in diversity teaching, Institutional Development Plans development and in Roma history / interculturality**

presented above is equal or lower than the average unit cost per teaching staff in the former QIE project, which is was roughly RON 2,000/person.

Regarding the Appreciative Parenting sessions, organized by Holtis, the **average expenditure** per participant stands at 921,14 RON for the trainings dedicated to the teachers (parent-educators). One of the components of this activity aimed to reach 40 teachers from 20 schools. The final achieved value was 66 teachers, representing an achievement rate of 165,00%. The executed budget for this training was 87,06% of the revised amount (thus a higher output was obtained with lower input compared to initial allocations). The sessions on Appreciative Parenting dedicated to parents with children in the 8th grade have a lower **average expenditure** per participant, standing at 174,20 RON. The component on parents managed to achieve its target of 800 parents, by providing trainings to 779 parents, representing a final achievement rate of 97,38%. The partner executed 100,00% of the amount dedicated in the revised budget for this type of trainings. The sessions with new modules on Appreciative Parenting dedicated for parents with children in the 8th grade have a lower **average expenditure** per participant compared to the overall unit cost (of 921,14 RON), standing at 272,29 RON. The component on parents managed to achieve its target of 400 parents, by providing trainings to 393 parents, representing a final achievement rate of 98,25%. The partner executed 94,74% of the amount dedicated in the revised budget for this type of trainings. **The average units cost spent on appreciative parenting are higher in QIE Transition than the average unit-cost in the former QIE project which stands at around 110 RON per participant.**

The Career Bus activity, coordinated by the School of Values Associations, managed to reach 255 teachers that were trained and provided with tools (including the Career Bus Board Game Kit) to guide students in their educational pathway. The partner exceeded its target of 231 teachers, representing an achievement rate of 110,39%. The total allocated budget for this activity was 258.600 RON, resulting an average expenditure of 1.014,12 RON per teacher. The School of Values organised online and offline workshops for students as well, to learn about the use and effects of tools and game kit. The activity managed to reach 1.661 students, slightly coming short of its target of 1.854 students, representing an achievement rate of 89,51%. The allocated budget for the students' workshops was 681.200 RON, resulting an average expenditure of 410,11 RON per student.

Table 18.

Activities	Partners	Total	Expenditure	% Expenditure	Achieved	% Achieved	Unit cost
Scholarships, mentoring activities and capacity building of the local structures to promote diversity and QIE	Împreună	241.000,00	207.115,99	85,94%	117,00	93,60%	1.770,22
Mentoring activities and scholarships for 350 students	Împreună	1.187.084,00	1.257.840,00	105,96%	353,00	100,86%	3.563,29
Provide and facilitate management of schools microgrants	Împreună	1.278.343,00	1.290.000,00	100,91%	155,00	158,16%	8.322,58
Organize teenagers' clubs in schools and high schools (2020)	Holtis	61.200,00	56.503,21	92,33%	34	113,33%	1.661,86
Organize 10 teenagers* clubs in schools and high schools	Holtis	47.650,00	-	100%*	10	100,00%	4.765,00
Consolidate 58 teenagers' clubs	Holtis	114,750,00	-	100%*	58	100,00%	1,978,00

Source: Analysis conducted by expert team

Concerning the 30 teenagers Holtis clubs in schools and high schools in Bacău county (organized between 2019-2020 period), the **average expenditure** per club in Bacău was 1.661 RON. This activity exceeded its target (which was initially increased from 20 clubs), as Holtis managed to

organise 34 clubs⁵² in high-schools from Bacău, representing an achievement rate of 113,33%. The budget execution for this activity was 92,33% of the revised budget. The costs related to establishing a club are consisted of the following activities:

- Cash for programme activities;
- Cost of supplies that directly assist beneficiaries or beneficiaries' institutions, including related costs for warehousing, transport and assembling;
- Technical assistance and costs of technical staff to directly support beneficiaries / beneficiary institutions;
- Cost of surveys and other data collection activities in relation to beneficiaries or measurement or programme expected results;
- Communication activities to directly support programme planned results.

Another 10 clubs were organised or consolidated between the period 2021-2022, for which the average **estimated expenditure** per club was 4.765 RON, which is much higher than the average expenditure of 34 the clubs established in the 2020-2019 period. However, this clubs benefited from consolidation, for which the average expenditure was 1,978 RON per club. According to an initial interview with Holtis, there are schools where two clubs have been organized, because the Regulation of Order and Operation (ROF) stipulates that the number of members who are part of a club must be between 12 and 33⁵³.

For the establishment of Holtis club activity, the most reliable data regarding average expenditure represents the 1.661 RON figure from the 2019-2020 period, for which the evaluators have data on expenditure.

The **average estimated expenditure** on microgrants per beneficiary (school) is 8.322,58 RON. The total allocated budget for this activity was 1.278.343,00 RON, while the detailed budget indicates that the total amount that is estimated to be executed was 1.290.000,00 RON. The total number of microgrants that were allocated were 107 (46 in 2021 and 61 in 2022). Based on the initial programme document of *Împreună Association* for 2021-2022, 50 microgrants were estimated to be financed and monitored for two years duration. Due to administrative constraints, the microgrants call was launched every year and new projects were submitted by the schools. Thus, the new target was set at 98 microgrants developed and implemented. However, the project managed to implement more microgrants than planned, namely 155 microgrants (achievement rate stands at 158,16%). No data available on executed budget. **The amount offered through the micro-grant in QIE Transition is much higher than the amount offered in the micro-grant in the former QIE projects, which stands only at 2.178 LEI.**

The **average expenditure** per scholarships, mentoring activities, and capacity building of the local structures (schools, students associations etc) to promote diversity and QIE is 1.770,22 per mentee. Each mentee benefited from a scholarship and mentorship activities. The rate of achievement of the target for the scholarships and mentorship activity was 93,6%. The total expenditures executed and approved through FACE accounts to 85,94% of the total budget.

Between 2021-2022, another scholarship/mentorship activity was organised, in which 353 pupils were supported, slightly exceeding its target of 350 pupils. The **average estimated expenditure** per pupil in this activity was 3.563,29 RON, from a total estimated expenditure of 1.257.840,00 RON. The budget planned to be executed was slightly higher than the budget initially planned in the Programme Document for 2021-2022.

⁵² The project managed to reach the target of 68 adolescents' clubs organized or consolidated in Bacău County by its end. However, only for 34 clubs financial data existed and the calculations could be carried out.

⁵³ Interview with Holtis Association, on 11th of January 2023

Overall, the consulted stakeholder, beneficiaries and UNICEF partners agree that the project used resources in the most efficient manner to achieve expected results from an economic perspective. According to the partners interviewed, the overall implementation of the activities of the project was considered as efficient. Special attention was given to the micro-grants component, which proved to be implemented in an efficient manner. Changing the partner in charge with the implementation of the microgrant component constituted a challenge to the efficient use of economic resources. At the same time, there have been situations where reallocation was needed to respond to unexpected changes or to optimise the efficiency of the project. One of these changes refer to switching from face-to-face to on-line meetings/trainings etc. While from a pure efficiency this change brought financial gains, evidence collected indicate that, to a large extent, face to face meetings are more cost-effective. Overall, from this perspective, it would have been worth, after the restrictions were lifted, even to supplement the budget in order to return to physical interactions.

On the other side, the factors positively conditioning the efficient nature of the micro-grants component were the successful collaboration between partners, within the partners teams and with the teams in schools, but also with local authorities. Another positive factor was the high level of attractiveness of the activities organised for the students, including the low-budget grants, such as providing transport for high school visits. Additionally, the partners paid particular attention to resource management, making sure that they were directed to the areas with the highest impact; appropriate adjustments of budgets were made to achieve, timely, the planned results.

The case studies reveal that micro-grants provided essential support for organizing activities and acquiring necessary equipment for students. These micro-grants resulted in the acquisition of equipment that continues to benefit the schools even after the project concludes. The purchase of technical equipment and consumables has notably improved the overall conditions for school activities. Tablets were specifically provided to children from vulnerable socio-economic backgrounds, allowing them to participate in online classes facilitated by the librarian during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Extent to what the project used resources in the most efficient manner to achieve expected results from a timeliness perspective

Overall, most of the activities were completed on time, with certain exceptions. Regarding the components implemented by Împreună Association, the biggest barriers encountered by the partner was the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in 2020. Due to the restrictions implemented by Romania in controlling the COVID-19 pandemic effects, Împreună had to delay the implementation of workshops on diversity and project writing and implementation for teachers, workshops on project writing and implementation for County Education Inspectorate staff, national conferences and team-buildings for local teams. Although the majority of the delay were overcome in the coming quarters, the activities of workshops on project writing and implementation for County Education Inspectorate staff and team-buildings for local teams had to be renounced. As well, the technical meetings with experts on education organized for schools in Bacau during 2021-2022 were delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic⁵⁴.

Besides the epidemiologic context in Romania between 2020-2021, Împreună encountered difficulties related to the availability of teachers and school principals. The partner encountered difficulties in gathering sufficient attendees to the workshops on updating Institutional Development Plans. Furthermore, a number of principals, despite attending the workshops, did not update their school's Institutional Development Plan, due to lack of time. On the same barrier, the partner encountered minor difficulties in the initial stages of the model, in providing trainings for teachers in

⁵⁴ Standard Quarterly Progress Reports for 2020, Împreună Association

diversity teaching (including intercultural and Roma history course). For the Programme Document 01/2019, Împreună did not achieve its target of providing trainings to teachers in diversity teaching, due to the low number of participants and even lower graduation number of participants (constrained by the responsibilities at schools)⁵⁵. Despite the aforementioned obstacles, Împreună managed a successful implementation of the component, with all other activities being implemented in time (or with a slight delay of a quarter) and all outputs have been obtained.

The COVID-19 pandemic represented an obstacle for the workshops on Appreciative Parenting, too, which were delayed due to the restrictions. The online workshops for parents on parenting education were also affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. These activities overcame the delays in implementation and achieved the targeted output by the end of the project⁵⁶. However, the QIE Mobile application with 4 modules (interface with QIE platform, QIE for Parents, QIE for Teachers and QIE for Clubs) was not implemented anymore. The main reason for this shortcoming represented the short time for implementation of such a platform (caused by the COVID-19 pandemic) and the constraints in terms of sustainability, as Holtis would need resources for the continuation of the platform after the end of the projects.

As for the Career Bus component, the constant change between online and face-to-face meetings due to the COVID restrictions, the additional vacation days for children and the limited availability of teachers represented an interplay of challenges that affected the efficient implementation of the workshops⁵⁷.

Although the project managed to achieve the majority of its outputs by its closure, with certain exceptions presented above, it is difficult to evaluate at this stage if the project managed to achieved its **effects** in time. The case studies show that significant improvement was achieved concerning the result of the children or the transition from 7th grade to 10th grade, however it is not clear if the observed changed can be fully attributed to the QIE Transition project. These aspects will be tackled in the Impact section of the evaluation.

7.2. EQ11. What is the value added (in terms of financial value) of the project?

Additional funds were made available to schools due to the implementation of the project

The project supported the financial capacity of the targeted schools through two channels: the microgrants that financed activities and acquisitions of equipment and the increased capacity of the school principals and teachers to attract funding, due to the workshops in project writing and implementation. Although data as regards additional projects won as a consequence of the activities of QIE Transition exist (as presented under “Effectiveness”), no information on the financial value of the won grants are available. Evidence collected indicate that, in general, the number of schools winning projects increased, and this evolution had a snow-ball effect as other schools also become inspired and applied for different projects.

According to interviews carried out, the project has successfully heightened the interest and capacity of school staff to seek external funding opportunities. While schools had previously engaged in limited collaborations with NGOs, the fieldwork revealed an increased eagerness to diversify funding sources. This newfound enthusiasm stems from the desire to enhance infrastructure, acquire necessary equipment, and ensure a steady supply of resources for school activities, including the organization of extracurricular events.

⁵⁵ Standard Quarterly Progress Reports for 2021-2022, Împreună Association

⁵⁶ Standard Quarterly Progress Reports for 2020, Holtis

⁵⁷ Standard Quarterly Progress Reports for 2021-2022, School of Values

7.3. EQ12. Are the cost implications for scaling up considered?

Extent to what the project considered the cost implications for scaling up the project

Based on data collected, no cost analysis was developed to facilitate the scaling up of the QIE Transition model. Holtis was the only partner that developed Scalability and Sustainability Plans for each component that it managed, namely the teenager clubs, parental education and QIE web platform. The analysis of the three plans shows that the cost implications for scaling up the component are limited. Each plan has two main chapters, one focussed on Scalability and one focussed on Sustainability. The Plan of the QIE web platform is an exception, as it only has a chapter on Sustainability⁵⁸.

The chapters dedicated to Scalability for the two components were found to be limited, as each chapter in all plans presents the scope, objectives, importance, steps in implementation and related scalability cost. The last section, i.e., scalability costs, is available only in the plan for teenagers' clubs, and it provides limited information on the necessary finance to sustain such a component at a higher level. The costing analysis from the Plan presents estimated number of clubs at national level, estimated number of projects that receive a grant, estimated number of members and total cost per year. The plan presents an optimist and pessimist scenario; however, it does not mention the methodology used in establishing the two scenarios and the related calculations. The programme document also does not budget the development of the Scalability and Sustainability Plans, therefore it is likely that the allocated resource for this activity was low⁵⁹.

In the context of the debate on the new National Education, UNICEF prioritised its resources and efforts in integrating elements from QIE Transition into the new reform on education. As well, UNICEF sought to incorporate elements of QIE Transition into the Multiannual European Financial Framework, given that the Operational Programmes for 2021-2027 were developed and approved in the last two year.

Due to the approach in integrating multiple components to address different needs, the complexity of scaling the QIE Transition model is acknowledged. Previous cost analyses in a similar project influenced current priorities and opportunities. Drawing parallels with the QIE model, which successfully scaled the parental education component in Iasi and Vaslui counties through separate initiatives, there are opportunities for scaling up QIE Transition in its entirety or only certain components (as needed). A barrier in scaling up QIE Transition is its limited visibility on a national scale.

8. Main findings - SUSTAINABILITY

8.1. EQ13. What are the interventions modelled that are most likely to continue when external support is withdrawn?

The understanding and capacity of stakeholders (within the school, as well as the county stakeholders in charge) to continue activities, based on the knowledge and skills acquired during the implementation of project activities and the teaching materials that were provided to them

The analysis carried out on the documents provided by UNICEF implementing partners on the effectiveness of the trainings carried out indicate that teachers were well equipped as to be able to continue activities as proposed by QIE Transition project. The in-depth analysis conducted for 6 middle schools showed that many activities are continued, such as: remedial activities, Holtis clubs,

⁵⁸ Scalability and Sustainability Plans for Teenagers Clubs, parental education and QIE web platform

⁵⁹ Scalability and Sustainability Plans for Teenagers Clubs, parental education and QIE web platform

extracurricular activities, and that many of the pedagogical methodologies and materials provided by UNICEF during the implementation of the project were considered very relevant by teachers and they are used in general (especially the materials related with the subjects for National Evaluation) or only when the situation requires (such as: parenting education materials or inclusive education and multicultural materials). Nevertheless, well equipped teachers do not constitute the only necessary requirement as to ensure the continuation of UNICEF's interventions in school. The discussions held with project beneficiaries emphasize that more important are: the interest and importance given by the principle / management team to these activities, the motivation of teachers, the financial and available time resources. The schools treated by the QIE Transition project face difficulties in ensuring at least one of the abovementioned necessary conditions for project sustainability. In general, where the project was very effective, the visibility of results and satisfaction of principals and teachers compensate for other bottlenecks encountered. There is a need for constant and important additional efforts from the side of school staff and the extent to which they act accordingly depends in a significant manner on their motivation and determination, and of the lack of alternative incentives. However, there is a risk that the teachers that are the most involved could lead to fatigue and lesser involvement in future activities. The potential burden on teachers due to the limited time available for extracurricular activities is a real risk, as most of these activities are planned and executed after regular school hours.

Moreover, in order to ensure the continuation of the activities promoted through QIE Transition, it would have been beneficial to set from the beginning a sustainability period of the project and to periodically assess the extent to which project components have been taken up by school carried out without the support of UNICEF. As the discussions held during field work indicated, for many principals and teachers, the fact that "UNICEF left their school" felt similar to an abandonment, especially after more than 8 years in which various interventions and types of support coming from UNICEF was constantly present in schools. Thus, a smoother exit strategy is required as contribute to the maintenance of project results in schools and motivation of teachers to continue in the same vein as in the last years. Several interviewees mentioned as a solution the organisation of annual meetings, even online, with UNICEF experts, partners and representatives of the schools supported during which recent experiences related to UNICEF activities still carried out in schools and bottlenecks encountered, are shared . This type of activity may have positive effects by maintaining the feeling of belonging to the community created by UNICEF and the motivation of resource staff from each school.

Level of stability of teachers and school managers in the schools

Although there is no available information regarding the percentage of teachers that participated in QIE Transition project and are still employed by the same school unit / units, the qualitative data collected through interviews and focus groups with principals and teachers indicates that a large number of school personal involved in the project is still in place. On the other hand, the important change in the school management that took place in 2020, when approximately 50% of the principals from the QIE Transition schools were replaced, led, in some cases, to a decrease in the interest and motivation of the teachers that were involved in the project at that time. Due to the fact that some of the new principals did not prioritize the QIE Transition project, in few cases activities stopped for important periods of time.

Extent to which human resources involved in the project continue activities beyond its completion or apply the approaches proposed by the model in their daily activities

According to the data collected from surveys, 70,83% of the middle school principals and 80% of the high school principal consider that, in general, activities implemented under QIE Transition project in their school will be continued to a very large or large extent. Also, 75,23% of the surveyed teachers

share the same opinion. This perspective has been validated through the data collected from interviews and focus groups conducted with school staff. The main activities that are still being conducted in schools are:

- **Remedial activities**, in some schools being already an activity implemented in schools when QIE Transition project started – in many cases teachers acknowledge the importance of supporting the children that have difficulties in achieving satisfactory school results and that this one of the most important support actions that the school staff can do in order to improve the overall performance of their school;
- **Holtis Clubs**, clubs are active in all school units that were included in the data collection phase of the evaluation – based on the evidence collected, in many cases, the clubs evolved in a natural way, where board members gained more responsibilities in planning and organizing the activity of the club and couches remained active mostly for advisory purposes;
- **Extracurricular activities**, being the ones that were mentions in each discussion held with principals or teachers due to their importance in changing the atmosphere in school and motivating children, but also teachers, are still conducted in most of the analysed schools;
- Searching for **external funding opportunities**, even if in some cases schools limited so far only to small collaborations in NGOs projects – the field work showed that the project increased the interest and capacity of school staff in searching for additional sources of funding, as to improve their infrastructure, supplement the equipment, provide the necessary supplies for school activities and be able to continue organizing extracurricular activities. There is a still functional WhatsApp group where the trainers continued to offer support to teachers also after the closure of UNICEF project. The trainers and also the participants periodically share information about funding opportunities.

Other activities that are still conducted by teachers, but not in most of the in-depth analysed schools, are:

- Parenting sessions;
- Visits at high schools;
- Counselling sessions and professional guidance;
- Mentoring activities;
- Experience exchange between middle schools and high schools and visits.

Table 19. Extent to which UNICEF activities are continued in the treated school's continuation of UNICEF's activities

TYPE OF ACTIVITY	OBSERVATIONS / STATUS	APPLIED BEYOND THE SCOPE OF THE PROJECT ⁶⁰
Ensure identification of vulnerable children and their monitoring until graduation (and after, if possible, but in big schools this activity is rather difficult to be conducted due to the large number of graduates and the limited time resources of school staff)	Very few examples where this process is conducted in a systematized manner. This has been an activity that has not been optimally implemented during project implementation.	YES, to primary education level
Remedial activities	To a large extent in place. This activity has been extended using UNICEF model also to other	YES, yes to primary education level

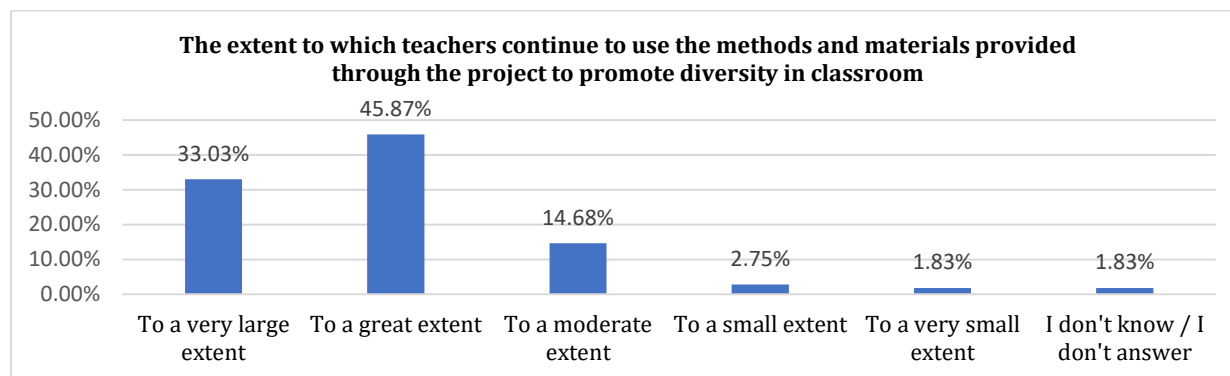
⁶⁰ The extension does not refer to a general approach conducted by most of the schools treated in QIE Transition project, but to the identification of situations in which activities have been provided to also other school children, beyond the scope of the project, at the initiative of school management.

Holtis Clubs	To a very large extent in place.	YES, to middle school children enrolled in 5 th or 6 th grades or to high school children enrolled in 11 th and 12 th grades
Extracurricular activities	To a large extent in place. Principals and teachers seek to organize various types of activities with children outside classes, in order to motivate children, connect better with their families, make the school visible within the community and make the work of the children visible.	YES, many activities were addressed to all school pupils
Attract external sources of funding	Still in place. This focus of the teams that participated in writing microgrants has been maintained after project closure.	YES, depending on the school needs
Counselling and tutoring activities	Still in place, process conducted, in general, on a case-based approach.	-
Ensure a closer relation and communication with parents, including through parenting sessions	Partially in place, due to the fact that the evaluation found that parenting sessions are still conducted to a small extent, nevertheless, the approach promoted by Holtis is to a large extent still used by teachers involved in the project, in their relation with parents.	YES, to other education levels, i.e., primary school.
Carrer guidance	Partially in place.	-
Mentoring activity	Partially in place. This activity has been conducted also for other school levels because teachers have realized its importance in maintaining their pupils in school and easing their transition from an education level to another.	YES, for the transition between other education levels, i.e., from preschool to primary education level, or from primary education to lower secondary education.
Partnerships between schools and high schools and visits	Partially in place.	-

Source: analysis conducted by the evaluators

In general, school units kept an active interest in ensuring a non-discriminatory and violence free environment in their institutions. Several cases of specific activities related to discrimination and bullying have been identified. But the possibility of assessing in a more exact manner the extent to which schools are still focused on providing an inclusive, friendly environment for their students is limited. The data collected through the survey addressed to teachers showed that 78,90% of the respondents still use to a very large or large extent the material provided by UNICEF partners in order to supported in promoting inclusiveness and diversity.

Figure 11. The extent to which teachers continue to use the methods and materials provided through the project to promote diversity in classroom



Source: Survey addressed to teachers

Extent to which relationship built between schools and parents and other members of the community is maintained

The perspectives collected from project target groups show that where the appreciative component of the project had effects, the produced changes in regards with the improved relationships between teachers and parents have been maintained also after the closure of the project. On the other hand, the evaluation also found cases where parental education activities were either not conducted in schools either they did not have the expected effects, like in the case of Mihail Andrei Schol of Buhuși or Lower Secondary School of Sănduleni. Also, in general, there was a category of parents difficult to reach, that could not be involved in school's activities even during the implementation of the project. Even if parental sessions, based on the module provided by Holtis, may not be conducted with the same pace, all interviewed school staff, including principals, acknowledge the importance of developing a better relation with parents and bringing them closer to school, is a factor in the education and further professional development of their students. Thus, in most of the in-depth analysed cases, in general the approach of the parents towards teachers have changed, the topics addressed during parents meetings organized by class mastered besides administrative issues and children's school results, include new also: problems encountered by parents and children, needs that can be addressed by the school, methods through which parents can help their children with homework and ways in which parents should behave and communicate with their teenagers children. Based on the survey addressed to principals, the trainings followed by teachers on appreciate parenting were the ones that changed the most the ways in which activities in schools are carried out by teachers. 88% of middle school teachers that participated in the survey, shared his opinion. Further, the qualitative data collected from interviews and focus groups carried out with school staff, indicated that the improved relationship between parents and teachers is maintained in schools, and this is due to the fact that teachers acknowledge that a closer communication with parents is very important for raising their interest in school and their children performance and thus, for providing them more support and advice.

On the contrary, the parents who participated in the survey, have a less positive perspective on the extent to which parenting sessions influenced their relation with the school and changes produced can be sustained on a long term. Only 32,85% of parents consider that parenting sessions generated to a very large or to a large extent visible effects regarding their relationship with the school (class masters / teachers). In regards with the perspectives of children, 26,95% of the children that participated the survey, consider that parenting sessions determined visible positive changes in the relationship your parents have with the school. The discussions held with children showed that they

did not know very much details regarding this component of the project, not have noticed changes in their parents' relationship with their teachers.

Level to which funds are secured (national budget and or/EU funds) for the project continuation

While the majority of teachers and principals consider that the activities of the project will be continued at school level, all discussions held with the school communities highlighted the fact that the available financial resources are not sufficient. At the project level, coherence of drafting sustainability plans is limited. While some partners developed such plans, other only identified risks or bottlenecks that may be encountered in this regard.

In terms of ensuring the sustainability of the project, UNICEF aimed to work with central authorities, in order to incorporate good practices into legislation, policies, norms and standards. Also, UNICEF Country Office aimed to support county and national authorities accessing national budget, EU, and Norwegian funding to replicate the model. In this regard, it is important to mention here, some key examples of components of the project that were taken up in national legislative or programmatic documents, creating the necessary preconditions, including setting budget allocations, for the further implementation of activities promoted in the QIE Transition project:

- The introduction of vulnerable children monitoring fiche into the **National Programme for Reduction of School Dropout**, programme financed through EU funds. The programme also includes the following types of eligible activities similar with QIE Transition model:
 - o Remedial activities,
 - o adolescents' clubs,
 - o extracurricular activities, including trips,
 - o counselling,
 - o parental education,
 - o pedagogical trainings and trainings for mentors, tutors, school counsellors.
- Parental education has been included in the **Law of Education**. Currently a **National Strategy for Parental Education** is under public consultation.
- The strategic documents developed under CRED project, especially the **Reference Framework of the National Curriculum** adopted through Ministry Order in 2020, which included the experience of the Institute of Educational Sciences (project beneficiary of CRED project, funded under the Human Resources Operational Programme 2014 - 2020) accumulated during its participation in QIE projects in Bacau County, thus pedagogical approaches and materials have been taken up in this project.
- Together Agency also extended the utilization of various elements of the project, such as: pedagogical trainings, including trainings on discrimination and interculturality and technical assistance for project writing, through their other project implemented at national level, or in other counties.
- School of values developed a version of the Career Bus Board Game based only on pictures, as to be able to be used also in lower education levels, such as preschool and primary school. Also, the Association works on making the kit and the related tests available for other schools for free, through another non-refundable financing, i.e., Erasmus Plus.
- Holtis clubs have been successfully scaled up nationally and at other education levels, such as kindergartens and nurseries. QIE platform has been used with this purpose and partnership agreements between Holtis and the schools that established adolescents' clubs were signed.

Also, the evaluation showed that teaching materials, including the Career Bus Kit, were taken up by responsible public actors at county level, such as County School Inspectorate or County Resource Center and Educational Assistance, and further disseminated to all schools under their coordination.

Thus, some materials and approaches have already been introduced in the educational process in other schools from Bacău.

On the other hand, it is important to mention here that all interviewed school representatives emphasize that they are facing problems regarding financial resources at disposal. While the evaluation, especially the efficiency analysis, but not only, showed that the project has been designed as to easily integrated the proposed components into schools' activities without the need of involving many resources, in some cases, such as: extracurricular activities, schools need to deploy additional budgets, which in many cases are missing. In this context the capacity of attracting non-refundable funding, including PNRAS funding which covers most of QIE Transition types of activities, remains utmost importance for the sustainability of the project.

8.2. EQ14. Is the project replicable? Are any adjustments of the model needed for replication?

The extent to which needs as prioritized in the planning phase of the project and based on which the model has been developed are still in place

As a conclusion of EQ1, the project remained relevant until its end. Where some activities were not implemented in all schools (e.g., parenting education in Mihail Andrei School from Buhuși, or Microgrants in Bogdănești Lower Secondary School), this was due to lack of capacity at school level or lack of interest at management level.

The small progress as regards solving the main problems addressed by the project, e.g., transition rate, dropout rate, rate of the National Evaluation passing or school grades, does not indicate that there is no need for further interventions in the same direction. On the contrary, as the addressed phenomenon is a very complex one, impactful changes can be seen only after a long period of time and continuous intervention, especially as school populations are constantly changing and the efforts of teachers in applying and promoted the values and methods proposed by QIE Transition model needs to be constant.

The extent to which the monitoring system used under the QIE Transition model allows collection of evidence regarding all registered effects of the model

While to a large extent comprehensive in terms of its scope, the monitoring system would need several improvements in the case of a model replication. Based on the analyses conducted under relevance (EQ1) and effectiveness criteria, the following key issues need to be taken into account for a better registration and quantification of projects effects:

- 1. Better capturing outcomes** - The system of indicators does not capture all expected types of effects (outputs, outcomes and impact). While the monitoring system covers outcome indicators and it is properly defining them, expressing the measurement of a change produced by the activities conducted, the measurement unit is not adequately set, because it is not correlated with label of the indicators. The analysis conducted under EQ1 showed that outcomes are measured as outputs, counting number of participants instead of, for example, increased capacity, or number of new teaching methods applied in classes. Due to these inconsistencies, in several situations the monitored outputs and outcomes overlap because they addressed the same type of data.
- 2. Ensure coherence throughout the monitoring system** (at partners level and period of implementation) - In the case of project outputs, other inconsistencies were identified when comparing the outputs reported by each implementing partner. Similar approaches should have been applied horizontally at project level, in order to make the achievement by component comparable. Moreover, in line with the idea expressed aforementioned, very few partners report on changes produced by their involvement in the projects, such as: number of teachers with improved skills. In a similar manner, all implementing partners should measure

the effects produced by the activities conducted by them and report against a target. Moreover, where relevant or possible, partners should report the registered values by gender, type of addressed school (middle school / gymnasium), and rural / urban dichotomy.

3. **Capturing the effects produced for most vulnerable children** - In addition, in order to be able to measure the effects of the model on most vulnerable children, the monitoring system should have made possible the analysis of the proportion of vulnerable children (as identified through the fiches that needed to be filled out at school level) that benefited from each of the project activities addressed to school children. The fact that the available data does not allow to make these assessment leads to the impossibility of clearly stating to what extent QIE Transition helped first of all children being at risk of dropout.
4. **Ex-post monitoring** – A sustainability period may be set from the planning phase of the model and regular monitoring should be conducted after the closure of the project, through which information related to the activities still continued in schools, material still used or bottlenecks encountered by schools should be collected.

The needed human resources (including capacity building, management and coordination at national and country level) and the needed continuous/refreshing training/year

Based on the analysis conducted, and most important on the perspectives collected from local community level, a list of key responsible school personal should be ensured in schools and deployed to coordinating the activities.

Table 20. List of key school coordination staff needed to be in place as to ensure the continuation of UNICEF’s activities

ENSURE AN INCLUSIVENESS APPROACH IN THE EDUCATION PROCESS	MANAGEMENT TEAM
Ensure identification of vulnerable children and their monitoring until graduation (and after, if possible, but in big schools this activity is rather difficult to be conducted due to the large number of graduates and the limited time resources of school staff)	Responsible for the coordination of vulnerable children identification and monitoring - with the support of class masters
Ensure a closer relation and communication with parents	Management team - with the support of class masters
Adress emotional and socio-affective needs of students when the situation imposes it	School counsellor
Provide counselling and professional guidance	School counsellor and class masters
Ensure the activity of Holtis Clubs in schools	Holtis Club coach
Continue mentoring activity	Management team / Mentoring coordinator
Provide additional learning support / remedial activities for National Exam subjects to children with poor results	Management team - With the support of teachers

Source: analysis conducted by the evaluators

Possible risks for replicating the model and best mitigation measures

Three key aspects need to be considered when replicating the model:

- Avoid duplication, as some components of the project have already been taken over into national strategic of legislative documents, and other activities have been replicated in other areas of the county through the efforts of the implementing partners.
- Indicators system, to cover all important project outputs, include and measure outcome and apply a unitary monitoring system and outcomes measurement process to all parties involved. Ensure that data is collected and reported by gender and ensure that vulnerable

children, at least those involved in project are monitored throughout implementation and afterwards till school completion.

- Engagement strategy for local community actors (principals and teachers), especially in the context of teaching staff turnover, more intensive in rural environment, but also management staff turnover.

8.3. EQ15. What recommendations could be made to the GoR to replicate and scale up such a model?

The replication of the model or its scale up is recommended in principle to be undertaken by component. While the effectiveness analysis conducted under the evaluation shows that in order to produce the intended effects the project should be implemented based on its integrated approach, each component having its usefulness and important role in the entire logic of the intervention, the sustainability analysis showed that several components, continued from the first phase of QIE model, have been already taken up at national level, included in legislative documents, strategies and national programmes. Thus, a replication without a thorough analysis of what had already been transposed to the national strategic or programmatic levels, or implemented in other schools by project partners, may lead to the duplication of measures and inefficiency or waste of resources.

As mentioned in the previous section, many elements have been scaled up at national level or taken up in other schools' communities, outside of the scope of the project, by UNICEF partners, such as: remedial activities for vulnerable students with poor school performances, trainings for teachers, extracurricular activities, parenting sessions, career guidance, adolescents' clubs.

Nevertheless, components that were included in laws and strategies, may be also included in a replication project with the aim to facilitate their application at school level and urge the manifestation of the expected results. But in this case fewer solid arguments may be available as to finance certain type of interventions that are already regulated at national level and for which responsible actors should employ the necessary resources.

A key direction of action that should be taken by the Ministry of Education is thoroughly monitoring the achievements of the PNRAS, by region and county and evaluating the effectiveness of the programme, by eligible types of activities. This approach will show where the programme generated most effects and for whom (which target groups), where the approach of the programme was less effective and why, and where additional support is most needed.

Moreover, as the evaluation showed, Appreciative Parenting was one of the most valued components of the project, equally by principals and teaching staff. Thus, continuing the work on the National Parental Education Strategy "Educated Parents, Happy Children" 2022 – 2030 becomes another utmost important step for scaling up QIE Transition model.

9. Main findings - IMPACT

9.1. EQ16. What change did the project determine or influence at the level of beneficiaries (children and their families), professionals, communities, public administration – at local, county and/or national level?

The evaluation led to the formulation of the following main findings regarding the impact of the project for children and especially vulnerable children, parents, teachers and schools' principals, school communities and the education policy, for which we further present evidence.

1. **While there is an overall positive trajectory in graduation rates for the 10th grade (compulsory education), sustained efforts are required to address specific challenges, including enrolment disparities and the sustainability of progress.**

2. **The available statistical data present an inconclusive picture. Existing information indicates that children in the 7th grade are the most vulnerable to dropout risk. But data at project level and recorded in in the schools' electronic system (SIIR) show no consistent evidence that the QIE Transition project, implemented amid the COVID-19 pandemic, has significantly altered this trajectory.** Deficiencies in recording absenteeism and tracking the educational paths of students at risk of dropout hinder a more in-depth analysis of the QIE Transition project's impact on school attendance and participation.
3. **According to assessments from school principals, teachers, and students, the family's dynamics, including income and household issues, alongside children's intrinsic motivation to learn, emerge as primary factors influencing school attendance and, consequently, dropout rates.** Ultimately, there is a limited belief in the school's and teacher's capacity to motivate children to attend school regularly and engage in learning, despite the various activities implemented within the project. On the other hand, the importance of scholarships is emphasized by all stakeholders, and there is a recognized need for national policies that enhance scholarship programs to serve as effective incentives for students' motivation to pursue and continue their education.
4. **Surveys conducted among students, teachers, and parents underscore a widespread acknowledgment among students regarding the overarching importance of education and its specific relevance to their future success.** A substantial number of children express a robust desire to pursue further studies at high school or vocational school, a sentiment corroborated by both teachers and parents.
5. **While soft, cross-cutting skills, particularly communication, are deemed crucial and have been notably developed by children, it is essential to complement these skills with the cultivation of other key competences to ensure successful completion of upper secondary education.** The results of the National Evaluation exam underscore persisting deficiencies in key literacy and mathematical competences.
6. **QIE Transition projects have significantly impacted teachers' planning skills and organization of school and extracurricular activities, garnering strong enthusiasm from both teachers and students.** Improvements are also observed in areas such as school strategic management, didactic strategies, community partnerships, parental communication, and support services. However, based on the perspectives of teachers and school principals, along with in-depth case studies, it can be concluded that these changes remain modest and have not led to substantial structural alterations in school organizations.
7. **The QIE Transition project has positively impacted parental attitudes toward education for parents participating in activities, but continuous efforts are needed for significant impact.** Despite children noting changes in their parents' relationship with the school and teachers acknowledging an improvement in their relationship with parents, yet fewer teachers believe in increased parental involvement in school activities post-project, highlighting the challenge of engaging hard-to-reach parents and emphasizing the importance of further cultivating and expanding efforts to promote a substantial and enduring impact on students' annual graduation rates.
8. **The QIE Transition project played a role in enhancing the capacity of county-level institutions and influenced the national education policies, notably contributing to the formulation of the new law on pre-university education.** However, the impact of QIE Transition is only visible when considered in conjunction with other ongoing initiatives in the education sector, such as the presidential project "Educated Romania," earlier UNICEF

models (especially QIE), the support from the World Bank to the Ministry of Education, and the concerted efforts of numerous NGOs that, like UNICEF, have long advocated for education reform.

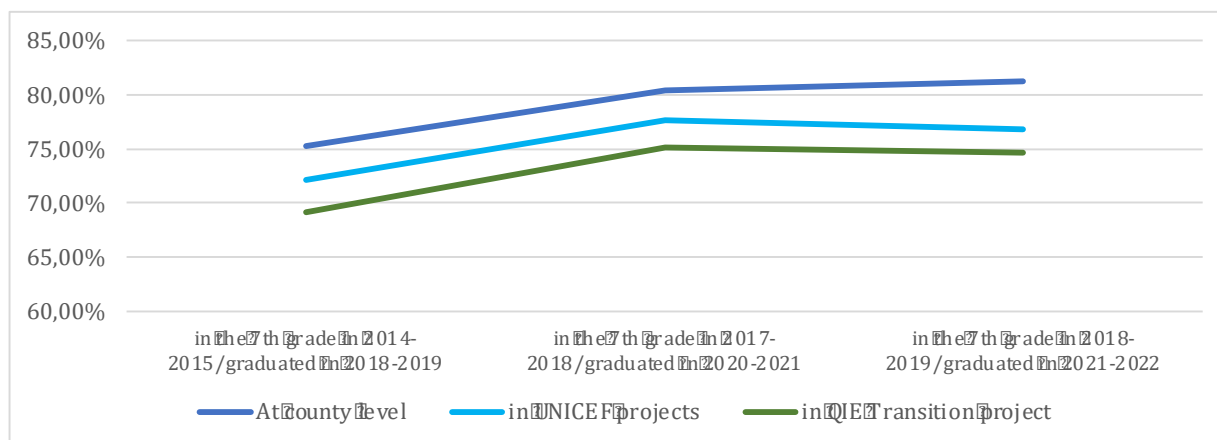
The general situation of the schools involved in the project in terms of graduation and transition rates

In Bacău county, there has been a consistent upward trend in the graduation rates of compulsory education over the years. 75.3% of 7th-grade students enrolled in the 2014-2015 school year successfully finished the 10th grade by the 2017-2018 school year. Three years later, in the 2020-2021 school year, this graduation rate increased to 80.4%, marking a notable improvement of 5.1 percentage points. Thus, 80.4% of students who were in the 7th grade during the 2017-2018 school year successfully graduated to the 10th grade by the 2020-2021 school year. In the subsequent school year, 2021-2022, the county-level graduation rate further rose to 81.2%, demonstrating a continued positive trajectory with an additional 0.8 percentage point increase compared to the previous year. Specifically, students enrolled in the 7th grade during the 2018-2019 school year, successfully completing their 10th-grade education.

Among 7th-grade students enrolled in the 2014-2015 school year in schools participating in UNICEF projects, the initial graduation rate of the 10th grade stood slightly lower at 72.1% compared to the county average. Similarly, for those enrolled in the 2017-2018 school year, the graduation rate in the 2020-2021 school year was below the county average, registering at 77.7%. Despite this, the progression in graduation rates of the 10th grade exhibited a slightly higher trajectory at +5.6 percentage points (77.7% compared to 72.1%) in UNICEF project schools, as opposed to +5.1 percentage points at the county level (80.4% compared to 75.3%). However, a noteworthy observation is that the trend in graduation rates in schools involved in UNICEF projects does not appear to be sustainable. Specifically, for 7th-grade students enrolled in the 2018-2019 school year, the graduation rate dipped to 76.8%, representing a decrease of 0.9 percentage points compared to the previous year, concerning 10th-grade graduation in the 2021-2022 school year.

For the QIE Transition project, the baseline graduation rate in the 2017-2018 school year for 7th-grade students from the 2014-2015 school year was even lower at 69.19%. The progression until 2020-2021 was slightly higher compared to the county level and marginally superior to schools participating in all UNICEF projects. Specifically, 75.11% of 7th-grade students enrolled in the 2017-2018 school year successfully advanced to the 10th grade by the 2020-2021 school year, reflecting a notable increase of 5.9 percentage points compared with the baseline. Similar to the broader pattern observed in all schools involved in UNICEF projects, those participating in the QIE Transition project also experienced a slight decline in the graduation rate in the 2021-2022 school year. Concretely, the graduation rate was 74.71%, representing a decrease of 0.4 percentage points compared with the previous year for 7th-grade students enrolled in the 2018-2019 school year, concerning 10th-grade graduation in the 2021-2022 school year.

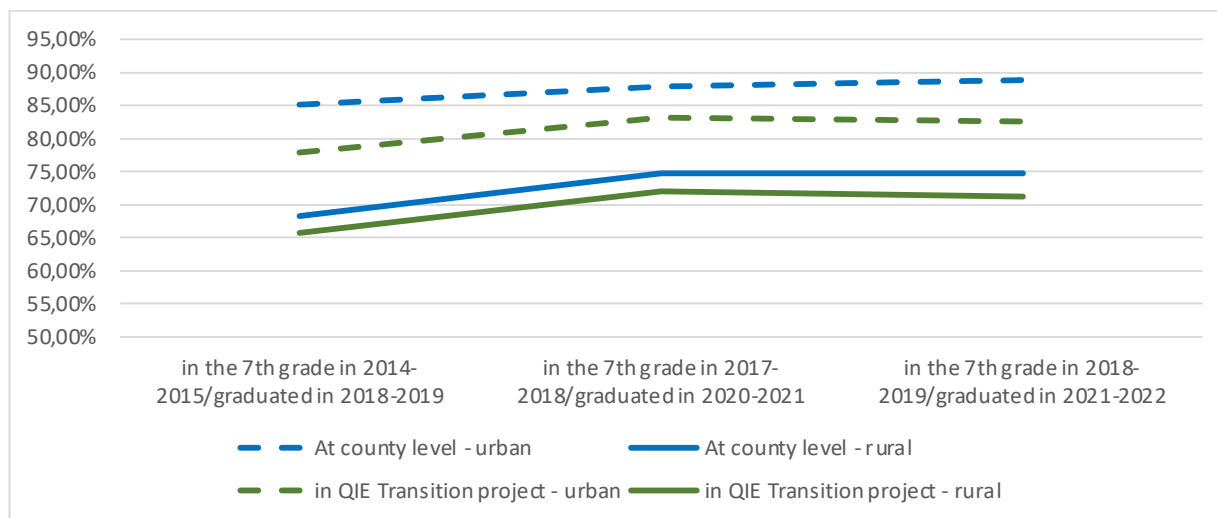
Figure 12. Graduation rate: baseline in 2018-2019 and results in 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years: county level compared with schools with UNICEF projects



Source: SIIR data provided by UNICEF

The graduation rate for 10th-grade students in schools situated in rural areas consistently lags behind that of their counterparts in urban areas. This disparity persists over time, and there are no substantial differences in the trend of evolution between all schools in Bacău county and those participating in the QIE Transition project. However, the gap between urban and rural areas is for the entire period analysed smaller for the schools in the QIE Transition project. This smaller gap between urban and rural schools in the QIE Transition project, compared to the county average, can be attributed to the deliberate selection of schools with a significant concentration of vulnerable students within the QIE Transition project, even within urban areas.

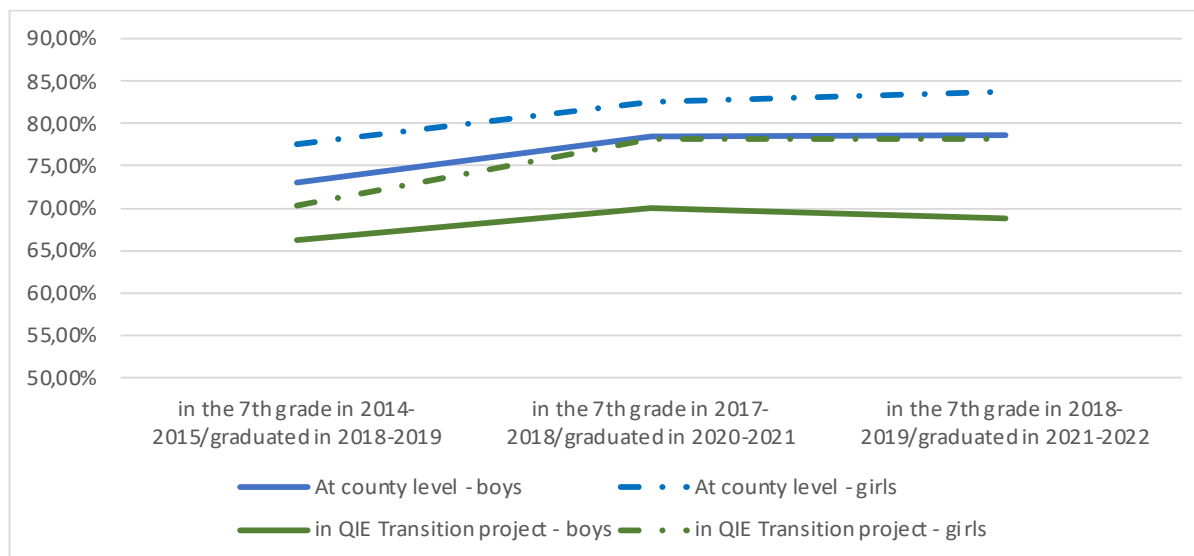
Figure 13. Graduation rate: baseline in 2018-2019 and results in 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years in rural and urban areas: county level compared with schools with QIE Transition schools



Source: SIIR data provided by UNICEF

Both at county level and at in the schools included in QIE Transition project, girls have constantly higher levels of graduation rates compared to boys. Important to mention in this context is that the graduation rate of girls in the schools included in QIE Transition project has a higher growth rate and is better maintained in the 2021-2022 school year compared to 2020-2021.

Figure 14. Graduation rate: baseline in 2018-2019 and results in 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years, boys and girls compared and county level compared with schools with QIE Transition schools



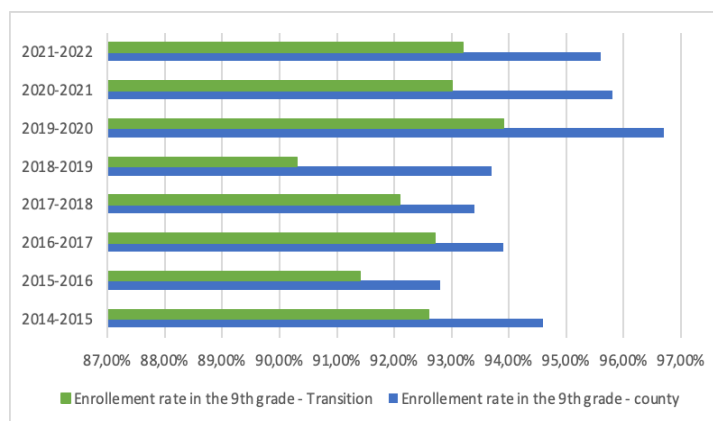
Source: SIIR data provided by UNICEF

The enrolment rate in the 9th grade is not evolving in a positive way in the schools included in QIE Transition project. In the school year 2014-2015 school year the difference between the enrolment rate in the 9th grade between the county average and the schools in the QIE Transition project was 2 percentual points. In the 2019-2020, 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years this difference was 2.8 and 2.4 percentual points.

Table 21. 9th grade enrolment rate: county average compared to QIE Transition schools, baseline and during and after project implementation

School year	Enrolment rate in the 9th grade - county	Enrolment rate in the 9th grade - Transition	Difference
2014-2015	94,60%	92,60%	0,02
2015-2016	92,80%	91,40%	0,01
2016-2017	93,90%	92,70%	0,01
2017-2018	93,40%	92,10%	0,01
2018-2019	93,70%	90,30%	0,03
2019-2020	96,70%	93,90%	0,03
2020-2021	95,80%	93,00%	0,03
2021-2022	95,60%	93,20%	0,02

Figure 15. 9th grade enrolment rate: county average compared to QIE Transition schools, baseline and during and after project implementation

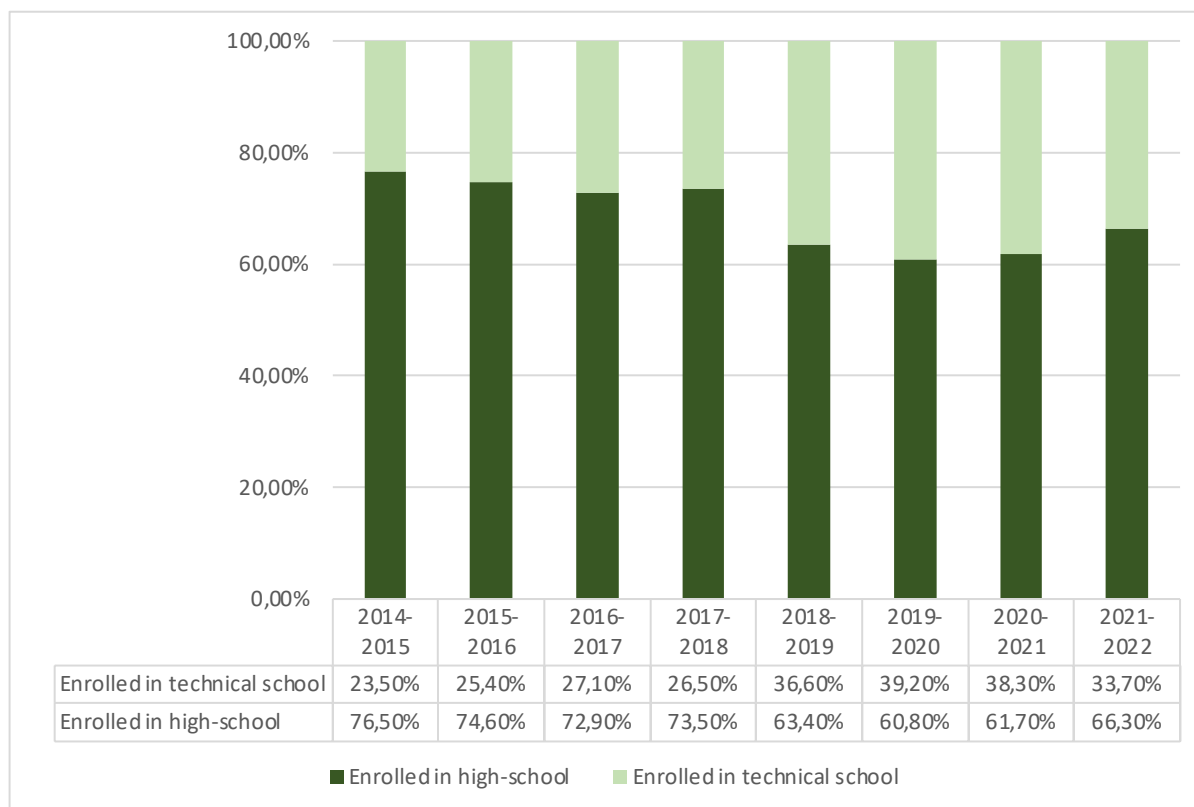


Source: SIIR data provided by UNICEF

Furthermore, over time, a higher percentage of students have been enrolled in the 9th grade at a technical school compared to a theoretical high school. However, upon closer examination of the data, shifts in the proportion of school continuation in either a theoretical high school or a technical school can be attributed to administrative changes between 2014 and 2022, transformations in high schools,

or similar circumstances. For example, in the case study of Mihail Andrei School in Buhuși, we see that a sudden shift in the distribution of children enrolled in the 9th grade is explained by a change in the statute of the local upper secondary education institution.

Figure 16. Enrolment rate in a high-school and a technical school for students in schools in QIE Transition project



Source: SIIR data provided by UNICEF

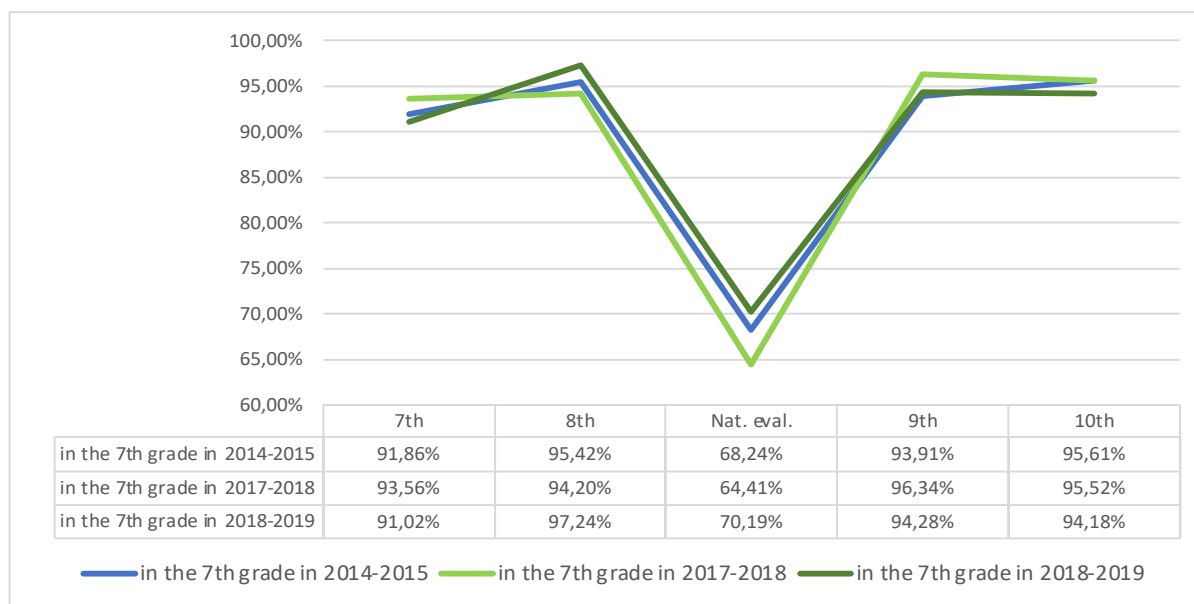
The situation of the schools involved in the project in terms of school attendance

The recording of absenteeism rates lacks consistency both at the school and county levels. The pandemic further complicated school attendance tracking, as each school organized classes differently. Consequently, a thorough analysis of absenteeism rates, crucial for this report, cannot be reliably conducted. The response from children, indicating a 93.88% attendance rate, is questionable. Additionally, only half of the children report that teachers consistently record absences. On the other hand, it is important to analyse children's responses regarding responsibility for school attendance. The majority (74,04%) attribute this responsibility to their families, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive examination of these perspectives. This is similar with the perception of teachers, that also attribute in general the responsibility for school attendance to families and to the children motivation to learn influenced by the existing models in the household.

Analysing the annual graduation rates in schools participating in the QIE Transition project (detailed information presented in Annex 7), we observe minimal differences among student cohorts when comparing the baseline (students in the 7th grade in 2014-2015) with those in the 7th grade in the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years, graduating in the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years. For the cohort graduating the 7th grade in 2018, a slightly higher graduation rate in the 9th grade is observable in 2020. However, this cohort exhibits the same graduation rate in the 10th grade in 2021

as the baseline cohort (students graduating the 7th grade in 2015 and the 10th grade in 2018). Conversely, the cohort graduating the 7th grade in 2019 displays a slightly higher graduation rate in the 8th grade in 2020 but a lower graduation rate in the 10th grade in 2022 compared to the baseline cohort. It is noteworthy that higher graduation rates across all cohorts are observable in 2020, a year significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which schools faced challenges in consistently assessing students' progress throughout the year.

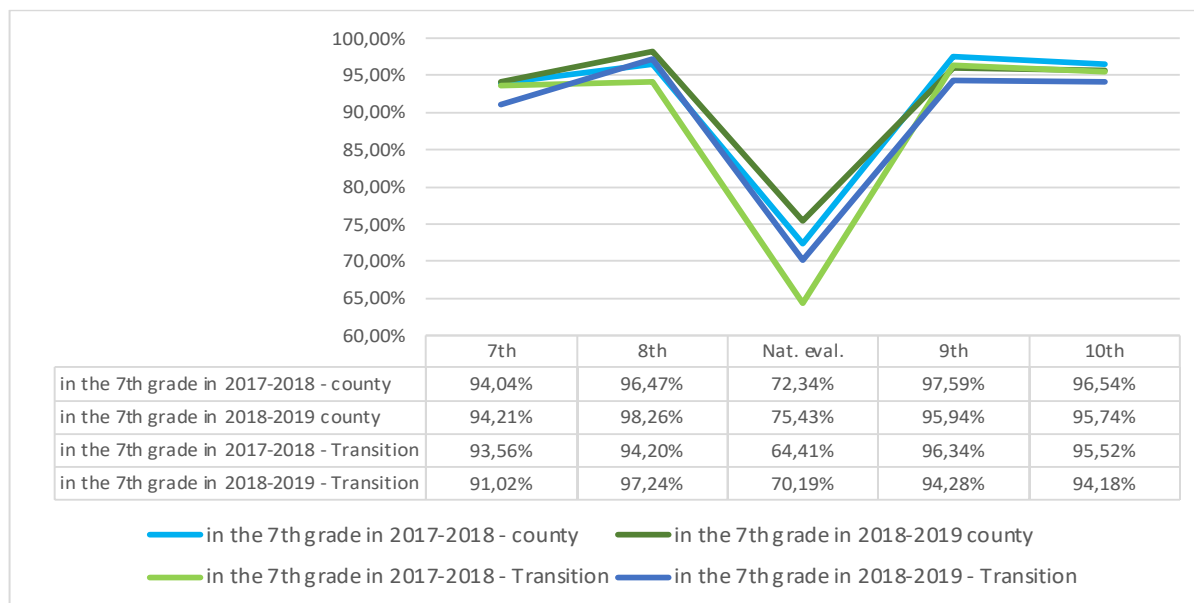
Figure 17. Annual graduation rate in QIE Transition schools, baseline compared to results during and after project



Source: SIIR data provided by UNICEF

Comparing the annual graduation rates in schools participating in the QIE Transition project with the county average, the differences are also small. As showed in the presentation of the graduation rate for the 10th grade of children in the 7th grade, in the analysis above, the graduation rates at county level are slightly higher compared with the ones in the selected schools for QIE Transition project, that focused from the beginning on schools with high number of vulnerable children. Starting with this situation, we are looking for a decrease in the difference between the annual graduation rate at county level and the annual graduation rate in the project's schools. However, the differences are also not revealing a clear trend.

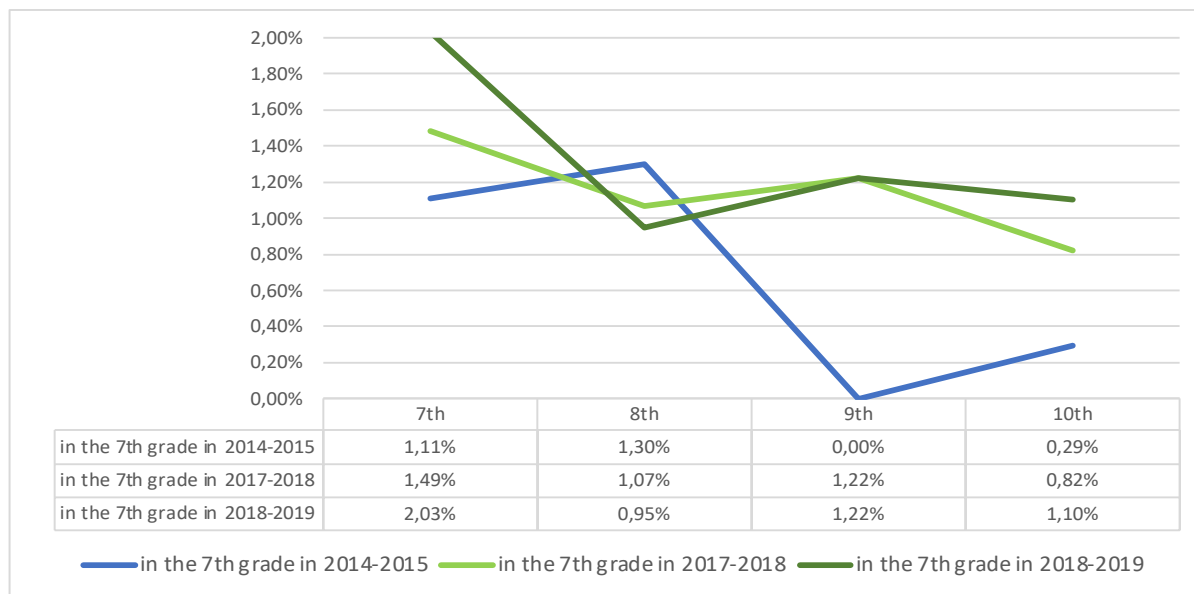
Figure 18. Annual graduation rate: county average compared to QIE Transition schools during and after project results



Source: SIIIR data provided by UNICEF

The dropout rate in the 9th and 10th grade is higher during and after the project for students in the project target group compared with the ones from the same schools, included in QIE Transition project, before project implementation.

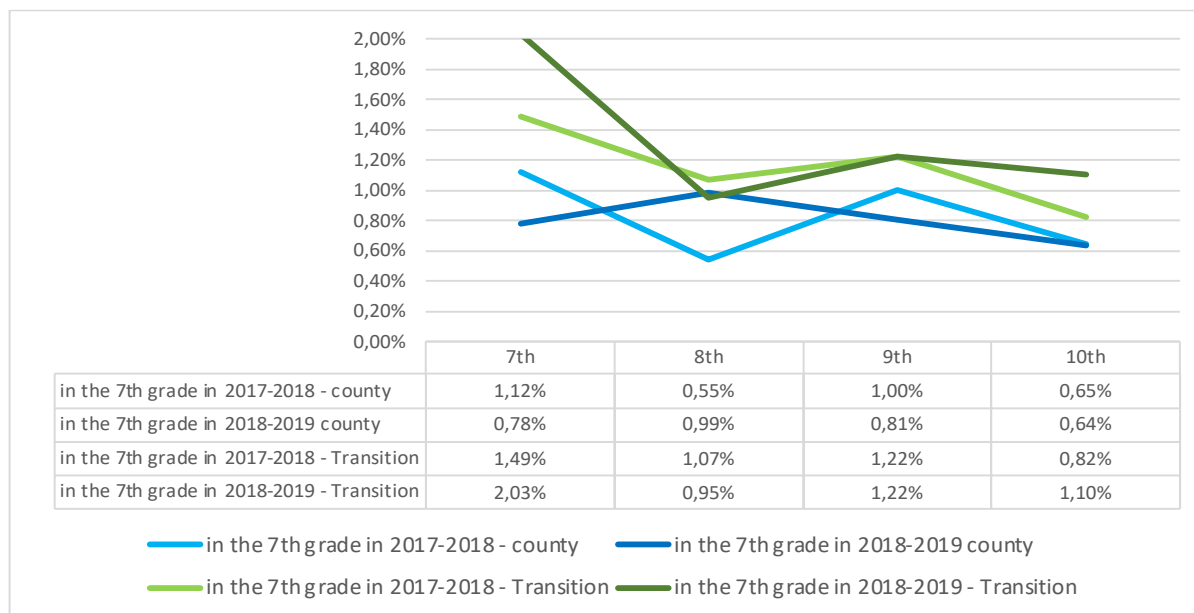
Figure 19. Annual dropout rate in QIE Transition schools, baseline compared to results during and after project



Source: SIIIR data provided by UNICEF

The dropout rate in schools participating in the QIE Transition project consistently exceeds that of schools in Bacău county, and there is no apparent declining trend that surpasses the county-level decreasing trend of the dropout rates.

Figure 20. Annual dropout rate: county average compared to QIE Transition schools during and after project results



Source: SIIR data provided by UNICEF

As highlighted in the assessment of the project's effectiveness, a thorough and comprehensive identification of vulnerable children at the lower secondary education level was not conducted as planned within the project. Additionally, for various activities specifically targeting these vulnerable children, essential monitoring data is lacking. This includes crucial information such as the number of beneficiaries, details about the activities they participated in, and the trajectory of their educational path. Consequently, the analysis of individual educational paths, progress, and dropout situations for each monitored at-risk student becomes impracticable due to the absence of consistent monitoring.

Poverty is often identified as the primary factor impeding the transition from lower secondary to upper secondary education and a significant contributor to school dropout, as acknowledged by national stakeholders in the QIE Transition project, including the Ministry of Education. In this context, the importance of scholarships is emphasized, and there is a recognized need for national policies that enhance scholarship programs to serve as effective incentives for academic motivation.

According to both teachers and school principals, the primary factors contributing to school dropout include:

- lack of motivation among students, identified by 85.11% of survey respondents as a major influence.
- poor material/financial situations within families, identified by 67.14% of survey respondents as a significant factor.
- various family issues, such as conflicts, lack of supervision, household tasks, etc., identified by 71.07% of survey respondents as a major influence.

Teachers and school principals express the belief that school-related factors, such as support systems for students, from teachers, and other students, the school assessment system, and even commuting, either do not influence or have minimal impact on dropout rates. Moreover, the factors contributing

to dropout rates exhibit consistency over time, with less than 12% of teachers and fewer than 8% of school principals reporting any notable differences from previous years.

On the other hand, according to the surveys, teachers and school principals expect that the UNICEF contribution in their schools will influence the dropout rate.

The graduation rate at the National evaluation exam is significantly lower compared with the graduation rate of the school years. However, school enrolment and the transition from lower secondary to upper secondary education is not determined by the graduation of the National evaluation exam, as only access to theoretical high school classes is limited to students that passed the exam. In this context, the transition rate from Elementary school to the 9th and 10th grades is not so much determined by the academic performance, but by children motivation and their environment.

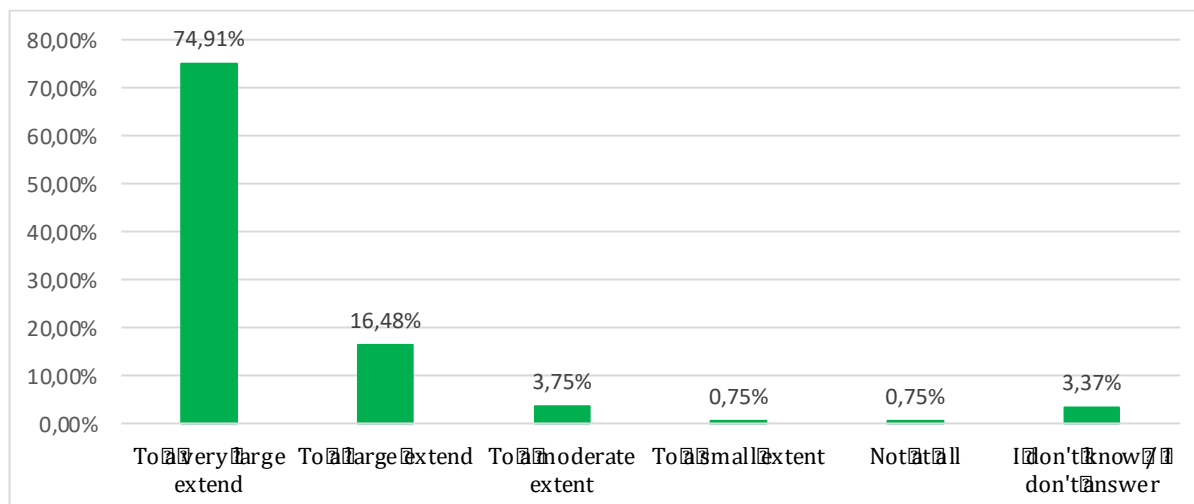
Furthermore, the case studies reveal that children's motivation to continue school, learn, and pursue a career is primarily influenced by other factors, beyond the activities and results of the QIE Transition project, while career guidance and counselling activities receive positive feedback from students (particularly the career bus). The most significant driving force for students to contemplate their future and select a high school or even a university stems from examples in their immediate surroundings, such as parents, siblings, neighbours, or older peers. In focus groups with determined students, who have already planned their future educational paths, many cited external motivations, emphasizing the importance of role models among their relatives and friends. It is important to note that the participants in the focus groups rarely included examples of children at risk of dropout; instead, children participating in focus groups often demonstrated strong determination to continue their education.

Positive changes generated by the project, from a general perspective, at the level of the school children

The survey conducted with students indicates a widespread recognition of the importance of education both in general and specifically for their future endeavours. Among the respondents, 64.01% believe that university studies are necessary for a successful life, while 21.80% consider high school graduation to be essential for success.

Furthermore, a substantial 80.62% of the surveyed students express a strong belief in the importance of continuing their education for their future. Additionally, 74.91% of the students convey a strong desire to pursue their studies at high school or vocational school (they declare they what to continue their studies at high school/vocational school to a very large extent). 16.48% express a considerable interest in continuing their education at these levels (they declare they what to continue their studies at high school/vocational school to a large extent).

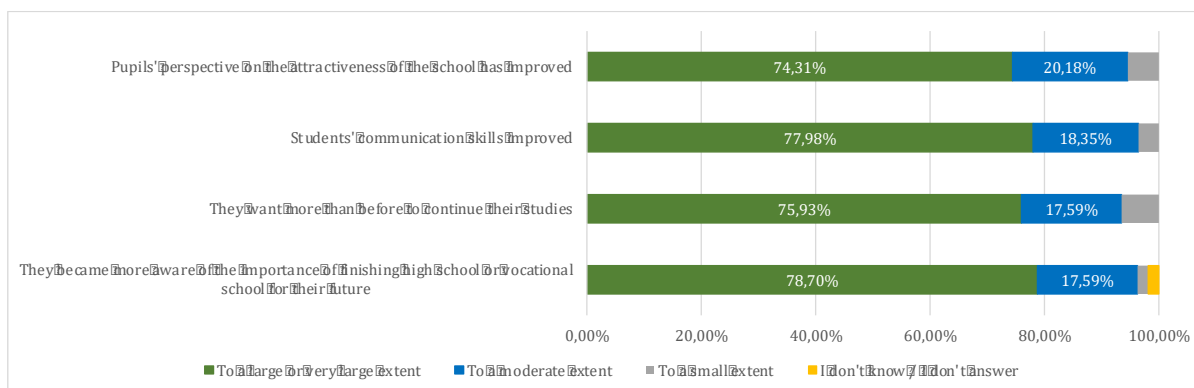
Figure 21. Students answers to the question: “To what extent do you want to continue your studies at high school/vocational school?”



Source: Survey with children

Teachers also assess that the project had an overwhelming positive influence on children motivation to learn and to go to school.

Figure 22. Teachers opinion on the projects' impact over children



Source: Survey with teachers

Parents participating in the evaluation affirm that the QIE Transition project significantly influenced their children. More than 71% of parents report that their children have become more aware of the importance of completing high school or vocational school, attributing this awareness to the project's activities. Over 74% of parents declare the perspective of their children on the attractiveness of the school has improved. Additionally, almost 77% of parents indicate that their children express a desire to pursue further studies. This motivation is particularly notable among children in the 9th and 10th grades, with almost 85% of parents of children in these grades expressing their children's keen interest in continuing their education.

A significant majority of surveyed children, accounting for 64.36%, believe that their communication skills improved due to their involvement in project activities. Furthermore, nearly 72% of parents state that their children have enhanced their communication skills. This positive shift can be linked to various activities of the project: the extracurricular activities along with professional guidance,

mentorship, counselling. Involvement in extracurricular activities plays a crucial role in enhancing communication skills in general. Activities such as team projects, presentations, and group discussions provided students with opportunities to express ideas, collaborate with peers, and articulate thoughts effectively. These experiences contributed to the development of interpersonal communication skills, thereby positively impacting the surveyed children's overall communication competence. Furthermore, counselling sessions provided a platform for students to express themselves, fostering self-awareness and effective communication of emotions. Moreover, exposure to professional guidance equips students with practical communication strategies relevant to their future careers.

There is no doubt that the large majority of children enjoy the activities of the Holtis club and the extra-curricular activities organised as part of the microgrants in most of the schools. But focus groups with children and further analysis for the case studies show that children's motivation to learn, even before the project started, is the main driving mechanism of school participation and school transition. The capacity (of teachers, parents, and other adults) to identify motivation triggers / factors and to nurture children's motivation seems to generate the best results. These results are reflected in children showing elements of grit: they are conscientious, they have the courage to plan their future, they should persevere, they are able to find something they care about when learning (we can see hints of passion).

Children's intrinsic motivation to learn and their vision for their professional (and personal) future are the main mechanisms leading to good results of the project. Although both the motivation and vision are supported by the programme, there is both a positive feedback loop based on a good motivation and good school results that are reinforcing each other and a negative feedback loop, where a low level of motivation generates less attention to school, tests and exams and poor results in school, tests and exams underlines the motivation. A missing or low-level link may transform the positive feedback loop in a negative one. Breaking the negative feedback loop generates the need for additional activities to boost motivation and to ensure better educational results.

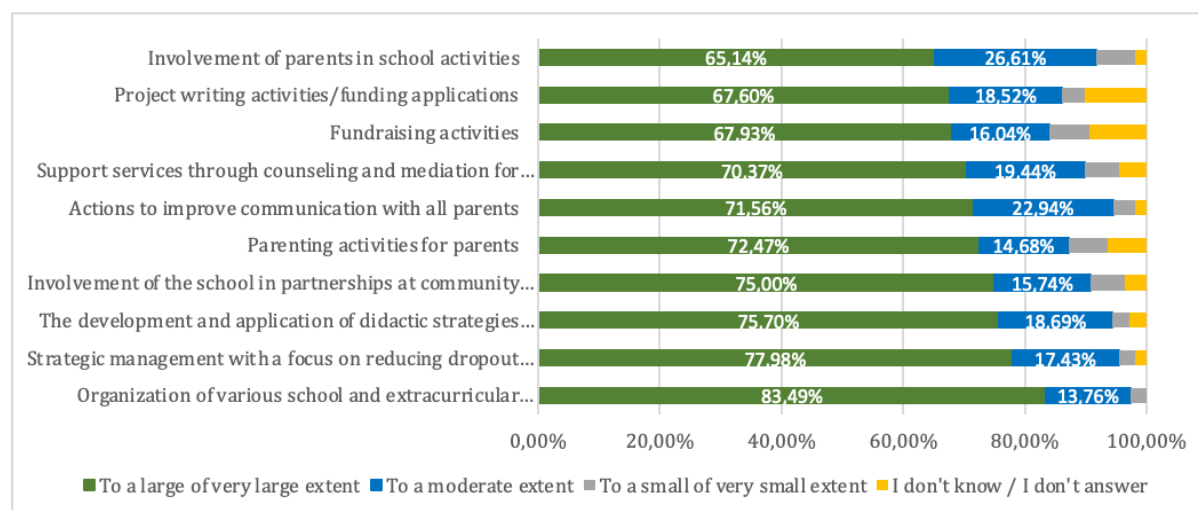
Positive changes generated by the project, from a general perspective, at the level of principals and teachers

In schools participating in QIE Transition projects, a substantial 83% of teachers acknowledge that the project has influenced how they plan and organize various school and extracurricular activities involving all students. This observation aligns with findings from focus groups conducted during case studies, where a compelling desire to continue extracurricular activities was expressed by most teachers and students involved in Holtis clubs. However, in several cases, minimal funding is required for the sustained continuation of these activities.

Furthermore, over 70% of teachers attribute a significant impact to the QIE Transition project in the following areas, rating it to a large or very large extent:

- Strategic management with a focus on reducing dropout and increasing school participation and increasing the transition rate of your students;
- The development and application of didactic strategies adapted to children from vulnerable groups;
- Involvement of the school in partnerships at community level, in support of children from disadvantaged groups;
- Actions to improve communication with all parents;
- Support services through counselling and mediation for children from vulnerable groups.

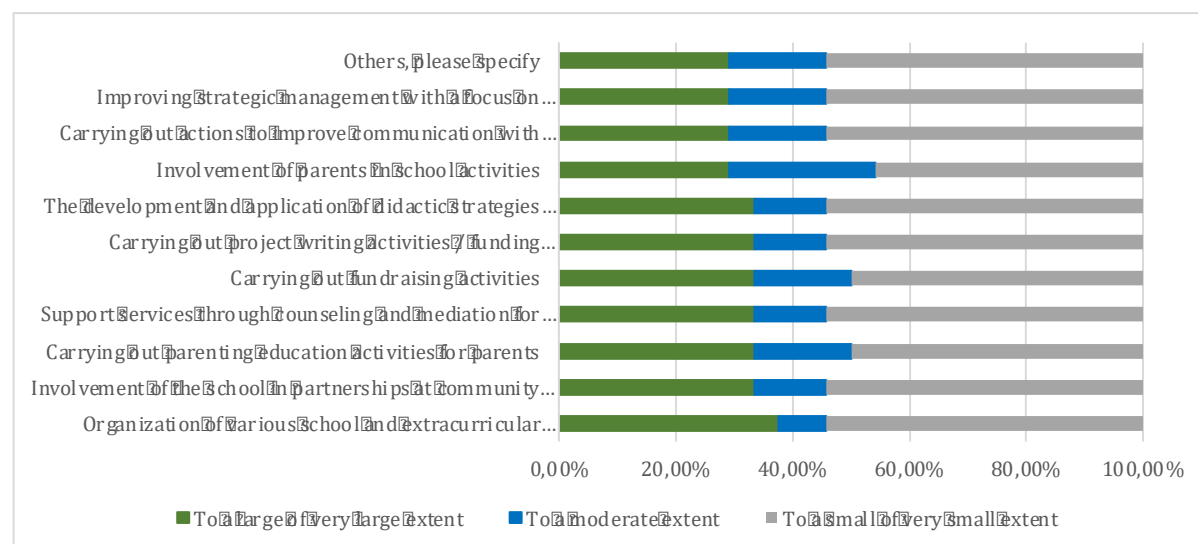
Figure 23. Teachers' opinion on the projects impact on the school



Source: Survey with teachers

On the other hand, schools' principals exhibit a generally more sceptical outlook compared to teachers. The majority of principals express the belief that the QIE Transition projects had a limited or very limited impact on the school environment and management.

Figure 24. Schools' principals' opinion on the projects impact on the school



Source: Survey with schools' principals

The surveys with teachers and school principals show that the formal marking of absences introduced by the project was effective but not a highly impactful component of the QIE Transition project. Forty percent of school principals and 65% of teachers consider the formal marking of absences introduced by the project useful to a large or very large extent. However, the system was not consistently used in the schools and did not generate data with increased value for the evaluation of the project's impact on school participation and dropout rates.

Drawing from interviews and focus groups involving teachers, school principals, students, and their parents, the case studies reveal a notable transformation in the overall school atmosphere towards a

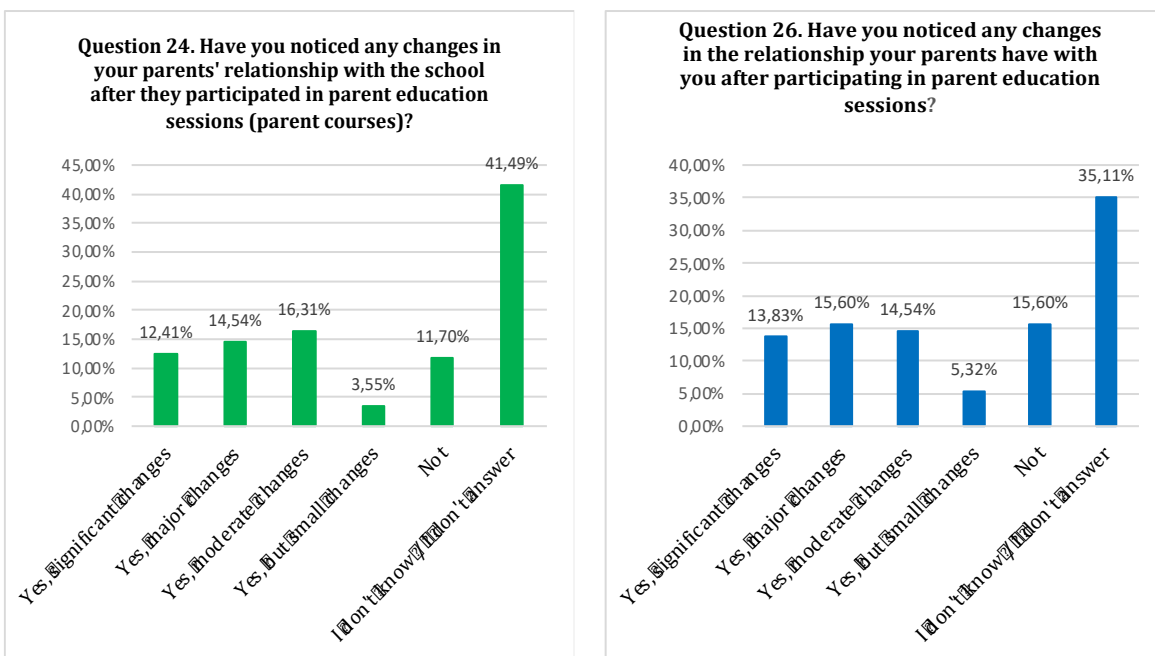
more child-friendly environment. Both teachers and students exhibit increased enthusiasm for participating in extra-curricular activities. Additionally, teachers who participated in training sessions demonstrate enhanced capabilities in employing diverse teaching methods tailored to children's needs. Overall, these trained educators exhibit greater motivation to organize remedial learning activities and various other initiatives, including extra-curricular activities, to support children's learning, graduation of the National Evaluation exam and transition to upper secondary education.

Positive changes generated by the project regarding the attitudes towards school at the level of the parents

More than 71% of parents report an improvement in their attitude towards the benefits of education and its continuation during the implementation of project activities in schools. Distinctions emerge between the parents of children in the 7th and 8th grades, with over 80% indicating significant attitude changes, compared to parents of children in the 9th and 10th grades, where around 62% report such substantial changes. These variances can be attributed to the timing of the activities, predominantly occurring after the pandemic, and directed at parents of students in elementary schools (lower secondary education).

When asked about their parents and the possible impact of the QIE Transition project over their parents, children are mostly undecided. However, over 43% of children answering the survey say that they noticed some changes (significant, major, or moderate) in your parents' relationship with the school after they participated in parent education sessions. About 44% of children also say they noticed some changes (significant, major, or moderate) in your parents' relationship with them (the children).

Figure 25. Children assessment of the project's impact on their parents



Source: Survey with children

Moreover, the insights of children are confirmed by teachers. Almost 70% of teachers declare that their relationship with parents improved to a large or very large extent. However, while the

introduction of parenting activities represents a notable change brought about by the project, and an increased focus on the school and children's relationship with parents is considered a significant impact, a slightly smaller percentage of teachers (65% compared to over 70% for other impact elements) believe that parents are more involved in school activities after the project compared with the previous period.

Nevertheless, the assessment of the project's effectiveness reveals that hard-to-reach parents have not been effectively engaged by the project activities. Recognizing the fundamental role of the three-way relationship between the school, students, and parents in school participation and children's motivation to learn, it becomes crucial to not only initiate changes in parental attitudes toward school but also to cultivate and expand these efforts. Additional activities are deemed necessary for a substantial and enduring impact that can be reflected in students' annual graduation rates.

Positive changes generated by the project regarding the capacity building of public institutions in the educational system

UNICEF's assistance to schools in Bacău county enhanced the capabilities of the County School Inspectorate (CSI) and the County Education Resource Centre (CJRAE). Specifically, the project facilitated an expansion in the staffing of CJRAE, enabling the institution to furnish schools with counsellors and, when necessary, offer assistance to teachers.

Furthermore, the initiative fostered the creation of a professional community comprising teachers and support professionals at the county level, promoting ongoing collaboration and the sharing of best practices for the benefit of children.

Additionally, UNICEF initiatives, beginning with the "Joy to learn" model (i.e., the project "Hai la școală!"), effectively facilitated the engagement of county-level educational institutions and the majority of schools in Bacău county, encompassing both urban and rural schools, in projects implemented with support from the Ministry of Education, international organizations, and civil society organizations. This opens the county-level educational institutions and the schools to new experiences, innovative teaching methods, a large diversity of extra-curricular activities, with a great potential for long term changes at the level of schools.

Intellectual outputs generated by the project which were / are used at local/county/national level

In 2023, a new legal framework for education, including the Law of Pre-University Education (Law no. 198/2023), was enacted, incorporating several recommendations for enhancing educational transition and fostering child-friendly schools put forth by UNICEF throughout the years, drawing from the outcomes of projects such as QIE, QIE Transition, and earlier initiatives, as well as from other projects (notably the presidential project: Educated Romania).

Leveraging insights from QIE and, to some extent, QIE Transition, UNICEF complemented the World Bank support for the Ministry of Education. As a result, UNICEF has emerged as a key influencer in shaping the MATE tool. This tool is designed for assessing the risk of dropout and early school leaving across all schools nationwide. Additionally, these organizations actively contribute to the National Program for Reducing School Dropout by supporting pilot projects that implement innovative activities targeting school participation, access, inclusive education, and the prevention of dropout risks.

Despite facing intensive political debates and opposition from conservative or far-right groups, the National Strategy for Parental Education, prepared by the Ministry of Education with support from UNICEF, was not adopted as planned in 2022 or 2023. Nevertheless, the adoption of a parental education strategy became a mandatory commitment for the Ministry of Education through the newly enacted Law of Pre-University Education (Law no. 198/2023).

10. Main findings – ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

10.1. EQ17. What are the lessons learned at each level of intervention that should be considered for implementation and further replication of the project?

the overall lessons learned identified by the evaluation relate mainly to the clarity of the model and its monitoring system, in order to better capture effects of the intervention; the engagement strategy at local community level, especially in the case of disruptive events during the implementation period and projects identity; and attention to cases in which other UNICEF interventions have been previously introduced in the treated schools, and are to be taken into account for further improvements.

The lessons learned at each level of the intervention

The following list presents the aspects to which more attention should have been paid during project planning and implementation phases, due to the bottlenecks encountered, especially, in regards with the effectiveness of the project and the extent to which the generated effects could be captured and measured:

- ***The clarity of the LoI of the project, which comes from the identification and explicit presentation of the general aim of the project, its specific objectives, the planned activities, expected outputs, outcomes (results) and impact and of the exiting causal links between these components***

In several discussions held with school personnel, the idea emerged that in the beginning the overall design of the project and its specific objectives was not very clear, due to less effective approaches applied during the initiation and implementation of the project. Nevertheless, this situation was mitigated through the intervention to a large extent. Local coordinators were very effective in this regard and as the majority of collected opinions show, they provided clear and timely support to schools.

This impression, rather frequently expressed by project beneficiaries, may also be a consequence of the fact that QIE Transition continued many interventions already conducted in schools through the previous phase of QIE model. Thus, the specificity of the current project was more difficult to be comprehend, with of the experience and impressions left by the previous project. As an example, in the case of Andrei Mihail School from Buhuși, the feedback received from teachers and students, indicates that apparently the connection between UNICEF's intervention and the academic performance of the children was not clearly established at the outset of the project. As a result, participants lack a clear understanding of how the project has contributed to improving the successful transition rate of students enrolled in the school. Similar perspectives were collected also from the other schools included in the case studies, where in general various positive effects of the project could be mentioned by its beneficiaries but in regards with its impact related to the transition rate discussions held were less informative. Similar findings were collected from Lower Secondary School from Sănduleni. Another example is the case of Lower Secondary School of Bogdănești, were most of the teachers that were interviewed express the opinion that QIE Transition project was less organized or poor coordinated in comparison with the first phase of QIE project implemented in Bogdănești gymnasium.

Therefore, in order to create a common understanding regarding the objectives of the project and the responsibilities of school staff, more efforts should have been made in the communication and coordination areas, but only after the ToC of the model is clarified and explicitly presented in project documents (*for more details please see section 4.1 of this report dedicated to the quality of the intervention model*).

- ***Comprehensive monitoring system, capturing key expected outputs of the project and outcomes (results), that is followed in a unitary manner and maintained, with the necessary revisions, throughout the implementation period***

The analysis found that there is a need for a clearer and more comprehensive monitoring system, maintained throughout the entire implementation period of the project, with targets set up for all project outputs and also for expected results. Additional outputs can be included in the monitoring system if additional activities are added to the model, but in the case of QIE Transition, for some indicators the labels were changes, or they were split during implementation or indicators were removed from the monitoring and reporting system even if activities were continued. While flexibility one of the added values of UNICEF's interventions, rigor is also key in adequately registering the effects (referring to outputs and results) of the models, especially due to the main objective of modelling component from UNICEF strategies – to gather evidence for improving policies for children. In the same vein, the monitoring system needs to capture all outputs of the project, especially in terms of number of beneficiaries by project activity, target group and by gender.

A responsible project staff for monitoring of vulnerable children, their involvement in each project activity and their evolution should have been set up. Due to the fact that this activity is highly time consuming, the intensity of the way in which monitoring was conducted decreased during the implementation of QIE Transition. Because of this situation, the analysis that can be made on the extent to which the project helped children being at risk of drop out is very limited and the available administrative data do not confirm significant changes in this regard (*please see section 6.1 of the report*). Thus, a team of responsible persons outside the school community should have been assigned to coordinate this activity for each school and a another responsible at school level.

Based on the lack of administrative data quality and lack of accessibility to data in the education system in Romania, UNICEF models should build up a monitoring system that can fill in the data gaps in the public system. Especially, due to the fact that QIE Transition model is continuing most the activities of the first phase of QIE model implemented in the same treated schools, the monitoring system should have been built as to be able to collect relevant data and be improved from a model to another.

- ***Coherent implementation of the model at school level, its integrated approach being one of the key success elements of the model***

In several cases, such as Sănduleni Lowe Secondary School, Bogdănești Lower secondary School, or Mihail Andrei Lowe Secondary School from Buhuși, the analysis confirmed that the effectiveness of project varied between components. Some preliminary results were achieved and effects are still visible, such as: non-cognitive skills of children were developed, parents were helped to better support their children educational path, children were further supported through scholarship and mentorship programmes. But the schools did not implement all project activities, as designed (for example, Bogdănești school did not benefit of microgrants or Buhuși school did not benefit of parental education). Evaluation found that the components of the project have not been implemented with the same pace and consistency in all schools, in same in-depth analysed cases the project lost from its coherence and improvements in terms of school performance and transition rates were not visible in the official figures.

- ***Identity of the project, important for motivating and activating local community actors, for replication and scaling up purposes, and further for a better management of the snowball effect, which has been generated in case of QIE Transition project***

Evidence collected showed that the identity of QIE Transition was less developed than the one of the first phase of QIE. While the main objectives of two models are different and several new components were added to QIE Transition, most of the activities conducted between 2015 and 2018 in the lower secondary schools from Bacău County were continued in the new model. In many cases for teachers and principals it was difficult to make the distinction from the actions implemented in the projects. When discussing in regards with the effects generated at school level, many provided examples referred to events that took place before 2018.

Another element that led to this effect was that because teachers considered the approach promoted by UNICEF in their schools wanted to expand the project target groups to children enrolled in 5th and 6th grade, which overlapped with the category of beneficiaries from the previous project. Moreover

While, it is expected that these overlapping effects to be identified, the implementation of the previous project in the same schools being a success factor for the subsequent project phase, the effects UNICEF long-lasting presence in lower secondary schools from Bacău County cannot be strictly decelerated between the implemented models. Thus, a realist approach aiming to quantify the effects and impact of UNICEF QIE Transition project in Bacău can only be viewed from a wider perspective needs to take into consideration the changes that were already in place in 2018 in the addressed schools.

- ***Efforts directed to the advocacy component of the project***

Some of the advocacy activities which were planned within the project were delayed, especially, due to the Covid19 pandemic. Moreover, as experts interviewed mentioned, based on the opportunities encountered in relation with the improvement of public policies for children, other important UNICEF projects have been promoted to the detriment of QIE Transition. On the other hand, it is important to mention that, the sustainability analysis showed that several components of project, which were taken over from the first phase of QIE intervention were already taken up in various national strategic documents and programmes and in this context the advocacy strategy should have been focused on components of the project rather than to the scaling up of the model in its entirety.

Opportunities / problems encountered in the implementation that were not timely identified and taken on board / adequately mitigated

The evaluation identified very few cases of problems that were not adequately mitigated or opportunities that were not taken on board through the project. In general, due to its flexibility, when different changes were produced or disruptive phenomena occurred, the design of the project partially shifted as to support the ones that were the most in need. The Covid19 pandemic and the reaction of UNICEF through the QIE Transition project to the needs emerged at schools' level, is clear evidence on the effective approach that was implemented during the project in order to meet the needs of the target groups and better address their problems during the implementation of the project. As also presented in the effectiveness chapter, **UNICEF was the first real support received by the staff of the schools (at least from QIE Transition project) when the pandemic started**, by providing them with masks, disinfectants and later tables and ITC support. In all schools that were involved in data collection process, the support provided by the Ministry of Education for improving the capacity of the schools to translate the education process to the online environment came when the vulnerable children had already received tables.

Another example of a rather adequate adaptation of the project design to the context changes occurred during the implementation of the project is dissolution of the institutional structure of one

of the implementing partners and also key stakeholders of the project at national level, the Institute of Educational Sciences. This dissolution came together with the establishment of a new structure within the Ministry of Education, the National Center for Policy, and Evaluation in Education, where at the Directorate level was set the Unit for Education Research, where the key staff of former institute was relocated. This situation led to the transfer of some actives from ISE portfolio to Together Agency and to changing the legal collaboration type established with the experts. An institutional contract could not be enclosed any more, thus each expert from the former ISE was contracted separately. But, **if the continuation of the planned activities was ensured, to a large extent, through the measures taken by UNICEF, the monitoring system has been affected due to the fact some important output indicators, such as the number of children participating in remedial activities, were excluded from the reporting procedure.** Moreover, due to the fact that no programme document was drafted in regards with the activities conducted by the expert from former ISE, the monitoring system and reporting one were changed and they did not match any more the templates and type of output quantification and in the previous period. This affected the extent to which project effects could have been registered and measured.

The last case worth mentioning in this section is the change of the school management for almost 50% of the lower secondary schools treated by UNICEF QIE Transition project, which led in a visible decrease in the engagement of school staff. The evaluation showed that **even if problems related to the understanding of the aim and design of the project tried to be addressed by UNICEF's experts, still there were identified cases where the changes of management teams in schools during the implementation period of QIE Transition led to inconsistencies in the implementation of the model in several schools,** where a partial dissolution of the teams that implemented the UNICEF intervention in schools took place and thus, the common understanding of the project approach and aim was weakened. As an example, in Buhuși, at Mihail Andrei Lower Secondary School, the shift in school leadership in 2020 and the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a diminished significance of UNICEF interventions within the school. Fewer activities were carried out compared to the initial QIE project, and a reduced level of engagement from teachers was noted. Also, in the case of Bogdănești Lower Secondary School, due to the lack of a stable management team within the school remained with the same impression. Communication between UNICEF management team or local coordinators and project participants was weaker and less effective than previously. Firstly, it would have been essential to establish a dedicated management team to ensure the project's continued presence and visibility within the school, particularly in the face of multiple changes in the school's leadership. Second of all, a plan or strategy in regards with the engagement of the new principals in the project would have been important for increasing the success chances of the project.

10.2. EQ18. Are there any unplanned outcomes worth considering for filling in capacity gaps and/or addressing remaining bottlenecks?

Unplanned outcomes identified by project beneficiaries

The analysis conducted for the 6 case studies drafted within the evaluation revealed some positive, unexpected effects which were generated by QIE transition. First of all, some activities, considered to be very beneficial by school staff were implemented with the participation of children which were not part by the target group. As an example, at Alecu Russo School from Bacău, the management team realized that there is also a need to facilitate the transition from kindergarten to primary education cycle and to gymnasium and organizes similar mentoring sessions, common with children from the preschool system (from the educational unit) and those from preparatory grade and first grade. In the case of Târgu Ocna nr. 1 School, the parental education has been considered very important in

winning the support of the parents for the education paths of children. This experience has instilled in teachers the courage to work more closely with parents, as the school extended parental education to primary education.

Another unexpected effect is the transfer of the activities or outputs of UNICEF's project, such as: pedagogical materials and techniques, to other schools in the county, through the mobility of teaching staff or through the dissemination facilitated within Methodological Circles.

Moreover, the analysis conducted on the qualitative data collected from principals and teachers, indicates that in several cases the number of requests for children's enrolment in preschool cycle and in primary education level has doubled over the implementation of QIE transition project. Thus, the number of classes has doubled. Examples have been collected from Alecu Russo School, Târgu Ocna Nr. 1 School, Răducanu Rosetti School from Căiuți, but not only. Principals that were interviewed believed that UNICEF QIE Transition project led to important and visible changes to their school, including children's school results at the National Evaluation, which are usually searched by the parents when selecting a school for their children. And generated or contributed to the increase of the number of enrolled children, which has been an important gain for the school. On the other hand, while de implementation of the project the outburst of Covid19 project led to the return to the country from abroad, to native towns, of some families with children. This may be another phenomenon that contributed to the increases in the number of enrolment requests made by parents for preschool units and primary cycle.

11. Conclusions, recommendations and lessons learned

11.1. Conclusions and recommendations

Based on findings presented above, the evaluation formulates the following conclusions and recommendations, for each of the evaluation criteria addressed in the report.

Relevance

Conclusion 1: The theoretical model of the project covers in a comprehensive manner the problems and their drivers as identified in the needs analysis. The model is consistent, being developed, to a large extent, on solid links between needs, on one side, and outcomes, on the other side. The experience of QIE model - first phase, which was implemented between 2013 and 2018, led to a broader understanding of the phenomena that cause poor school performance, low levels of school attendance or drop out. This acquired knowledge was transferred to the QIE Transition model, which adequately addresses the needs of school management, teachers, children, and parents with a view to ensure optimal conditions for children to learn in an inclusive environment.

Conclusion 2: The integrated approach of the model represents the main added value of the model's design. Keeping the children in school, especially from socio-economic disadvantaged communities, is a complex problem that needs to be treated from multiple perspectives, while even the slightest improvements take time. The fact that non-cognitive capacities are placed on a similar or even higher level of importance than teachers' and children's performances created the premises of a successful project.

Conclusion 3: Through the activities carried out under the QIE Transition project, various challenges, and aspects that students faced during the transition were addressed. Support was provided to help students adapt to new school requirements and responsibilities, promote skill development, and facilitate their integration into the school community. The need for development of life / practical skills, socio-emotional skills, and access to psychological counselling in rural areas, was emphasized throughout the evaluation. The project addresses these needs, also by

supplementing such activities, confirming, one more time, its continued relevance. The focus on the needs of adolescents is in line with the identified challenges to increase awareness of the importance of education within the community and among families. For many children, educational opportunities are limited due to family issues and attitudes, i.e., children need to help with household chores, engage in physical labour, and miss classes. The introduction of the mentoring program, as a new component in comparison with the first phase of QIE, reflects the need to support younger students, particularly from rural areas, in adapting to the high school environment and contributing to the prevention of school dropout and the improvement of the transition.

Conclusion 4: The model remained relevant during its implementation, as the initially identified needs did not evolve significantly. Where deemed necessary, several specific activities were added such as: (i) to better address urgent needs emerged as a consequence of external conditions (due to Covid19), (ii) to cover needs identified during the implementation, through the permanent reflection of project management of the relevance and potential success of the model or (iii) to adjust activities (i.e., revise approaches, materials and addressed topics) based on the specific needs collected from beneficiaries by project partners in the planning phase. Additional activities were organised when the remote education process was introduced during pandemic times. Similarly, the component related to the counselling and professional guidance was added in the second half of the project implementation, when the need for training schools' counsellors was identified. Nevertheless, the evaluation identified a (rather limited) series of additional activities needed in order to fully achieve the model's objectives.

Recommendation 1: The most important additional benefits that should be covered, in the context of a project replication or by other key actors in the sector: hot meal programs to support remedial activities, better promotion of the educational offer of high schools by their representatives, extracurricular activities with former students who are in high school, practical workshops/laboratory activities, more activities focused on personal development, for all target groups, additional financial incentives for students transiting to high school, merit-based, as well as for extra-curricular activities (i.e., in the form of very small grants, of an average value of even 100€).

Conclusion 5: The system of indicators does not capture all expected types of effects (outputs, outcomes and impact). Although outcome indicators are established, they are not measured properly. Even if the Theory of Change of the project includes all necessary elements (i.e., needs, activities, outputs, outcomes (results), specific objectives, impact, main objective), the connection between outputs and outcomes is less explicit. This in turn created challenges in adequately formulating outcome indicators. Moreover, while the label of the outcome indicators reflects the measurement of the effects generated (i.e., developed capacity to enhance transition) as a consequence of the achieved outputs (i.e., schools involved in the project), the actual measurement, or reported values cover only outputs (i.e., 35 lower secondary schools and 20 high schools involved in capacity building activities). Outcomes had been assessed separately by implementing partners, but due to the fact that they are not included per se in the monitoring system, they are not reported in a unitary, quantifiable and comparable manner.

Recommendation 2: In the case of project replication or scale up, the improvement of the monitoring system is paramount for better capturing outcomes and thus, better register evidence on the model effectiveness and impact. Such outcomes would be: improved school management increased capacity of teachers to support children in covering learning gaps and better preparing for the National Evaluation, increased capacity of children to communicate, improved self-confidence of children. Moreover, ensuring the coherence throughout the monitoring system (at partners level and period of implementation) it is needed. All implementing partners should measure the effects produced by the activities conducted by

them and report against a target. Where relevant or possible, partners should report the registered values by gender, type of addressed school (middle school / gymnasium), and rural / urban dichotomy.

Conclusion 6: QIE Transition followed to a large extent the key UNICEF criteria for model projects. The following criteria were largely addressed: (i) the existence of a clear ToC, (ii) the development of a comprehensive and useful baseline study, (iii) the involvement of relevant partners in the design and implementation, (iv) the deployment of highly qualified and appropriate human resources in the implementation of the model, (v) the existence of an exit plan, (vi) the development of a communication plan / strategy (but, less effective in implementation) and (vii) the representation of human and child rights in all existing model plans/strategies. On the other hand, there is room for improvement as regards the following components: (i) a shared understanding of the logic of the intervention, especially of the link between activities and expected final impact, at local community level, (ii) the monitoring system (*please see conclusion 5 and recommendation 4*) and (iii) the sustainability plan.

Recommendation 3: In order to create a common understanding regarding the objectives of the project and the responsibilities of schools, more efforts should have been made in the communication and coordination areas. For future similar projects, enhanced communication should also further entail further explanation of the project ToC and present, especially at the level of expected outcomes, that link between activities and related achievements with the expected impact of the project.

Conclusion 7: Based on evidence collected, QIE Transition objectives, activities and results are highly relevant in relation to the national strategic framework and national programmes. Three elements specific to the context and framework of this project contributed to the relevance of QIE: (i) the UNICEF's vision, significant role and experience of in Bacău County; (ii) the wide perspective and significant experience of UNICEF's partners in their field of expertise and (iii) the traditional partnership of UNICEF with the Ministry of Education in developing and implementing educational policies, as well as partnerships established before and under the project with relevant institutions at national level and local.

Coherence

Conclusion 8: Various interventions in child protection, social protection and education are have been implemented at the national level, such as: the pilot project "Masa caldă în școli", "Nouă ne pasă" program, "Școala după școală" programme. These interventions are aligned with the Quality Inclusive Education Transition Model. These programs, in conjunction with the QIE Transition Model, provide a comprehensive approach to addressing early school leaving and school dropout rates in Romania. They focus on different aspects of the issue, from providing hot meals to offering additional educational support, making them complementary to each other. Other wide programmes that aim to increase access to child protection or social protection and generate effects for the same schools and children addressed by QIE Transition project, are: Local Development Programme in Romania, Romanian Education programme, and Active Youth for the Community, financed through EEA Grants, which included a strong social component aiming to ensure effective inclusion of Roma children and covered part of the schools treated by QIE Transition Model. They aimed to develop soft skills, media education and critical thinking and in this manner created synergic effects with QIE Transition model.

Conclusion 9: The project is fully aligned with international strategic documents in the area of education. Based on the generated effects it contributes to the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (in particular SDG 4, Quality Education), the Strategic framework for European

cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area, the OECD "Learning Compass 2030" framework as well as the European Union Youth Strategy for the period 2019-2027. At the same time, the project addresses the key bottlenecks in the education area presented in the 2023 European Semester Country Report, as well as the Education and Training Monitors.

Conclusion 10: QIE Transition is deeply rooted in the principles of human and child rights and equity. The QIE Transition model is designed to ensure that every child has the right to quality education, in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The model emphasizes inclusion and equity, aiming to reach the most vulnerable children and ensure that all students complete compulsory education. The model adopts a holistic approach, addressing children's needs across education and social sectors.

Effectiveness

Conclusions 11: QIE Transition was to a good extent effective as regards children being at risk of dropout. However, the available data does not allow a thorough and exhaustive analysis on the effects generated by the project at the level of vulnerable children, due to the fact that (i) identification and monitoring of vulnerable children at school level was conducted to a limited extent and (ii) for several activities focused on vulnerable children (e.g., remedial activities) monitoring data is not available. While the system of monitoring vulnerable children through the fiches proposed by UNICE was taken up by school units to a limited extent, it is still key for identifying the needs of the most vulnerable children. Nonetheless, the majority of the collected and analysed perspectives showed that vulnerable children were the focus of the teachers that coordinated UNICEF activities in schools (in some cases due to the fact that the majority of school pupils were vulnerable). Not all cases could be solved by school staff, but the evaluation identified several instances where vulnerable children were identified and important steps were taken as to avoid dropout and increase their school performance, e.g., remedial actions, discussions held with their families, involvement in extracurricular activities, discussions among teachers for better addressing together the problems.

Recommendation 4: A similar future project needs to better capture the effects produced for most vulnerable children. The monitoring system should allow the analysis of the proportion of vulnerable children that benefited from each of the project activities addressed to school children. Thus, each indicator should be split by sub-target groups, covering explicitly the number of children identified as being at risk of dropout and participated in projects activities (at output level) and the registered effects (referring to the outcome indicators).

Recommendation 5: More advocacy activities should be conducted for expanding the use of the system for monitoring vulnerable children. The fact that this mechanism was included in PNRAS proves its added value, but it does not ensure its adequate or wide utilization at school level. This instrument should be taken up by the Ministry of Education and its County Directorates, who should ensure its application at national level.

Conclusion 12: The gender sensitive approach was ensured by the project to a large extent. However, not for all implemented activities the achievements were reported by gender (e.g., remedial activities, participants to role model activities or participants to Career Bus components, where data are partially available). In general, more girls have benefitted from the project than boys.

Conclusion 13: In regards with the general effectiveness of the project, according to the monitoring data, in most cases, the targets of output indicators were achieved or surpassed. According to the target groups perspectives, all activities generated positive effects, but in various proportions,

depending, mainly, on their pace and frequency, the involvement of school staff and the socio-economic context of the area in which the school was located.

Conclusion 14: The project becomes highly effective when its integrated approach is implemented adequately at school level. Many activities created synergies, thus contributed together to the same expected result, such as (i) extracurricular activities and parenting sessions which led to increase the interest of parents in the education path of their children, increase the trust of parents in schools and what education means for their children's future or (ii) extracurricular activities, Hobbies clubs and career guidance that together had positive effects on self-confidence of children and trust in their capacity of pursuing the educational and professional paths that they desire. Nevertheless, where not all activities provided by the model's design were implemented, this was not due their lack of relevance, but due to lack of interest, capacity, or available human resources. Where the activities were not implemented with the recommended pace and frequency and where very few school staff members were constantly involved, the overall effectiveness of the project remained limited.

Recommendation 6: In the event of model replication, more attention should be paid to the adequate implementation of projects' activities by school staff, without losing from sight the importance of projects flexibility and alignment to the specific needs of each school.

Recommendation 7: For future similar interventions, improvements in terms of monitoring and risk management processes are needed as to be able to timely identify school units where the project encounters significant bottlenecks and to take the necessary mitigation measures during implementation.

Recommendation 8: In addition, an engagement strategy should be developed for future similar interventions. Increasing the interest of school management in adopting UNICEF proposed activities, keeping them motivated along with the teaching staff contributes significantly to the success of the model. Moreover, an adequate engagement strategy would identify possible risks and provide directions of action if disruptive events emerge, as in 2020, when approximately 50% of the principals of QIE Transition schools were replaced.

Conclusion 15: The most effective activities conducted were: extracurricular activities implemented in the framework of microgrants and adolescents' clubs and trips / summer schools, parenting sessions (where conducted), trainings for teachers for school subjects and technical assistance / trainings for project writing, scholarships (where provided). Nevertheless, there are project components whose effectiveness varies across schools. These activities are: professional guidance and counselling, or the mentorship programme. In the case of the following 2 components, i.e., monitoring of children being at risk of dropout and remedial activities, a lack of clear implementation, reporting, and monitoring procedures, led to a limited effectiveness. In this context, improving the monitoring system is needed (*see recommendation 2 from relevance section*).

Conclusion 16: The main external facilitating factors that contributed to the effectiveness of the projects, as identified within the evaluation, were:

- the quality, interest and motivation of human resources involved in the project from school's side,
- the collaboration with the local community, especially the public local authority and its availability to take complementary measures (mainly providing financial benefits to families of vulnerable children),
- the effective collaboration between project management and the County Directorates for education.

The hampering factors related to the effectiveness of the project were:

- socio-economic situation of children's families,
- level of education of parents or child caregivers,

- stereotypes, especially in conservative communities,
- lack of motivating role models in the proximity of the children,
- school staff turnover, especially school principals,
- poor quality of administrative data from the education system (public monitoring system),
- Covid19 pandemic, which deepened the gap between disadvantaged communities and the more developed communities, disrupted the connection between parents and the school and the connection and collaboration among children, led to isolation of children, anxiety, and other mental health problems.

Recommendation 9: Considering the hampering factors, social and child protection measures should be properly carried out in each community, in synergy with efforts undertaken by schools to bring and keep children in class. UNICEF Minimum Package of Services model offers guidance in this direction.

Efficiency

Conclusion 17: The evaluation showed that resources were used in an economical manner within the project, with small variations from a component to another, based on the specificity of the conducted activities. The analysis did not identify significant differences between QIE and QIE Transition. The project used resources in the most efficient manner to achieve expected results, especially due to the fact that many activities generated important effects, in terms of visibility and target group coverage, with rather limited resources. The best example in this regard are the microgrants.

Conclusion 18: The project supported the financial capacity of the targeted schools through two channels: (i) the microgrants that financed activities and acquisitions of equipment and (ii) the increased capacity of the school principals and teachers to attract funding, due to the workshops in project writing and implementation. Although the monitoring data does not indicate the financial volume of additional projects won, outside of the direct support provided by the project for application writing, it is noted that in general the number of schools winning projects has increased as a consequence of the TA component of QIE Transition.

Conclusion 19: The scalability and sustainability planning for QIE Transition has been partly carried out within the project, as existing costing analyses are rather incomplete.

Recommendation 10: Due to the fact that many project activities have been already replicated in other geographical areas or scaled up through their introduction in strategic documents or national programmes (*see conclusion 27*), a scaling up costing analysis at least for the project components that have not been part of QIE (for which scaling up analyses exist) would be much necessary.

Impact

Conclusion 20: The available statistical data present an inconclusive picture on the impact of QIE Transition. Existing information indicates that children in the 7th grade are the most vulnerable to the dropout risk. But data at project level and recorded in the schools' electronic system (SIIR) show no consistent evidence that QIE Transition, implemented amid the COVID-19 pandemic, has significantly altered this trajectory. Deficiencies in recording absenteeism and tracking the educational paths of students at risk of dropout hinder a more in-depth analysis of the QIE Transition project's impact on school attendance and participation.

Recommendation 11: UNICEF could build up a monitoring system that can fill in the data gaps in the public system, in order to better advocate for improvements of the SIIR and school monitoring process at national level.

Conclusion 21: The attendance and dropout rates in schools are significantly influenced by the family dynamics, encompassing factors such as income. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize the pivotal role of scholarships in supporting the educational path of children. Another factor is the intrinsic motivation of children to learn. On the other hand, there is a limited belief in the school's and teacher's capacity to motivate children to attend school regularly and engage in learning, despite the various activities implemented within the project. However, the project has demonstrated success in developing children's motivation and soft skills, particularly communication. While these skills are essential, additionally it is equally important to complement them with the cultivation of other key competences to ensure the successful completion of upper secondary education. The results of the National Evaluation exam highlight persistent deficiencies in crucial literacy and mathematical competences.

Recommendation 12: Future similar projects should place more emphasis on identifying vulnerable children and providing scholarships for them. Further, it should also invest more efforts in trying to scale up this type of support provided to vulnerable children, through advocacy activities.

Recommendation 13: More attention should have been given to identifying children at risk of drop out and providing them the necessary support in compensating for learning gaps, such as remedial activities. A successful transition is directly conditioned by school results, because persistent education gaps may lead to school dropout also after children are enrolled in upper secondary education level (*see also recommendation 4*). Moreover, UNICEF should continue delivering activities developing non-cognitive skills and supporting motivation.

Conclusion 22: QIE Transition project generated important effects through its components at all levels. But viewed from an overall perspective at local community level, especially in vulnerable communities, they remain limited, as poverty, social exclusion and discrimination persist and cannot be properly addressed only in schools (*see recommendation 9*). Main changes that were identified through the evaluation are:

- QIE Transition had significantly impacted teachers' planning skills and organization of school and extracurricular activities, garnering strong enthusiasm from both teachers and students.
- The project had a broader impact by enabling underprivileged children and their families to participate in extracurricular activities that were previously financially inaccessible. This can be linked with children's motivation to continue their education.
- The QIE Transition had positively impacted parental attitudes toward education for parents participating in activities, but continuous efforts are needed for significant impact. Engaging hard-to-reach parents should be better addressed.

Recommendation 14: More efforts should be directed towards reaching parents or families that are, in general, not in contact with the school. If QIE Transition is replicated, an engagement strategy should be developed as a guidance for parental educators, but also for class masters. Involving school counsellors and school mediators and, where relevant, other important community actors should be part of this strategy.

Conclusion 23: QIE Transition played a role in enhancing the capacity of county-level institutions and influenced the national education policies, notably contributing to the formulation of the new law on pre-university education. However, the impact of QIE Transition is only visible when considered in conjunction with other ongoing initiatives in the education sector, such as the

presidential project "Educated Romania," earlier UNICEF models (especially QIE), the support from the World Bank to the Ministry of Education, and the concerted efforts of numerous NGOs that, like UNICEF, have long advocated for education reform.

Sustainability

Conclusion 24: School staff was well equipped for continuing activities as proposed by QIE Transition. Many activities are still conducted in schools, such as: remedial activities, Holtis clubs, extracurricular activities. Pedagogical methodologies and materials provided to schools are still in use. Nevertheless, well equipped teachers do not constitute the only necessary condition for the continuation of the project. Moreover, teachers that are the most active in the project can become overwhelmed and start to decrease their involvement in future activities. Other important elements that need to be in place are: the interest of the school management team for these activities, the motivation of teachers, the financial and time resources. The capacity of attracting non-refundable funding, including PNRAS funding which covers most of QIE Transition types of activities, remains of utmost importance for the sustainability of the project. The schools involved in QIE Transition face difficulties in ensuring at least one of the abovementioned necessary conditions for project sustainability. There is a vicious circle: schools currently still have insufficient capacity to access funding, which would enable them to be more capable to implement projects addressing school dropout.

Recommendation 15: A smoother exit strategy is required as to contribute to the maintenance of project results in schools and motivation of teachers to continue in the same vein as in the last years. A suggested solution is organizing annual meetings, following 3 to 5 years after the project conclusion, with the participation UNICEF experts, implementing partners and representatives of the schools, for sharing recent experiences related to QIE Transition activities and still conducted in schools and the bottlenecks encountered.

Conclusion 25: Various components of the project have already been taken up in national legislative or programmatic documents, creating the necessary preconditions, including setting budget allocations, for the further implementation of activities promoted in QIE Transition, such as:

- The introduction of vulnerable children monitoring fiche into the National Programme for Reduction of School Dropout, programme financed through EU funds. The programme also includes the following types of eligible activities similar with QIE Transition model: remedial activities, adolescents' clubs, extracurricular activities, including trips, counselling, parental education, pedagogical trainings and trainings for mentors, tutors, school counsellors.
- Parental education has been included in the Law of Education. Currently a National Strategy for Parental Education awaits approval.
- The strategic documents developed under CRED project, especially the Reference Framework of the National Curriculum adopted through Ministry Order in 2020, which included the experience of the Institute of Educational Sciences accumulated during its participation in QIE projects in Bacau County.
- Various activities implemented by UNICEF partners, outside of the scope of QIE Transition model (in terms of geographical and target group coverage), such as: pedagogical trainings, including trainings on discrimination and interculturality and technical assistance for project writing, parental education, Career Bus component.
- Methodological and teaching materials taken up by responsible public actors at county level, such as County School Inspectorate or County Resource Center and Educational Assistance, and further disseminated to all schools under their coordination.

Recommendation 16: As the replication of the model or its scale up it is done by component, UNICEF should conduct additional advocacy activities in order to ensure the integrated implementation of the components, covered by different policies / initiatives, in as many schools as possible.

11.2. Lessons Learned

The following list presents the aspects to which more attention should have been paid during project planning and implementation phases, due to the bottlenecks encountered, especially, in regards with the effectiveness of the project and the extent to which the generated effects could be captured and measured:

- 1. The evaluation found that the overall design of the project and its specific objectives were not very clear from the outset to all project stakeholders, especially to the schools that were involved, which led to, in some cases, poor coordination between activities and in general, to overlooking the final goal of the project at school level, facilitating a successful transition for all pupils.** UNICEF mitigated to a rather large extent this issue throughout the implementation. Local coordinators also, put efforts in this regard and as the majority of the collected opinions indicate, they provided clear and timely support to schools. Nevertheless, due to the fact that most of QIE Transition activities have been taken up from the initial phase of the project, which was implemented in the same schools, still the specificity of the current project was more difficult to be comprehend, with of the experience and impressions left by the previous project. Moreover, also, the link between the conducted activities and the final objective of the model was not clear to school staff who was involved. As identified by the evaluation, the connection between UNICEF's intervention and the academic performance of the children was not clearly established at the outset of the project and, as a result, participants lack a clear understanding of how the project has contributed to improving the successful transition rate of students enrolled in the school. Moreover, to a large extent teachers do not systematically monitor the education path of their pupils after graduation, thus they have only on a case-based information regarding their former students.
- 2. Developing the identity of the project is very important for motivating and activating local community actors, for replication and scaling up purposes, and further for a better management of the snowball effect, which was produced in the case of QIE Transition project.** The evidence collected from schools showed that the identity of QIE Transition model was weaker than the one of the first phase of QIE model. While the main objectives of two models are different and several new components were added to QIE Transition, most of the activities conducted between 2015 and 2018 in the lower secondary schools from Bacău County were continued in the new model. In many cases for teachers and principals it was difficult to make the distinction from the actions implemented in the two projects. When discussing in regards with the effects generated at school level, many provided examples referred to events that took place before 2018. Also, in several cases, teachers considered the approach promoted by UNICEF in their schools to be very useful and expanded the project target groups to children enrolled in 5th and 6th grade (generating a snowball effect), which overlapped with the category of beneficiaries from the previous project. While, it was expected that overlapping effects of the two interventions to be identified, the implementation of the previous project in the same schools being a success factor for the subsequent project phase, better coordination among project staff and better communication with beneficiaries, focused on the development of the identity of the project and clarifying the distinction between the two interventions, would have helped in keeping

the interest and motivation of school staff rather high and overcompensating for the fatigue generated by the multitude of planned activities and the long period of implementation (counting also the previous phase of the model).

3. **Using a comprehensive monitoring system, that is able to capture all the key expected outputs of the project and the related outcomes (results), unitary applied throughout the implementation period, is deemed valuable for the final goal of one of the key UNICEF modelling strategies, namely to gather evidence for the effectiveness of specific interventions, which should be further used in the process of advocating for the improvement of public policies for children.** The analysis found that there is a need for a clearer and more comprehensive monitoring system, maintained throughout the entire implementation period of the project, with targets set for all project outputs and also for the expected results. Additional outputs can be included in the monitoring system if additional activities are added to the model, but in the case of QIE Transition, for some indicators the labels were changes, they were split during implementation or indicators were removed from the monitoring and reporting system even if activities were continued. While flexibility represents one of the added values of UNICEF's interventions, rigor is also key in adequately registering the produced effects. In the same vein, it is utmost importance to cover through the indicators' system all key expected outputs of the project, especially in terms of number of beneficiaries by project activity, target group and by gender. In this manner, more insightful information on the mechanisms that work and why do they work can be provided through the monitoring system. This approach becomes utmost important especially the context of poor quality and with limited accessibility administrative data within the system of education in Romania.
4. **More attention to the coherent implementation of the model at school level, could have been beneficial for the effectiveness of the project, its integrated approach being one of the key success elements of the model.** The evaluation confirmed that the efficacy of project varies between school units. The components of the project have not been implemented with the same pace and consistency in all schools. Based on the in-depth analysed cases, the analysis showed that the project lost from its coherence and efficacy where not all project components were adopted by school principals and improvements in terms of school performance and transition rates were less visible in the official figures. A stakeholder engagement strategy should have been developed from the outset of the project in order to.
5. **Less than needed efforts were put into the advocacy activities conducted by UNICEF for model scaling up.** At CO office level, this component has been made based on the emerging opportunities in relation with the improvement of public policies for children, other important UNICEF projects being more intensive promoted, such as The Minimum Package for Social Services, than the QIE Transition model. On the other hand, the sustainability analysis showed that several components of project, have been already taken up various national strategic documents and programmes. In this context, an advocacy strategy needs to cover the assessment of the extent to which various sets of project activities have been already replicated by project partners or components have been included in national strategic or programmatic documents and then propose direction of actions in order to promote project expansion without duplication.