



Directorate for Education  
Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI), OECD

## Innovative Learning Environments (ILE)

### INVENTORY CASE STUDY

### **Dobbantó (Springboard) Programme**

### Hungary

*This is an innovative full-time compensatory programme that takes place within regular vocational schools and prepares learners with unsuccessful school careers for a return to schooling or professional life. The key element is a complex support system. Learners work in small groups, and meet at least weekly with a personal mentor teacher with whom they develop a positive, caring relationship, evaluate their progress and draw up individualized learning plans. There is a large selection of modules from which teachers (and learners) can choose for this purpose. Activities focus both at basic competencies necessary for reintegration in schools, and on groundwork for realistic career planning and improving self-knowledge. Regular workplace visits and 'job shadowing' are part of the curriculum to enable learners to choose a profession based on a realistic idea of what they will have to do in practice. Learners work in well-equipped, newly renovated classrooms, which position the Dobbantó classes in the eyes of all learners of the school not as catch-up classes but as classes that receive special attention. There is extensive professional support for teachers and school to successfully implement the programme (e.g., external advisors, regular team meetings within and between participating schools). Dropout rates are low and most learners successfully move on to further education or work upon completion of the programme.*

This Innovative Learning Environment case study has been prepared specifically for the OECD/ILE project. Research has been undertaken by Edit Sinka, research fellow from the University of XXX, under the supervision of László Limbacher from the Ministry of Human Resources, Hungary and Mária Bognár, Project leader at FSzK (Public Foundation for Equal Opportunities of Persons with Disabilities), following the research guidelines of the ILE project.

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# The Dobbantó (Springboard) Programme

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## 1. Aims of the ILE and the nature and history of the innovation

The primary aim of the Dobbantó Programme was to resolve the problems of early school leaving and unsuccessful school careers, and improve students' chances when starting or restarting their studies aimed at obtaining a vocational qualification. Thus, Dobbantó is a compensatory programme designed to stop students who have started to drift out of the school system. This requires schools to handle students' social, mental and learning problems, as this is a precondition of guiding them back into the world of education.

Both Hungarian and international experience indicates that this group needs a programme that offers a complex support system with the involvement of well-prepared teachers and other support staff. The most important element of this system is a personal relationship; preceding failures are largely due to the fact that the students in question did not develop an attachment or a relationship of trust with their schools or their teachers. Their future success hinges on them experiencing pleasure and success in education. If they get to know themselves better, they may be able to set realistic life goals for themselves. An improved mental condition also makes students easier to educate. Those are the core principles of the programme.

The implementation of the Dobbantó Programme in Hungary started in 2008 in the framework of a project led by Fogymatékos Személyek Esélyegyenlőségéért Közalapítvány (Public Foundation for Equal Opportunities of Persons with Disabilities - FSZK). The funding for the project was provided by the training sub-fund of the Labour Market Fund, and the legal framework was provided by Section 126 of the Act on Public Education. An amendment of the law made it possible to launch preparatory classes in selected vocational schools from 1 September 2008 for students with permanent and serious disorders affecting learning abilities or behaviour development that are not due to organic causes. Pursuant to the law, appointed schools may help students prepare to pursue a vocational qualification from the next academic year in the framework of regular vocational school education by offering them individualized training based on an individual schedule.

The FSZK – an organization that has considerable expertise in the area of individual development – wished to provide the appointed vocational schools with specialized support to help them prepare for providing personalized education. The foundation also expanded the project's target group to include all those young people who did not complete their studies (dropped out of school) or did not meet their compulsory schooling obligation (early school leavers) in the basic or secondary level of the traditional school system.

Thus, the project's target group is that of school leavers or students on the verge of leaving school, aged between 15 and 24, with learning or behavioural issues. Smaller classes (12 students on average, 16 at a maximum) are set up with such students within regular vocational schools for a single academic year. After this year, students can start vocational school or vocational secondary

school training within the school system in the vocational school in question or in another school, or they can participate in adult education or start work (and possibly carry on with their studies in parallel with work).

The Dobbantó project took on two tasks:

- developing a programme package that prepares students for the first year of vocational training in a single academic year using the method of development based on personalized education, and
- preparing the teachers and managers of the vocational schools participating in the programme for carrying out the above programme, and providing complex support to them.

In order to achieve these two goals, the programme fundamentally changed the previous learning environment that had proved unsuccessful with the students in question, and provided professional support to the teachers of the schools implementing the programme throughout the entire project period. This latter element was vital in enabling teachers to feel at home in a radically new learning environment.

Thus, the Dobbantó Programme started in Hungary in 2008 with the above objectives, and the first Dobbantó students started their studies in 15 vocational schools – chosen via a call for applications – after the preparatory year in September 2009. The project that laid the groundwork for the programme ended in November 2011<sup>1</sup>, and with it the direct technical and financial support provided to schools, but after two and a half years of joint work, the schools were already able to continue the Dobbantó Programme on their own, with support from their maintainers.

The paradigm of personalized teaching lies at the centre of the Dobbantó philosophy, and implementing this approach involves changing the entire learning environment that students remember from earlier periods and attach to failure. This includes the following:

- *Physical environment*: a tasteful, pleasant space with new and repainted movable furniture, providing opportunities for enhanced forms of socializing, leisure and learning, including formal, informal and non-formal learning
- *Organizational framework of teaching*: small groups (no more than 16 students), with no more than 4–6 teachers, with teacher pairs (two teachers present in class at the same time) covering 40% of the classes if possible. Each day of teaching starts with a warm-up session and ends with a wind-down session, and the day is made up of longer units than the traditional 45-minute classes. Opportunities for studying outside the school are also provided on a weekly basis.
- *Curriculum*: the programmes are interesting and relevant as to their content, practical, and adaptable to individual needs. Apart from developing the basic competencies necessary for reintegration and resocialization, they lay the groundwork for realistic career planning.

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<sup>1</sup> The school visits the present case study is based on took place in the Spring of 2011, and they covered all participating schools.

- *Methods of the organization of learning*: the central elements are individual development, differentiation, the central role of assessment supporting development and giving students the opportunity to take individual responsibilities (formative assessment). Cooperation, learning together and learning from each other are encouraged, and cooperative methods and projects are used.
- *Person centred teaching approach and practice*: the Dobbantó teacher team is committed to supporting students and able to put their individual development first and create an atmosphere based on trust to aid their development. Each student has a supporting teacher assigned to help them, with whom they discuss their individual development on a regular basis (occasionally with the participation of their parents). The commitments of the student and the environment are laid down by the student and the supporting teachers in an agreement.

The most salient differentiating factor of Dobbantó – at least for an outside observer – is the classroom itself and the organization of learning. However, during the project, the greatest challenge was neither of the above: it was working with the teachers. Dobbantó also declared that the most useful step in stopping early school leaving is a type of teaching that provides personalized care and pays attention to each child; however, this is also the most difficult goal to achieve. It is an expectation teachers cannot meet without support. Starting with their own school days, teachers and school management have all amassed thousands of classes of experience with frontal, one-size-fits-all, authoritarian teaching, which has become a deep-rooted mental model. These strongly embedded views and practical methods can only be changed through a long, interactive process. In order to bring about this change, the teaching team of each school was supported by a so-called "*change agent mentor*" (trained for this task in the framework of the programme and supported by regular supervision) who visited the school each month. Mentors facilitated the start of reflective thinking and the process of change and offered various alternative solutions to problems the team struggled to resolve. The presence and activities of change agent mentors modelled the role that supporting teachers play in personalized education. Team-building was an important task of change agent mentors as well.

Workgroups were set up for the five most important areas covered by Dobbantó, made up of experts with rich practical and/or development experience and wide ranging theoretical knowledge. The concrete content of the programme was drawn up by two groups: the *Content Development* group and the *Bridge to the World of Work* group. In drawing up the programme contents and the programme package designed to help implementation, the first of the two groups focused on the development of competencies that are necessary for success in school, while the latter focused on the development of competencies that are necessary for building a career. Their activities were characterized by cooperation and coordination. The *Student Support* workgroup worked on issues like drawing up schedules for the new school days and developing the student-teacher relationship, focusing on taking into account the complex needs of students. The task of the *Institutionalization* workgroup was optimizing the conditions of the sustainability of the Dobbantó Programme, including developments and changes at the school, local, regional and national level and in the legal framework, as well as disseminating the results. The *School Development* workgroup supported the implementation of the Dobbantó Programme in schools, in particular through the training of and regular cooperation with *educoaches* supporting school management and *change agent mentors*

working with teachers participating in the programme. This workgroup also organized trainings for the school leaders and supported teachers' regional meetings two times in each year.

The technical heads of the workgroups consulted regularly throughout the project period, ensuring constant coordination and supporting the technical and operative work of project managers, functioning as a so-called *management council*.

Some of the core principles and models of the school development practice of Dobbantó are as follows:

- The fundamental goal of the development is to change classroom processes in order to help each student learn and develop. *Teachers* are the key actors in this regard, but the unit of change is the *school* (Hopkins 2001 and Fullan 2003). The system of assistance and support provided to teachers and managers was set up based on these principles, and maintainers were involved in the programme based on these principles as well.
- Teachers are the key actors in the pedagogical work that puts the student at the centre. However, in order to change teaching attitudes and practices, the focus needs to be on how the individual may be assisted and what sort of processes can lead to transformational changes. According to the Concerns Based Adaptation Model (CBAM, Anderson 2002), the interests and activities of participants of change evolve together with the progress of the process. In the first stage, each individual concentrates on the *connection between the change and themselves*. In the next stage, interest is directed at the *task to be completed*, with the issue of *how* taking centre stage. In the last stage, the attention of the participants of a development project is directed to the *effects of their actions*; how they can make the change produce even greater results and work even better. The CBAM model confirms the importance of providing external assistance and support throughout the process of change, guiding each individual through the process, meeting their justified needs at all times. (As a side note, the deep change in attitudes required by the project would require technical cooperation and support over 4 or 5 years.)
- Depending on their innovation potential, schools need different types of intervention and follow a different path in their development/change; i.e. Dobbantó implements differentiated school development. (cf. Hopkins, Fullan) Therefore, each school had its own consultant, drew up its own change plan and took as large steps in each regard as was feasible.
- The model of Creemers et al. based on international school development experience stresses that a development-friendly environment is a precondition for successful, sustainable, systemic change. This model states that effective school development requires clear *goals*, technical support and recognizing the *requirements* attached to change.(Creemers 2001) The unity of goals, support and requirements was enforced at all levels throughout the whole project.

## **2. Structured patterns and characteristics of the learning environment**

174 students started the first academic year in Dobbantó, and 191 finished it. Naturally, there were students who abandoned Dobbantó during the school year, but there were far more new joiners. This was made possible by one of the principles of Dobbantó: that preparatory classes can only be truly effective against school dropouts if they are able to receive students immediately after a failure at school, eliminating the period of inactivity that could start the student on the road towards leaving the school. Students who apply for enrolment during the academic year may join groups if there are vacancies left. Similarly, if a student turns out to be able to make better progress in some other kind of training or is sufficiently personally strengthened after a shorter period, they may continue their studies elsewhere or possibly start work if they reached the age limit for compulsory schooling.

The second academic year of Dobbantó Programme started with 185 students and ended with 203. A total of 43 students arrived in 11 schools, and 25 left from 10 schools. A significant portion of the 25 leavers moved to another school during the academic year; 12 continued their studies in a different vocational school, and 1 student was transferred to a primary school. Five students transferred to another, non-Dobbantó class in the same school, and there were only 7 students who did not continue their studies at all, but that figure includes one student who sadly died and one who had to leave the programme due to illness. The other five went into employment or took temporary jobs. As they are the only ones who can be considered “real” dropouts, the overall dropout rate of the Dobbantó Programme is rather low at about 2%.

Dobbantó classes are rather heterogeneous with regard to age, cultural and ethnic background and special educational needs. The age of programme participants varies from 15 to 25, and cognitive skills range from mild mental handicaps to fully healthy and even above-average. There are great differences in terms of knowledge levels as well: some only completed five grades, while others completed nine. In some schools, the majority of Dobbantó students have a difficult family background or live in state care, while in some others, the Dobbantó class offered a solution for the education of the problematic children of well-to-do families, at least for a year. Heterogeneity was somewhat lower within each class than across the whole programme, but none of the classes were homogeneous in terms of pre-existing knowledge, motivation and background. According to Dobbantó teachers, this was one of the main challenges; at the same time, it also confirms that the decision to base the Dobbantó Programme on personalized education was the right one.

Most Dobbantó students arrived in this special class from a different school; there were only four who restarted their studies after a year spent outside the school system. They all completed the Dobbantó year. A review of the profiles of programme entrants shows that half of them had some type of special educational needs diagnosis and there were a significant number of students who had not completed primary school. The only common feature was that all of them had a winding, difficult past behind them.

One of the unique features of the Dobbantó Programme is that the location of study is not only the classroom, and this is by design: there are occasions for learning outside the school that are part of the curriculum. One of them is a visit to an external workplace, which involves what is called job-shadowing. This means that the students, after some prior information about the workplace and the job in question, observe real work for a longer period – for a full day, if possible – shadowing an

employee<sup>2</sup>. During this observation, students take notes, and they can put questions to the employee or the manager of the workplace at the end. This arrangement contributes significantly to enabling students to choose a profession based on a realistic idea of what they will have to do in practice at a workplace or job and what the advantages and drawbacks of the job are, what wage they might expect and all other important aspects; in short, job-shadowing helps students make as realistic career choices as possible. Job-shadowing is especially important because one of the main reasons for school leaving during vocational training is that students only find out during their traineeship that their ideas about their chosen profession are quite far from reality – and students tend not to have much of an idea about what the less popular professions involve, and consequently don't choose them. According to accounts of Dobbantó students, waiter positions were attractive to many students initially, but after visiting a bar or restaurant, most students did not find this job attractive.

Another typical example of studying outside the school is excursions and theatre, cinema and museum visits, which are usually not part of school curricula and are only organized as extracurricular activities in some schools where parents can afford to cover the costs. Most Dobbantó students had precious few such opportunities in their previous school years; however, the project made it possible for them to participate in such activities as well.

The academic year lasts 36 weeks in the Dobbantó Programme just like in any other Hungarian vocational school, but the daily and weekly schedules are quite different from the traditional system. First of all, approximately 60% of study time is devoted to general education, and 40% is devoted to developing work-related competencies – this latter often making up a very significant portion of the weekly schedule. (For instance, with three days dominated by general education modules<sup>3</sup>, and two days dominated by technical content – however, schools are given certain latitude in setting these schedules.) On the other hand, the structure of teaching days is not traditional, either; they are not simply made up of classes following each other. Each day starts with a warm-up conversation, followed by familiarization with the content of the module planned for the day. Teachers may decide to proceed with the modules in an epochal manner. The learning of the modules may be interrupted during the day by a block of exercise or art, followed by the second period of general education and a day-ending group conversation – an important part of which is assessment supporting development.

When specialized (as opposed to general education) modules are being taught, there is generally one preparatory day in school, with a similar structure to general education modules, followed by a workplace visit (with the previously described job-shadowing), and the cycle is closed by another day at school, during which students process their experiences together. Out-of-school learning is frequent outside of workplace visits, too, taking up a full day or part of a day.

It is also worth mentioning that the first and last weeks of the academic year are not organized following the normal template. The first week is devoted to getting to know each other and making plans, and the academic year is closed by a week of feedback and looking into the future.

Three to five teachers work with Dobbantó students on an on-going basis, and two of them are present together in the classroom in 40% of the time. Generally, there are three teachers working with the group on competency development and processing the modules, responsible for

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<sup>2</sup> It was an expectation that each Dobbantó group had to be acquainted with 6-9 different groups of jobs during the year.

<sup>3</sup> Modules and their content will be discussed in more detail later.

humanities, natural sciences and a vocational field, respectively, with at least one of them having experience in teaching students with special educational needs. Teaching is not necessarily vocational in nature; this is not required by the "curriculum" that focuses on individual development or the modules based on it. Thus, teachers have more time with students each week, allowing them to get to know them better, and making it possible for students and teachers to form a bond based on trust. The work of the teacher team may be supported by other specialized staff (e.g. school psychologist, developmental teacher, special education teacher, pedagogical assistant, the person responsible for child protection, social educator, school social worker), depending on what staff is available at the school in question.

One of the basic features of Dobbantó is that each student has a so-called supporting teacher, with whom they are in regular contact and have at least one individual discussion (face-to-face hour) each week.

There are three main areas of educational content:

1. developing communicational, social and learning competencies necessary for further schooling and participation in vocational training;
2. developing basic labour and career-building competencies necessary for shaping students' subsequent careers;
3. perhaps the most important thing: supporting the individual personal development of each student, including improving their self-image, self-knowledge, confidence etc.

There is a rich selection of modules – 5200 pages of ready-to-use material – is available for the organization of teaching in the traditional sense, which teachers can choose from in accordance with the unique needs of each student. Modules on communication, social and contemporary knowledge, English and German language<sup>4</sup>, mathematics and natural science, based on practical content related to everyday situations, are designed to improve students' general knowledge. The educational content created for the field of *Bridge to Employment* is unique; the eight modules built on each other are designed to promote the development of competencies necessary for employment and career-building. Finally, there are modules for each of the 21 occupational fields, at least six of which must be chosen and taught to students. The choice may be based on the interests of the students as well as the vocational qualifications available at the school in question. Printed material is also available to teachers participating in the programme over the Internet. Teachers were not limited to using the available modules only. The project encouraged them to enrich and improve the available material based on the individual needs and of their students and the local conditions, and financial compensation for their work in this regard was also available.

Among the methods of the organization of education, the programme prefers the solutions of so-called alternative teaching, supports cooperative organization of education and project work, as well as the various forms of individual learning. Teachers must focus on the individual development of each Dobbantó student and prepare an individual development plan for each student. Plans are drawn up with the involvement of the student, and, if possible, the parents, and progress towards the goals is reviewed by teachers and students together on a regular basis (every three months).

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<sup>4</sup> There is an option is to chose one of them.

Students have a supporting teacher at their disposal for solving problems, but teachers themselves may also run into problems they need help with. Weekly team meetings are organized to this end, with the participation of all teachers who teach in Dobbantó classes. In cases where this is not sufficient, the change mentors who visit the school once a month can be asked for advice. Naturally, the members of school management can also be relied on for help, as they are also subjects of the programme; within the framework of the Dobbantó Programme, they receive training and regular support so that they can promote and even guide innovation in their institutions. School leaders are supported in reflecting upon and developing their own leadership practices by educoaches with business skills and trained on the peculiarities of the field of education.

However, according to teachers, the most useful source of support is the practice of regional meetings, where teachers and managers of schools participating in the programme met with the teams of 4 or 5 other schools every 6 months. Each of these events was organized by a school, and the schedule was set by the participants – naturally, with ample support from the programme management, e.g. providing experts requested by the schools. Regional meetings proved to be popular opportunities for a direct exchange of experiences and learning from each other; this was the form of support most appreciated by teachers. Regional meetings provided teachers with knowledge and lasting personal and professional relationships, and teachers tired from the daily grind of the job who might have had a gloomy outlook gained new faith and energy from the accounts of their colleagues and received reassurance from credible external sources.

As described above, the element of Dobbantó that differs most noticeably from traditional classes is the physical environment itself. Dobbantó classes have their own classrooms, which are only used by them and host all of their classes. The renovation and furnishing of these rooms was funded by the project; therefore, these rooms tend to be among the nicest, if not the nicest, rooms of the participating schools. This has a double function: it is primarily designed to create a pleasant environment for students who are in the process of abandoning school, counteracting their negative image of schooling. However, it is also important to position Dobbantó classes higher in the school hierarchy in the eyes of other students, who thus see Dobbantó classes not as simple catch-up classes but as classes that receive special attention.

Classrooms provide spaces for both group and individual learning, rest and recreation, and all rooms contain a small kitchenette as well. The study space is supplied with movable desks, and individual learning is supported by a reference library and a computer with an Internet connection. Study material, student portfolios and printed module materials (folders) are stored on shelves or in cupboards accessible to everyone. The recreation area contains a conversation corner (carpet, armchairs, bean bags or cushions) and toys, musical instruments and audio-visual equipment, and the kitchenette can be used for making tea, warming up food and perhaps cooking simple dishes. The kitchenette, toys and conversation corner are designed to prepare students for everyday social situations, as are common meals.

At the start of the project, schools were given a very detailed description of what the classrooms of Dobbantó classes should look like. The rooms were planned in the Spring of 2009, and in most schools, the works were carried out during Summer break. Providing all of the above features was a problem for several schools, as they lacked a room large enough to accommodate everything. The study and recreational area plus the kitchenette would have required a larger area than an average

Hungarian classroom, despite the fact that Dobbantó classes are approximately half the size of an average class. Therefore, several schools opted to use two rooms, generally one for learning activities and one for non-learning activities. It is preferable for the two rooms to be connected. There was only one school where this decision was felt to be inappropriate with hindsight; in other schools, it did not pose a problem. It is worth noting that despite the detailed specifications, the Dobbantó classrooms of the various schools are quite different and rather characteristic. (The photos in the Annex show the layout and diversity of the classrooms.)

In the course of the Dobbantó project, individual development plans were drawn up not only for each student, but for each of the 15 participating schools as well. This was motivated – much like in the case of students – by the high degree of heterogeneity of the schools. The smallest had a few hundred students, the largest several thousand; for some, Dobbantó was their first experience with a development project, while others had a huge amount of experience in this area. Due to this, schools were at very different levels of quality in their attitude to personalized education and willingness and ability to change. Due to these factors, institutions participating in the Dobbantó Programme were assigned different goals and development tasks – if uniform goals had been set, some schools would have met them from the outset, while others would have had no chance of meeting them at all. Instead, the specialist programme managers defined 8 key areas at the start of the programme, which, if improved, can bring schools closer to personalized practices that can prevent early school leaving. Each school had to determine their status in each of the eight areas and set goals which were entered in the six-month action plan; their progress was evaluated every six months based on expert feedback. (This also served as a model for teachers to expect and support students' development in accordance with their particular situation and possibilities.)

The Dobbantó Programme was financed within the framework of the project; The Public Foundation for Equal Opportunities of Persons with Disabilities (Fogyatékos Személyek Esélyegyenlőségéért Közalapítvány), the foundation implementing the project signed contracts with each school. In accordance with the contract, schools received the largest portion of the funding at the start of the project – this was necessary because the largest single expenditure item was setting up and furnishing the classrooms. Subsequently, new funding instalments were provided every six months, with regular accounts submitted by schools. The funding was available to be used for Dobbantó goals with considerable freedom; there were no unified rules in this regard. However, financial plans had to stand up to scrutiny. The only hard restriction was that teachers could not receive extra wages simply for teaching Dobbantó students. This restriction was motivated by the experience from other projects that if participants of an innovative project are paid, then the benefits last only as long as the funding does. Teachers had to accept the fact that the programme was not employing them: it was providing help and support for them to do their job better, more successfully and more efficiently. The funding could however be used for purchasing equipment of all types, for financing events and for compensating teachers for intellectual contributions made outside the classroom. Such contributions could include things like written reflections on the project, or, more often, writing study material or creating teaching tools of some type.

Participation in the Dobbantó Programme was conditional on the support of the maintainer of the school. As the costs of the programme were funded in the framework of the support agreement, maintainers had no adverse interest in launching Dobbantó classes – they faced no extra costs but received an opportunity for professional development. The programme office worked hard to

maintain a good relationship with maintainers throughout the project; for instance, it provided them with regular information on the results and development of schools and invited them to various project-level events. Maintainers, who were a rather varied group ranging from foundations and local governments to ministries, did not play a particularly active role apart from the above.

The Dobbantó Programme paid particular attention to collecting evidence from the outset; therefore, quantifiable information is now available on the entire project and especially its direct results. The Dobbantó project was carried out with internal monitoring and regular external assessment every six months. In addition, the path of the first batch of students was monitored by a different independent assessment organization for one academic year. Thus, evidence collected on an on-going basis provided information on the effectiveness of the project already during its implementation.

As changes in the number of students are crucial indicators, the project required participating schools to supply data on student movements and student group compositions every six months. 89.0 per cent of the first batch of Dobbantó students and 92.2 per cent of the second group continued their studies in some form. (See also Chapter 4 on effectiveness.)

### **3. Nature and quality of the learning**

The experience of studying in a Dobbantó class is perhaps best summed up by the following quote from a student, recorded during a visit: "There is no strict discipline, but if you want to learn, you get the chance." There is some wonderment in this utterance, as the student's prior experience probably indicated that studying and educational achievement were tied to strict discipline in school, with students not being allowed to have fun while learning. One great achievement of Dobbantó is that it showed students that learning can be fun.

But what makes Dobbantó special, and how can it be effective without discipline? Observed classes differ from regular classes mostly in that students are much more active. Lectures by teachers are very rare; students work individually or in small groups very often. As traditional textbooks are not used, the study material is basically selected by the students (following the teacher's detailed instructions, of course). Thus, the idea of memorizing data never comes up. Students' prior experiences equate studying with memorizing things they do not understand – thus, they might not feel that Dobbantó activities are actually studying. However, teachers report that their competencies are clearly improving.

When asked about what makes studying in the programme a good experience, Dobbantó students mention the physical environment (pleasant classroom, couch, computers, football table) and the teachers. It was touching to hear almost all students of a class say that the best thing that happened to them all year was meeting the teacher who became their form teacher. Several students reported that they had never met such "cool" teachers, despite the fact that they had 10 years of schooling experience on average. By the way, a teacher is mostly "cool" simply because he or she listens to students and tries to understand and support them. This clearly shows that for students on the verge of dropping out of school, the material to be learned is not the main problem; the idea that previous teachers did not teach well never came up, nor did the subject of what or how Dobbantó teachers

teach. Students' expectations with regard to their teachers focus on a different issue: individual care and attention. This confirms the fundamental approach of Dobbantó: an effective approach against school leaving has to feature personalized teaching methods and dedicated teaching staff.

The heterogeneity of students, already indicated by the documents reviewed, was very noticeable during school visits as well. Apart from age differences, the most striking feature was seeing overage 'tough boys' listen intently to their mentally handicapped classmate trying to answer a question that had been put to the class. Students had clearly learned a lot about tolerance. Perhaps their only common feature was that they were all amazed that school can be the way Dobbantó is.

Students knew very clearly that there were differences between their class and other classes in the same school, but they had trouble formulating what the difference might be. The best answer was probably this: "There is life here, there is no life in the other classes." This shows that Dobbantó students see their environment as their own environment, their living space, while other classes are places where students are only present "in transit" (and because they are forced to). None of the students said that it was worse to study in a Dobbantó class in any regard than in a regular class; this shows that these classes are free of the stigma of preparatory and special classes in the schools in question (otherwise, the students, who are in daily contact with other students, would have been conscious of this attitude). This is a very important achievement of the programme.

"This programme is proving that it's not children that don't like going to school; it's something that we are not doing right. Why are there no absences? They come to school, because they like to come. They come through the door and the first thing they do is ask what we will be doing today." – a teacher.

Teachers also feel that their personality and personal relationships are contributing to keeping students in school. This is also demonstrated by the fact that many worry about the next year when they will not have a supporting teacher to rely on. The subsequent school career of the students of the first Dobbantó classes confirmed to teachers that those who stay in the same school and start vocational training there are more successful than those who move to a different school, ending the personal support relationship teachers have with the student. (However, this is only an anecdotal observation; it was reported at several different schools, but no hard data is available to support it.)

It was reported in every school that frontal teaching does not work in such heterogeneous classes. Teachers either use a differentiated model, or, as they call it, an individual model. One-on-one contact with students was among the project's primary objectives, and the heterogeneity of the classes contributed to making it a reality: teachers had to admit that their usual techniques involving frontal class management do not work in this context. This was supported by constant reinforcement from the programme and the mentors in this regard.

"It is important for teachers to see students as people first and foremost, and develop a relationship with them. Children need to be actively involved in their education. It is very important to do this from the very beginning to get them used to it. Be curious about children's feelings. They are rarely asked how they feel, but this is important. One has to ask them what they are concerned about. And the approach of "How much material can I teach in 45, 2x45 or 3x45 minutes?" needs to be abandoned. That doesn't work here. You have to accept that you will only be teaching three things in

a day, a full day. Instead, you have to show them what they are good at, because they come here and everyone has been telling them they are dumb." – a teacher

The Dobbantó Programme gave a lot not only to students, but also to teachers. They report: "Teachers participate in many trainings during their careers, but they often feel that the circumstances exclude the type of work that is expected at trainings. Here, on the other hand, all necessary conditions can be provided, and we received ready-made materials [modules] and there was time to prepare. [...] this gave us the chance to move to a higher level professionally." – teacher focus group

Almost all the interviewed teachers mentioned that they had learned many new methods, successfully handled challenges and emerged as better teachers. Some highly appreciated the possibility to act in a supporting role, and some reported to be happy that smaller class sizes allowed them to do a better job. They did not simply acquire concrete pedagogical or technical and methodological knowledge; they stressed the importance of learning to cooperate constructively with colleagues, learning humanity, a love of children, a better work ethic, team spirit, enthusiasm and relying on each other.

Among the forms of support provided for the local implementation of the Dobbantó Programme – as mentioned above – the most highly appreciated one by far was the organization of regional meetings. 10 out of 15 schools also stressed the importance of the regular visits by the change agent mentor. The most frequently provided justification was that an external point of view can be very helpful, providing true guidance. Dobbantó was a very good environment for teachers' professional development; they were especially enthusiastic about the new experience of two-teacher classes.

Schools strongly felt that Dobbantó was generally very demanding for teachers, both in terms of time investment and mental energy. However, teachers reported that the time strain was less intense in the second year: carrying out the same Dobbantó-related tasks took much less effort, as the experience of the first year allowed them to work more efficiently, and with increased confidence, they had a better subjective experience of the work (which was also reported in the interviews).

According to teachers' experience, the one year spent in the Dobbantó Programme was useful for almost every child, but it was perhaps most useful for those who had only experienced exclusion, shame and failure at school. Here, they open up, gain confidence and often their attitude to school changes completely. However, teachers themselves also noted that they need to work on making this a long-term effect that lasts as long as possible. One teacher said that, in this phase of their studies, every single student should have one year during which their self-knowledge improves as much as it does for Dobbantó students.

If one were to ask which students Dobbantó is most useful for or what the ideal Dobbantó student is like, and what methods and forms of work are most useful for them, almost every school would provide a different answer. One of the reasons is obviously that there are great differences in the composition of Dobbantó classes in various schools. On top of that, almost every class is a mix of special educational needs (SEN) students and non-SEN students (the latter are usually referred to as classical school leavers). Schools tend to have experience with teaching one group or the other, but not both. Therefore, special vocational schools tend to do better with SEN students, while students in regular vocational schools tend to struggle with them more. (However, this is only a general trend; it

is not present in every single school.) This is probably due to lack of experience with teaching SEN students.

The programme is good for those who do not yet know what they want to do with their lives, those who need a lot of individual discussion, those who have learning difficulties or are disadvantaged but are open. It should be noted that in most schools, teachers reported that the programme was beneficial for every participant, and would actually be useful for most traditional vocational school students as well, because they have largely the same problems as the students who, due to luck or other factors, ended up in a Dobbantó class. Their confidence increases, which allows them to integrate better elsewhere, which definitely affects their subsequent educational career positively.

Children are often driven away from school by bad company. However, Dobbantó "offers a cool place to be in school", as one school manager said, a place that can compete with company outside of school. On top of the physical environment, the events are also attractive, keeping students in school. Teachers picked up on this trend and tried to make the most of it, organizing a wide range of attractive events for students including paintball outings, summer camps, pizza nights and theatre visits. On the other hand, Dobbantó is not recommended for students who completed 6 or less out of the 8 grades of primary school, as the lack of baseline knowledge prevents them from being successful, and one of the main goals of Dobbantó is to give participants – who have mostly only been through failure before – an experience of success.

Therefore, the environment is very important for classical school leavers, as "they come in for the computer if nothing else, and once they are here, they can be involved occasionally." In the words of another school leader: "What we have seen is that the classroom and the furniture and equipment are crucial for the socialization of students, they certainly contribute 20-30% at least."

Classrooms differ, but they have one feature in common: student portfolios always enjoy pride of place. In these folders students collect everything they deem important with regard to their own development: written documents of various types, feedback and their own work. Students decide what to put in their portfolio, but they do so with assistance from their teachers, and teachers' and students' notes are often annexed to the documents. This gives students feedback, enabling them to reflect on their own studies, and possibly make the necessary corrections. This type of feedback is even more necessary because Dobbantó lacks traditional assessments; there is no grading. (There is an important role for assessment aimed at development, though.)

One of the most salient features of the classrooms visited was the extent to which student-teacher interactions differed from what is the norm in traditional school situations. The trust placed by students in their teachers was palpable, and the behaviour of teachers also showed that they knew students very well, and that their relationship was not superficial but very much personal. These teachers are very happy about students' successes – they talk about successful supplementary examinations and admission tests with as much pride as if the children were their own. For teachers, there is one other important issue aside from the success of students: this programme allowed them to experience freedom in teaching.

They felt that individual work was the most effective method with the students in question, and saw in practice that having as few teachers teaching them as possible can be crucial. This helps students adapt.

One teacher noted that for him, one of the defining experiences was being forced to stay silent, to accept being silent as part of a conversation. He believes that this is a very tough task for teachers, who are used to talking all the time. As a supporting teacher, however, he had to learn to really focus on students, and was surprised at how difficult this was for him.

What is the key to the success of the program in the opinion of teachers working in Dobbantó? What is the core element of this programme in their eyes, which component did they identify with the most? What do they think makes Dobbantó what it is?

- flexible teachers are needed, with many-many ideas and a willingness to help and adapt to the programme
- the programme hinges on teachers, and gives them a lot of freedom, which is great, but teachers need to know how to use it
- students must be viewed as partners; personal attention, individual treatment and differentiation are crucial, and teachers need to be able to listen to students
- a good team is needed, with one leader and relatively small number of dedicated, well-prepared members, and team meetings need to be regular
- small classes, individualized teaching
- teacher pairs running classes, with two teachers who can cooperate well
- funding, infrastructure, material conditions
- external support
- appropriate selection of specializations

In 14 out of 15 schools there was a teacher (and in most of them, more than one) who reported using elements of the Dobbantó Programme in non-Dobbantó classes with some regularity. Most of them mentioned the regular conversations at the start and the end of the day, but many teachers use a variety of work methods outside of Dobbantó as well, and parts of modules and task ideas are also often used as well. Several teachers mentioned that some elements of the Bridge to Employment module would be useful for each and every student, and some of them apply them – at least during form class. There are also teachers who use the idea of individual development plans in other classes as well.

The Dobbantó approach is spreading in schools in other, less direct ways as well: it affects the entire teaching staff in schools (with the possible exception of two particularly unreceptive teacher communities). In schools, majority teachers are starting to accept that their methods need changing. "They see that other methods do work, even with students who are considered to be really difficult to work with" – one teacher said. One school principal said that "It started a change of attitude among teachers, because when teachers who used to be sceptical saw the results achieved by Dobbantó students, they said that these children might not be beyond hope after all."

Finally, the nature of learning in Dobbantó could perhaps be best illustrated by a description of a class visit:

*When we arrived, a career planning class had been going on for some time, and we joined. It was very exciting to watch students – and of course, teachers – because it was a very real situation: students got obstinate and refused to even start doing a multi-part task. However, the teacher perceived the situation very clearly and was able to make a switch, which everyone was happy with and the class continued in a very good atmosphere.*

## 4. Impact and effectiveness

The effectiveness of the Dobbantó Programme is best assessed based on the results of the tracking of students after the closing of the programme. This evaluation took place in 2010 and 2011, following the first (2009/10) classes of Dobbantó students for 8 months. A relatively new methodology was used: students participating in the exercise (including members of the control group) had to answer questions via mobile phone. Thanks to this research method, which took into account the characteristics of the age group in question and motivated them to participate in the survey, 87% of students stuck with the survey and responded to questions to the end. The questions related to current experiences, activities carried out at the moment of asking and related to cognitive and emotional reactions. Responding to the questions took no more than 1 or 2 minutes at a time.

The research results show that participation in the Dobbantó Programme was a defining time in the lives of the participants. 98% of respondents reported that they were happy to have been Dobbantó students. 89% said they learned information or practical knowledge in Dobbantó that they later found very useful in life.

Students had a clearly positive opinion of the Dobbantó Programme and had a good experience during the year it lasted. They especially stressed personal attention, support, a sense of security and the important and supportive social contacts with their peers and teachers. The programme gave them useful knowledge on career choices, career planning and on how to look for a job.

After one year in the Dobbantó Programme, their integration into a new environment was successful. Students settled into their new classes, and developed good social contacts within the class and in the school. Most reported that they would prefer to finish their studies in the same institution. There were no significant differences in educational achievements between former Dobbantó students and the control group.

According to the external evaluation report, teachers' attitudes and practices changed for the better during the programme, and they learned a lot from working with children with special educational needs. This observation was also confirmed by the monitoring review that followed the development project.

According to the monitoring review that closed the development process, every teacher had successes with development based on individual schedules. According to the conclusions of the project closing on-site visits, all teachers still apply the methods and pedagogical procedures learned in Dobbantó, and not only in Dobbantó classes, but also in other classes they teach in.

What benefits did the programme bring to students, teachers and schools? – teachers' opinions:

- Students get to know themselves and their chosen profession better – the programme prepares them for life.
- The programme can retain children who would abandon other schools.
- Students had a nice place to be, they did not drift; their life got a direction.
- Students who started to learn a trade through this programme would otherwise not have done so.

- The aesthetically pleasing environment gave them direction, and became an important factor with regard to other spaces in the school and other teachers as well.
- It provided especially good conditions for both teachers and students.
- The programme proved that there is a methodology that can work and produce results with this group of students, as well.
- It gave schools the opportunity to excel.
- Teachers learned a lot, experienced success and the pleasure of teamwork and obtained a new outlook.

After the end of the Dobbantó project, we know of 12 schools that continue the Dobbantó Programme in the same form even without external support. Two of them launched additional classes, two more introduced Dobbantó methods in the existing catch-up classes, and one school is spreading the programme outside its own walls, in the city's juvenile penitentiary institution.

In order to allow any secondary institution to apply the programme of teaching students based on individual schedules and individual activities in the future,

- the Dobbantó framework curriculum was approved in 2010,
- a launch permit was granted to in-service teacher trainings *Preventing drop-outs in secondary schools using the Dobbantó Programme I and II* (the trainings last 60 hours each).

The Dobbantó Programme was introduced to Hungarian education professionals in detail in the last few years, through conferences and the educational press. Thanks to E2C contacts (European Association for Cities, Institutes and Second Chance Schools), Dobbantó was presented in several European countries, and was introduced as an example of good practice.

Another path of Hungarian utilization is also taking shape: the new Act on National Public Education contains provisions on what is called the Public Education Bridge Programme. The aim of this programme is to assist students in joining secondary education or vocational training or in obtaining the knowledge necessary for getting employed and starting an independent life by performing complex educational, social, cultural, pedagogical tasks for developing their skills and personality. The people in charge of the Bridge Programme are keen on establishing contact with Dobbantó, and would like to build on the results of the programme.

In sum, the current Hungarian education policy has based its new nation-wide programme aiming at effectively bridging the social gap among students on the positive lessons of the Dobbantó programme.

## Annex:

A collection site with English language materials (specially a film about Dobbantó with English subtitles): [www.fszk.hu/dobbanto/english](http://www.fszk.hu/dobbanto/english)

**Photos:** *(The original high quality photos can be sent via separate email messages. See addresses below.)*

Classroom:



Lesson:



Group work:



Free time corner:





Examples of ready-to-use module materials:

**Tanulás** *hisz eljött*

Milyen módszerrel tanulsz?  
*Először elsősorban utána nézek a témának, olvasom le a szöveget, és feljegyzem, hogy mi a lényeg.*

Miért érdemes tanulni? Sorolj fel minél több okot!  
*hisz azért kell tanulni, mert így könnyebb eljutni a célhoz, és megkapni a tudást.*

Szerinted hatékonyan tanulsz? Hogyan tudod ezt lemérni?  
*Ezt úgy mérhetem meg, ha mindig megkapom a jeleket, és a tanár elismeri a munkámat.*

Olvasd el a következő verset, amely egy felkészületlen diák kínjait ábrázolja!

*Megint hétfő van,  
 megint elfelejttem valamit.  
 A tanár lapozza a naplót.  
 Szeretnék összezúgorodni,  
 akár egy hangya,  
 csak akkor szeretnék lenni,  
 nem nagyobb.  
 Jó annak,  
 aki lázasan fekszik otthon,  
 sügőm a padtársamnak.  
 Ne beszélj, mondja, néz.  
 Néz ránk, nem szereti,  
 ha ilyenkor beszélgetnek.  
 Te és te, mondja,  
 gyerekek a táblához.  
 Ezért még kapni fogsz, hallom.  
 Ilyen az én formám.  
 A hangyák nem beszélnek,  
 gondolom a táblához vezető hosszú úton.  
 A tanár kérdez,  
 én pedig hallgatok,  
 mintha alig látható,  
 néma hangycscka lennék.*

(Szenási Miklós: Felelünk)

**1. MELLÉKLET** 19 D

**Életmenetrend – feladatlap**

Kérlek, rangsorold az alábbi kijelentéseket az szerint, hogy mit tartasz fontosnak a saját életedben! 1-est azon állítás elé, amit legfontosabbnak tartasz, 2-est egy következő állítás elé, amit másodlagosan tart fontosnak stb. – egészen 9-ig!

Saját rangsor	Mennyire fontos az életemben?	Csoport-rangsor	1	2	3	4	5	Összeg	Rangsor
1	Szeressenek az emberek.		1	9	1				
7	Okos, művelt, képzett legyek.		7	9	9				
8	Népszerű és híres ember legyek.		8	5	5				
6	Sikereim legyenek a szerelemben.		6	9	9				
5	Izgalmas kalandokban legyen részem.		5	1	3				
4	Nyugodt otthonom legyen.		4	9	7				
2	Jó barátaim legyenek.		2	9	6				
3	Sok pénzem legyen.		3	9	4				
9	Megfelelő hivatásom, szakmám legyen.		9	9	9				

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