Investigating the Reasons for High Dropout Rates in Upper Akkar

Mada Association

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High Dropout Rates in Upper Akkar

(Area of National Park)

Aicha Mouchref

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Acknowledgement

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METHODOLOGY

In spring of 2008, a comprehensive study was conducted in 38 schools in Upper Akkar, covering 20 municipalities (1) in the Jourd al-Qaytaa and Joumeh regions. The survey was comprised of structured interviews with 223 teachers and 38 directors, as well as focus groups involving 329 different stakeholders (directors, teachers, mothers, youth, children). Since dropout rates in Akkar are highest in the fourth grade, the decision was made to focus on primary and intermediate education. Secondary schools were not included. Of the surveyed schools, 28 are public, eight are free-private, and two are paid-private. For the quantitative component of the study, two questionnaires were designed: The Director's Form was filled in by interviews with 38 directors in the area; and the Teacher's Form was completed by 223 teachers (six per school), distributed almost evenly over grades K-9 and covering the entire spectrum of subjects taught. Purposeful sampling was adhered to in selecting teachers to be interviewed. The interviews pursued several areas of inquiry including:

- Teachers' background, level and attitude
- Reasons for dropout and school failure
- Use of punishment methods
- Environmental awareness
- Extra-curricular activities
- Situation of students with special needs

The qualitative component of the study involves focus groups held in five isolated subgroups, so as to rule out cross-influence and consequent contamination of data. The first subgroup consists of 89 children from six schools in separate sessions per school. These mixed-gender student groups span from grades 3 through 7. They are defined as children, as opposed to youth, if they fall in the age range of 7-13. The second group of students comprises 72 youth (ages 14-18) from the same six schools, grades 6-9. The third subgroup includes mothers of students at the six schools, with the aggregate number of participants amounting to 83. The fourth subgroup is made up of 67 teachers of various subjects at these schools, and the fifth subgroup involves 18 directors. Overall, 32 focus groups were held at the six schools, involving a total of 329 stakeholders.

Reported reasons for dropping out of school in all subgroups were assessed in addition to the attitude toward students with disabilities. The focus groups for children used a more interactive approach, dividing children in two groups and handing them the task to design the perfect school. After a brainstorming session, both groups came together to present their ideas and priorities to the larger group. These focus groups revealed interesting and essential information, especially from the point of view of children, who are ultimately the main stakeholders in this study. The analysis addresses the two components as premises. The quantitative component provides the major premise, which is the basic source of data. The qualitative component is the minor premise. It checks the truth of the first statements, shedding light on them from different angles to ensure validity. The analysis of data in various areas of need, along with recommendations for intervention, eases the work for any entity interested in tackling any of the identified deficiencies. Furthermore, a database for public viewing has been established on the 38 surveyed schools and is available upon request for any actors interested in working on improving the educational services in Akkar.

The Governorate of Akkar is characterized by, in addition to prevailing poverty (2), lower achievements in terms of education compared to national averages. The illiteracy rate is the highest in the nation at 30.5 percent, compared to a national average of 13.6 percent and 7.9 percent in Kesrouan. Akkar also has the highest rate of schooling delay, with 14.1 percent of students aged 15-19 still enrolled at the primary level, versus 3.5 percent in Lebanon as a whole. Moreover, the educational cycle in Akkar has a record of interruption at rates far exceeding the national average. Dropout rates are double the national average from the fourth grade and up, and the percentage of students completing the intermediate level of education is very low.

Socio-economic factors play an important role in this phenomenon, but the status of educational services is likely as much of a decisive factor. An inviting school environment, which provides both a haven for students from problems within their community and the promise of a good education that equips them with what it takes to break through, can and will nourish students' desire to fight on, or in the least dampen their urge to quit. Shedding light on the role of the school both as a unit of the educational system and as a local socio-cultural medium will open a new channel for intervention both in the measurable short run and the sustainable long run by targeting the system responsible for disseminating ideas and values in the area.

This study offers insight into the reality of children attending school in Upper Akkar and the services at their disposal, so as to better understand what drives these children to drop out of school. It opts to assess the quality of educational services in Upper Akkar (the area of the National Park) by building on a survey of the condition of schools and the quality of education, both physically and methodically. The intent is to assess the influence of the school system on the area's high dropout rates. Examining the physical school setting, staff, demographics, activities and approach to instruction will better expose the platform underlying this syndrome of interrupted education for reasons other than those that are financial.

(2) Akkar has the highest share of deprived households in Lebanon, (28.2 percent - most vulnerable group) according to the "Progress in the Living Conditions in Lebanon between 1995 and 2004", MoSA and UNDP, 2007.

1. PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

To start with, and regardless of the condition of the schools in terms of providing a decent, adequate, safe and inviting physical setting for education, we noticed that of the 38 schools surveyed, only 22 provided education into the third cycle (intermediate level). In a remote rural area that is characterized by poverty, poor public transportation and bad road conditions, this lack of access to schooling beyond the elementary level at the local school should in itself account for part of the reason for dropouts, as it restricts students' ambitions to pursue an education beyond the elementary level.

1.1. School Buildings

The majority of surveyed schools suffer from a substandard learning environment, starting with poor conditions of the building structure. Only 23.7 percent of the directors considered that their school buildings are In Good Condition. Another 23.7 percent regard their school to be inappropriate for teaching and 13.2 percent even declared theirs to be Rundown and Unsafe. The adequacy of the school building starts with its purpose for construction. Only 57.9 percent of the structures were built with the intention to be used as schools. 13.2 percent of the sample are residential edifices employed - fully or partially - as schools. The constructed space is not intended for teaching, and the building is not entirely dedicated to being a school, with residents or religious institutions using parts of it.

1.2. Classrooms

Many schools reported having dark, depressing or overcrowded classrooms. Five schools have classrooms smaller than 16m2 (standard bedroom area). In one school, this is the largest room. The average of 21 students per classroom, as found by the survey, portrays an ideal situation. Yet, this average is misleading. The study reveals wide discrepancy among schools in the distribution of students: one school accommodates a total of 42 students while another goes up to 796; one class comprises only eight students and another 36. This discrepancy was confirmed by the teachers' request for more adequate space and control of the number of students in certain schools. Nevertheless, when asked to identify the school's needs by urgency, teachers reported highest on the need for equipment. In fact, two schools did not have blackboards in every classroom. In 26.3 percent of the schools, there are not enough desks for all students; and in 15.8 percent of the schools, there isn't a chair for every student, a basic requirement that renders all other demands superfluous in comparison.

The under-equipped classrooms have even more basic problems. Seventeen schools (44.7%) suffer from dripping roofs and walls. Some classrooms are underground and others originally were cattle stalls (no painted walls, no tiling, etc.). Teachers, as well as students and their parents, mentioned humidity as a real health hazard. The problems of humidity and insulation are further aggravated by the lack of heating facilities. Although all schools reported having some form of heating system, with 89.5 percent relying on diesel, most of them indicated lacking the budget for purchasing fuel. It is worth noting that the area is mountainous, and many villages are located more than 750 meters above sea level, with temperature averages in winter reaching six degrees Celsius.

1.3. Playgrounds

In such an environment, playgrounds have more than a recreational role. They provide space and shelter for students outside of class time. Yet, two schools have only an open court and one school has no playground space whatsoever. In the majority of schools, playgrounds have a shabby appearance, with no play facilities available.

1.4. School Facilities

Sanitary facilities are also in dire need of care. Below-standard conditions were identified in 36.9 percent of the schools, varying from poor hygiene to leakage, broken taps and broken washbasins. 27.1 percent have fewer than three toilets for the entire school (not all functional). One school has co-ed toilets and another school has no toilets at all. Three of the surveyed schools have excellent sanitary facilities because they were recently rehabilitated by an NGO. Nevertheless, the students have access to only three out of the fifteen taps to use for washing. The administration deliberately removed the tap lids because otherwise, they explained, the students would play with them and break them. The directors indicated the need for hygiene awareness sessions for students to learn how to use toilet facilities.

Access to water, electricity and sewage facilities is another challenge for schools situated in an underserved region such as Upper Akkar. Only 44.7 percent of the 38 schools are connected to the public sewage system. A total of 55.3 percent are connected to the public water network and 34.2 percent of the schools have to buy their non-potable water supply as they have neither public network nor artesian well connection. Three schools have no drinking water at all for students. As for electricity, ten schools have no generator for power supply when the public grid supply is out, and one school has no connection to the public grid.

In 1998, a curriculum that applies an interactive methodology was introduced to Lebanon's public schools. But, this curriculum has not yet been applied in all schools. In the survey, 60 percent of teachers indicated that they were facing difficulties implementing the new curriculum, particularly in the absence of laboratory equipment, audio-visual communication tools and computers. In fact, 52.6 percent of the schools do not have any form of science laboratory, and only one of the schools with this requirement described its laboratory as "decent and amply equipped". As for the library, 42.1 percent of the schools have no "book room" or reading hall of any kind, and only two schools rated their libraries as furnished and classified". Furthermore, 60.5 percent of the schools unfortunately cannot provide their students with the benefits of physical education, as they lack sports equipment or a recreation hall. Of the remaining 39.5 percent that do offer some form of physical education, only two schools have an equipped gymnastics hall, one school has a hall without equipment and twelve schools have only basic sports equipment.

In modern society, where information and communications technology is an established vital element of daily life, computer literacy is regarded as a basic requirement for many jobs. Access to information technology is particularly important for remote and underserved rural areas since it increases access to information and stimulates networking. Information networks provide essential links to central sources for development, particularly for municipalities and institutions seeking resources. Nonetheless, 47.4 % of surveyed schools do not have computers for student, and the remaining that do offer computer classes for students indicated having a

shortage in trained staff, lack of up-to-date software and insufficient numbers of computers for students (an average of three students per computer). All public schools recently received computers for administration. However, these remain unused in many schools because administrative staff lacks knowledge of how to install software and operate computers. In the survey, most directors requested training in basic computer skills.

In a large framework, this scarcity in basic resources and facilities restricts opportunities for students aspiring toward immersion in modern society, thus contributing to their loss of interest in the pursuit of education as a means out and upwards. An inappropriate setting may be compatible and even acceptable in comparison with the local quality of life in some communities. Nevertheless, this study aims at presenting all the challenges faced by the educational system in Upper Akkar and identifying all that is related to the school environment with regard to the high dropout rate in this region.

Figure 1: Schools per absence of facilities

Facility absent	Frequency	Percentage
Connection to public electricity network	1	2.6
Connection to public water network	17	44.7
Drinking water	3	7.9
Sewage system	1	2.6
Toilets	1	2.6
Playground	1	2.6
Laboratory	20	52.6
Library	16	42.1
First-aid kit	14	36.8
Sports equipment	23	60.5
Computers for students	18	47.4

2. HUMAN RESOURCES

2.1. Teachers

The deficit in infrastructure and amenities can be compensated by affluence in capacity and efforts of human resources. Unfortunately, the region of Upper Akkar does not have this luxury. Many of the surveyed schools reported suffering from understaffing. 21.1 percent have a general shortage of teachers, and 57.9 percent of directors face difficulties in finding specialized teachers, especially in the French language (31.6%), math (18.5%), and science (15.9%). These shortages are further highlighted by the distribution of academic specializations of the teachers

Figure 2: Schools with shortage of specialized teachers according to subject

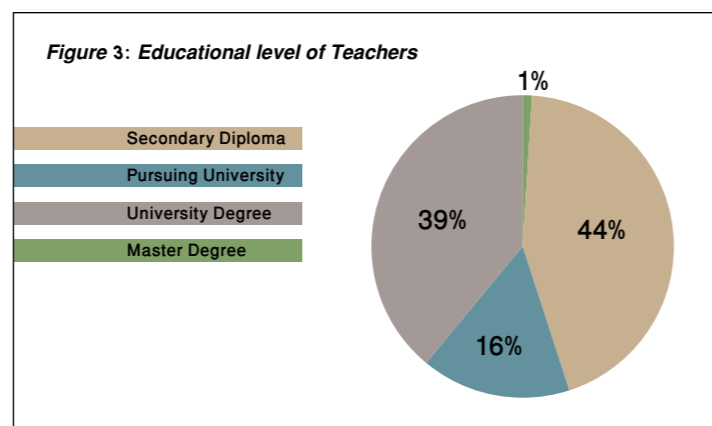| Subject in demand	Frequency	Percentage
No shortage	16	42.1
French language	12	31.6
Science	6	15.9
Mathematics	5	13.2
Sport & art	5	13.2
Computer	4	10.6
Physics	2	5.3
English language	2	5.3
Arabic language	1	2.6
Kindergarten	1	2.6

interviewed. The survey revealed that 20.2 percent of the 223 teachers are specialized in Arabic literature, 12.1 percent in history and only small percentages in French literature (1.3%), sciences (2.2%) and math (1.8%). Not only is there a need for specialized teachers, but there is also a problem in the availability and involvement of existing teachers. After all, 64 percent of the teachers in the surveyed public schools are contractual and 12.1 percent work in more than one school. The school cannot lay the same claim to contracted teachers as to permanent ones for employing them in extra-curricular school activities.

A more challenging matter for the schools in this region is the academic qualifications of the teaching staff. Of the 975 teachers at 38 schools, a total of 44 percent have only completed their secondary education and have no specialization in any subject matter. Added to this figure is 16 percent who are still pursuing their university studies. Knowledge of the subject taught is a necessary requirement for teachers, but to be able to pass this information to students, additional knowledge and skills in pedagogy, teaching methodology and classroom management are needed. In this respect, the directors disclosed that only 10.8 percent of the teachers had a teaching diploma and 88.8 percent of the teachers have not had any technical initiation into education, be it in the form of a teaching diploma or any training in educational techniques. The overlap of this figure with the 44 percent who have no university education suggests that almost half of the teachers have no academic advantage over their students apart from the general education they received at the secondary level. The same applies for the qualifications of directors: 71.1 percent of them have no technical initiation into education. 52.6 percent revealed having no university degree and an additional 5.2 percent have not completed their secondary education.

An additional area of deficiency is in foreign language. In the survey, 78.9 percent of directors reported that their teachers lacked knowledge of a foreign language. This fact was further confirmed by the teachers' responses; although 53.4 percent of the interviewed teachers said they relied on French as their primary language of instruction, only 29.1 percent claimed solid command of it. The Lebanese curriculum instructs mathematics and sciences in a foreign language. Teachers' inability to comfortably communicate the subject matter in the language required

Figure 3: Educational level of Teachers

- Secondary Diploma
- Pursuing University
- University Degree
- Master Degree

44%
1%
39%
16%

makes it hard for students to understand these difficult subjects, thus leading to school failure. Therefore, language courses for teachers are necessary, not only for foreign-language teachers but to all others who use that language in instruction. Fluent communication in foreign languages will not only expose the students more effectively to proper language use, thus enhancing their acquisition of language skills, but will also allow teachers to consolidate learning of the content and enable students to better use and understand the textbooks. This last aspect is particularly important, bearing in mind that the level of illiteracy in the area (30.5%) discards counting on parents at home to assist their children in homework. Being aware of this deficiency, both teachers and directors showed eagerness to take pro-active steps towards improving the situation. 79.8 percent of the teachers expressed desire and need for training. 42.1 percent of the directors called for teacher training in the very subjects these instructors teach, while 31.3 percent requested language courses for teachers and 26.4 percent requested training in teaching methodology and classroom management techniques. In the teacher sample of 223, training in computer (46.6%) was the most highly requested, followed by languages (34.5%), teaching skills (31.8%) and subject taught (30.0%). In light of the above findings on computer availability at the schools, the request for computer training seems to be more personal than professional. A comprehensive and efficient approach would be to provide, in parallel, training for the teachers and equipment for the schools. Otherwise, the information technology skills will not be put to use and thus quickly forgotten.

2.2. Other Staff

Besides the aforementioned shortage in teaching staff, directors indicated suffering from general scarcity in human resources. Directors single-handedly run institutions without any administrative staff in 26.3 percent of the sample. In the absence of a headmaster, teachers are required to attend to students during breaks in 13.2 percent of the schools. Two schools have no maintenance or cleaning staff whatsoever; and only one school has a counselor for the educational guidance of students. In addition, medical assistants are absent in over three quarters of the schools and only 63.2 percent of the directors reported having some sort of first-aid kit, which leaves thousands of students with no access to immediate basic medical care. Moreover, 65.8 percent of the schools have no coordinators, neither of subject nor of division. This is especially significant given that the lack of specialization of teachers makes the existence and role of coordinators all the more vital. In the survey, 50.7 percent of the teachers admitted to facing difficulties in the absence of a coordinator, while the majority (93.4%) highlighted the importance of the role of coordinators in developing both the subject matter and the efficiency of instruction. Lack of support staff adds to the stress of too much work placed on teachers and directors, especially when considering that in the survey, 21.1 percent of directors and 11.2 percent of teachers confessed to having multiple jobs due to meager pay. This observation further aggravates the lack of dedication and efficiency of school staff. However, a more notable de-motivator reported by teachers is the delay in salary payment. A number of contracted teachers disclosed that they and many of their colleagues often have to borrow money for transportation to work until they receive their salary, sometimes a year late.

Figure 4: Schools per absence of staff

Staff missing	Frequency	Percentage
Maintenance	2	5.3
Headmaster	5	13.2
Administrator	10	26.3
Coordinator	25	65.8
Medical Assistant	29	76.3
Counselor	37	97.4

3. PARENTS' COMMITTEES

The parents' committee is meant to be a body of both representation and participation. It enables parents to take part in the decision-making process regarding their children's school-life and provides a forum for people to voice major concerns and petitions to the school administration. Several studies (3) demonstrated that parents' involvement in school life has a positive affect on educational achievement and contributes to an improved school environment. A positive working relation between home and school is particularly important for children from socio-economically disadvantaged families. Only 31.6 percent of the schools surveyed in Upper Akkar reported having active parents' committees, which leaves over two thirds of the schools without access to a collective parental voice in their affairs, and no means for parents to contribute to school activities. These few active committees reported that a major portion of their activities is comprised of monetary contributions of a basic nature: 5.3 percent of activity out of a total 31.6 percent consists of subsidizing contracted teachers. Another 5.3 percent goes toward buying equipment for the school, and 2.6 percent is for financial support for underprivileged students. Schools with inactive parents' committees disclosed that members were unaware of their role and responsibilities and often too busy with their work to dedicate time to school activities.

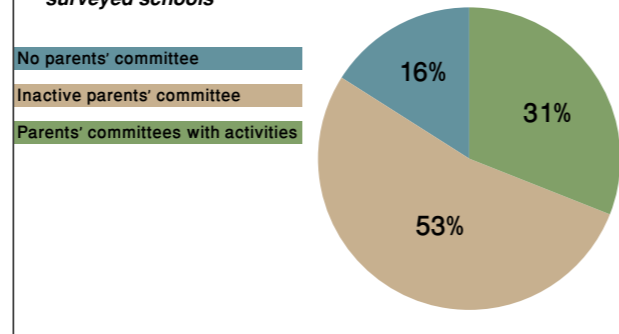*Figure 5: Parents' representation at surveyed schools*

No parents' committee
Inactive parents' committee
Parents' committees with activities

16%
31%
53%

Figure 6: Schools with parents' committees and kind of activities

Activities	Frequency	Percentage
No parents' committee	6	15.7
No activities	20	52.7
Gifts for the best students	3	7.9
Subsidizing contracted teachers	2	5.3
Support classes for weak students	2	5.3
Purchase of equipment for school	2	5.3
Sport activity	1	2.6
Financial support for underpriviledged students	1	2.6
Dental check-up for students	1	2.6
Total schools	38	100.0

(3) Q. Lin: "Parent Involvement and Early Literacy", Harvard 2003. Kathleen Cotton and Karen Reed Wikelund: "Parent Involvement in Education" and R. M. Becher: "Parent Involvement: A Review of Research and Principles of Successful Practice", 1984.

4. SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

In Lebanon, there is a significant difference in geographical distribution of institutions and structures that offer cultural and recreational activities for children. The majority of public libraries, museums, exhibitions and cultural activities are concentrated in a few big cities. In a remote area like Upper Akkar, most municipalities lack the financial and human resources required to organize leisure activities. Youth clubs are missing in most villages and aside from a few sporadic actions by NGOs, recreational activities are almost entirely absent in this region. Cultural and recreational activities play a significant role in stimulating the talents and psycho-sociological development of children. Organizing extra-curricular activities at school can enhance the educational environment and contribute to the retention of children in school, thus decreasing dropout rates. But given the condition of the infrastructure and staff, and in light of the absence of parents' committees to fill the gap regarding activities, 34.2 percent of the schools in the survey acknowledged to having no extra-curricular activities at all. The remaining lot reported a distributed amount of activities, ranging from arts to sports. This does not mean that 63.2 percent of the schools have a variety of activities. The concurrence of arts, sports, culture, and excursion is a meager 10.5 percent. This is the true figure representing the number of schools with an active extra-curricular program. It should be noted here, however, that the respondents did not give a time frame for their responses (e.g. last year), which could mean that these activities reported may well have been sparsely distributed over a number of years.

5. AWARENESS

Awareness refers to all non-content-bound communication with students, including environmental, social, civil or psychological. For the purpose of channeling later intervention, we have classified awareness into issues pertaining to the environment, the attitude toward people with special needs and the modes of communication that have psychological impact on students (e.g. violence).

5.1. Environmental Awareness

The region of Upper Akkar is one of natural beauty and diversity. Because the local economy is predominantly agriculture, local people have a positive relationship with the land and with nature in general. Nevertheless, the modern way of life, which is marked by increased waste production, has reached this region without an accompanying outlook on preservation. The survey demonstrated teachers' positive attitude towards nature and willingness to preserve it against the impacts of modern life. The majority of teachers (83.9%) reacted positively to the idea of waste recycling and only 13.8 % of teachers considered prospective recycling facilities in the area to be a distant, pointless luxury at the bottom of a priority list. The attitude toward nature is not the problem; rather, it is the level of awareness. This is a promising given because it supports the hope that environmental education could bridge the gap. Yet, the study revealed that none of the schools have integrated environmental education programs in their curriculum. 47.4% of schools have some kind of environmental awareness "activities" that are usually a small component of the science class. The methodology used is mostly didactic rather than practical and proactive. In light of the plan to establish a National Park in this area, it is very essential to increase environmental awareness among children and youth and stimulate their involvement by empowering them with the needed skills to take a pro-active role in protecting and improving their local environment.

5.2. Students with Special Needs

In short, there is no special needs education in Upper Akkar. The study found that 92.1 percent of students with special needs are fully integrated in the regular classroom without any special attention or any specific tools and skills to engage them. 84.2 percent of the schools have unscreened, open acceptance of all special needs students. The directors of the 38 schools reported having 307 students with special needs. Yet, only 38.1 percent of the teachers reported having some knowledge on how to deal with students with special needs, with only 4.4 percent of them having acquired that knowledge through training or personal reading.

The disabilities detected in the study vary from mobility to learning. It may be worth noting that while physical needs are obvious, learning disabilities tend to be harder to diagnose, particularly given the directors' and teachers' level of awareness and knowledge on disability issues. Nevertheless, we collected the following data. Note that the high percentage of learning disabilities (24.8%) is probably indicative of the directors' and teachers' lack of awareness regarding what defines this type of disability and the symptoms it typically displays. This conclusion is substantiated by the teachers' responses: 63.2 percent of teachers believe that they have students with learning disabilities. But when asked to specify, these same teachers labeled the following as forms of such disability:

- Indifference and limited concentration
- Problems in reading and writing
- Psychological problems
- Slow comprehension
- Speech and sight impairment
- Academic underachievement

A rather good indicator in regard to students with special needs in the region is attitude. There seems to be far more acceptance than awareness, and this is always a decent platform for intervention. However, this acceptance seems to be a fragile luxury enjoyed by mothers, probably because they either have children with special needs or do not have to be in contact with people with special needs. Some children expressed sincere and misinformed understanding in their focus groups. They accept and play with peers with mental or physical disability, but many of them seem to fear the possibility of contracting a disease through contact with them. However, these children disclosed that some of their teachers and directors tend to physically and verbally abuse students with special needs much more frequently and severely than they do others. In the focus groups for youth, some participants believed that "these people" should be allocated special schools and put out of contact with "normal kids." A few teachers shared their annoyance of "the handicapped" as they "slow down the class." This was in reference to students with learning disabilities. As for the physically and mentally disabled, many teachers in focus groups requested that they be placed in special institutions.

These findings revealed a lack of awareness on disability issues and a negative attitude toward persons with special needs. This is a matter that needs special attention, both through raising awareness on the rights and dignity of persons with special needs and through capacity-building training of school staff. This will enable them to identify learning disabilities and develop skills to offer better services to children with special needs. Such intervention may be easier to execute than developing parallel special-needs programs in the schools.

Figure 1: Type of disabilities

Disability type	Frequency	Percentage
Mobility	46	15.0
Sight	58	18.9
Hearing	26	8.5
Speech	52	16.9
Mental	49	16.0
Learning	76	24.8
Total	307	100.0

5.3. Violence

Teachers and directors were asked to assess students' behavior and the methods used to deal with misconduct. 15.8 percent of directors described the general conduct of their students as "negative". 10.8 percent of the teachers' responses concurred. This general description based on the observation of all students comprises violent behavior, indifferent attitude and "hyperactivity". All such behavioral modes were cited as negative and requiring punishment. The teachers' response to misbehavior has been classified per type. The highest percentage belongs to administrative procedures (46.7%), followed by psychological punishment at 22.3 percent. An additional 23.2 percent of the teachers boasted verbal abuse within their authority; beating was a less common act reserved for the administration. 12.8 percent of the teachers admitted to physical punishment. Moreover, 14 out of 38 directors and 39 percent of the teachers firmly believe in the effectiveness of the use of violence in teaching. The "old system" of physical disciplining is their choice of approach as the only way to deal with mischievous students. In fact, 34.2 percent of the directors and one third of the teachers call for bringing back the old system. Others confessed to being aware of the incorrectness of such methods but contended to having no other option since all other forms of punishment failed. They attributed this to the home situation: Children are used to being beaten by their parents. Hence, they would not respond to milder ways. The figures stated above may be much higher in reality, given the fact that physical punishment is prohibited under the "new system."

In the focus groups with children and youth, respondents reported bad treatment and violence as the main causes for school dropout and school failure. Their description of a teacher, whom they could love and remain in school because of, is simply one that is respectful and caring. Most of them agreed they have encountered a maximum of two such teachers throughout their school years. A lot of work needs to be done regarding this matter. A comprehensive approach involving both school and home in the process would be the most effective. In order to combat physical abuse effectively, intervention should not only aim for raising the awareness of parents and school staff regarding the damage of such practices with children. It should also work on providing them with child-friendly pedagogic tools to establish a positive and supportive learning environment at school and home that would increase children's desire to pursue their education.

6. SCHOOL DROPOUT AND FAILURE

The percentage of repeating students across cycles for the academic year 2007 reaches 14.2 percent for both genders, with rates for boys (16.0%) higher than that for girls (12.5%). This is particularly alarming, considering that the automatic promotion mechanism is supposedly applied in the first two cycles. In addition, the distribution of students along the different educational cycles reveals a sudden drop in the number of students between the second and third cycle. As for the difference between genders, we notice that the totals for male students drop much more (from 1804 to 1222) than do those for females (from 1776 to 1534). This notable decrease in figures could indicate a high dropout rate before the intermediate level. Moreover, a closer comparative look reveals that in kindergarten and the first two cycles, the number of enrolled male students is consistently higher than that of females. This changes in the third cycle, with female students suddenly outnumbering males, showing that it is mostly male students that drop out particularly at this stage and female students have a higher chance of benefiting from intermediate education.

Figure 8: Distribution of students along cycles and number of repeaters (2007-2008)

Cycles	Female		Male		Total	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Kindergarten	775	13.9	789	14.5	1564	14.2
First cycle	1374	24.7	1482	27.1	2856	25.9
Second cycle	1776	31.9	1804	33.0	3580	32.5
Third cycle	1534	27.5	1222	22.4	2756	25.0
Unspecified	113	2.0	163	3.0	276	2.5
Total	5572	100.0	5460	100.0	11032	100.0
Total repeaters	699	12.5	871	16.0	1570	14.2

6.1. Reported Reasons for Dropout

Directors noted they observe two kinds of dropout: one that is premeditated and another that is reactionary. The former is commonly practiced before the school year starts. Students who drop out during summer vacation or at the end of the school year tend to have reasons that pertain less to school and more to family. As for students who drop out during the school year, they most often do it in response to what happens at school. The directors consider the main reason to be underachievement to the extent of awareness of certainty of failure. When students lose all hope of passing that year, they will most probably drop out to save the remaining time from being poorly invested. The primary reason for dropping out according to directors is parents' indifference and discouragement. Repeated failure in school ranks as the second most prevalent reason, followed by financial needs of the family. Teachers confirmed this order of causes with similar figures.

Both directors and teachers were asked to classify students' reasons for dropping out along gender-specific lines. According to directors, the main reasons for female students were early marriage (47.4%), followed by parents' indifference (18.4%), repeated failure (13.2%), and parents' financial situations (5.3%). Male students dropped out for different reasons, mainly due to either parents' financial situations or repeated failure (tying at 26.3%). Next is parents' indifference (23.7%), followed by the need to work in order to assist in financially supporting the family (21.2%). Teachers provided similar reasons, albeit in varying order:

Figure 9: Main reasons for school dropout according to teachers

Reasons	Female		Male	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Marriage	88	39.5	0	0.0
Parents' indifference	38	17.0	27	12.1
Financial situation of parents	22	9.9	65	29.2
Repeated school failure	18	8.1	23	10.3
No interest in learning	6	2.7	13	5.8
Low educational level of parents	6	2.7	3	1.3
Work to help parents	4	1.8	60	26.9
Difficulties reaching school	1	0.4	0	0.0
Disease	1	0.4	0	0.0
Bad treatment	1	0.4	0	0.0
No answer	38	17.0	32	14.4
Total	223	100.0	223	100.0

Another look at the classification reveals the recurrence of the financial aspect as a reason for dropping out. Whether the parents' financial situation cannot support the child's education expenses, or the situation requires a child to bring in additional income, the matter boils down to the socio-economic nature of educational lag in Upper Akkar.

In the focus groups, students' mothers reported a variety of reasons they considered responsible for their children's tendency to drop out, ranging from early marriage (particularly for girls) to violence in the classroom. However, the two most common factors according to most mothers' opinions remained the need to work and de-motivation by the school environment. Youth among the students interviewed shared the same views as their mothers. After all, they are at an age to wed or work in conjunction with regional norms. Yet, it must be noted that their motive for leaving school was essentially related to achievement. Marriage and work (or joining the army, age permitting) came more readily as an alternative to the underachiever, once the decision has been made to interrupt education. According to the students, failing ranks first on the list of reasons for dropping out. Yet, the cause of common repeated failure remained unidentified. Why do students in this area tend to achieve less than in other areas?

Younger students, labeled children in this study, exposed an additional cause of failure and loss of interest. According to this group, the main cause for dropping out at the elementary level is violence. "The teacher beats us." Simply put by the kids themselves: "The teacher does not help us understand the material." In other words, the children are referring to the previously identified shortage in pedagogical and academic skills of teachers. Fear, added to repeated failure, eventually damages the children's self-confidence and sense of achievement. Even if they decide to start afresh at a later stage, they are limited by years of accumulated loss of prerequisite knowledge. The very fact that it takes repeated failure to actually leave school means that the children try more than once to stay in it. Their parents rarely force them out if they are performing well and expressing interest in education. The economical and social stress grows more compelling only when no resistance meets it on the part of the student.

6.2. Factors Reducing Dropout

Teachers and directors proposed a list of factors that could reduce dropout rates. They focused on improving students' academic achievement as the primary element in controlling dropout. Each group provided a separate list of what they deemed necessary to fulfill this purpose.

Directors:

1. Better cooperation by the ministry
2. Implementation of the support system
3. Teacher training
4. Educational counselor in residence
5. More effort by the teachers

Teachers:

1. More effort by the parents
2. More effort by the teachers themselves
3. Implementation of the support system
4. Educational counselor in residence
5. More effort by the administration

7. SCHOOL NEEDS ACCORDING TO STAKEHOLDERS

Both teachers and directors were requested to classify the needs of their schools by order of priority and urgency. The needs were divided into the following four categories:

- Building & Infrastructure   - Equipment & Tools   - Human Resources   - Activities

Directors emphasized infrastructure, with building restoration and maintenance ranking first. Second was equipment (mainly computers, heating, library, power generator and laboratory), while human resources (particularly extra teachers) ranked third. Last on the list were activities pertinent to training, development and facilitating education. Teachers presented a different grouping of priorities. First on their list were equipment and teaching aids, while the building came second. Human resources ranked third (particularly specialized teachers) and activities came last in conjunction with the directors' evaluation.

In the focus groups, students and their parents also provided a classification of the schools' needs. Students stressed the need for friendly and supportive teachers and school staff, followed by warm and dry classrooms with nice colors on the wall, clean toilets, play facilities, arts and sports activities, a library and computers, in addition to school trips. Parents requested training of teachers to improve their capacity, remedial classes for their children, especially in foreign languages, and rehabilitation of the school building with special emphasis on the status of humidity and the toilets.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUSION

This study aims to identify the school-related causes of the phenomenon of dropping out of school in Upper Akkar. The study has ventured for a comprehensive survey of the status of education in the area, covering the physical structure of the school, the staff, the extra-curricular incentive, awareness issues regarding the pedagogy, disability and environment,, and the perspective and evaluation of concerned groups in the community. The survey revealed numerous deficiencies starting with a poor and uninviting physical setting, a general shortage of school equipment, lack in quantity and qualifications of teaching staff, and little awareness on pedagogy, child rights, environmental and disability issues. Added to this is the effect of poverty and the weak role of parents and society as a whole in encouraging education. Not one of these factors mentioned above could alone account for the phenomenal dropout rates in the region. In fact, they all correlate with and aggravate one another. Therefore, it is important to work on developing all these factors simultaneously.

It is safely assumed that, as far as the school is concerned, the dropout rate will certainly decrease once all of these de-motivators are dealt with. The remaining portion of responsibility can be attended to in a different context, focusing on the role of the parents, the community and the state at large. Given the drastic needs of the area, large-scale intervention is required. The objective is to address the issue proactively, if not by direct intervention, rather than by raising the need for such intervention and referring these needs as per area of focus to social actors that have the capacity to address them. To begin with, because the vast majority of schools in the region are public, the state can play an essential role in the fight against high dropout rates and in improving the educational services in the region. Suggested remedial action includes a number of measures:

- Geographical redeployment/distribution of teaching staff in accordance with school needs to fill the gaps in terms of the number of teachers, specializations and qualifications.
- Boosting the teaching staff's motivation by equipping them with the skills and educational tools needed to implement the new curriculum and providing them with timely and sufficient financial means.

8.1. General Recommendations

The approach in this section is executive, dividing recommendations into categories, according to potential areas of intervention.

Physical Infrastructure:

- Run-down school buildings need to be rehabilitated according to health requirements, while also taking into consideration demographic issues, such as student-body growth compared to the surface area of schools and the ability of classes to accommodate students.
- Funding is needed to dedicate independent buildings as replacements for residences shared as schools.
- Rehabilitation of sanitary facilities, particularly toilets and drinking water, is important. However, this effort should be combined with hygiene awareness sessions.
- Rehabilitating classrooms and school playgrounds to make them a more pleasant and appealing place for children.
- Improving schools' access to electricity, water and sewage facilities.

Human Resources:

- Providing schools with extra human resources according to needs, including specialized teachers French, math and science) and additional non-academic staff (e.g. headmasters, counselors, maintenance staff).
- Building the capacity of directors in order to improve their management and outreach skills.

- Building the capacity of teachers through training in the following: the subject taught, foreign languages, teaching techniques, classroom management, pedagogy, child protection, environmental education and disability issues. Assigning competent coordinators might solve the problem of training teachers by decentralizing the effort.

Human Resources:

- Providing schools with equipment in accordance with the actual needs in order to enable teachers to implement the new curriculum properly, including:
    - Classroom furniture (desks, chairs, audiovisual equipment, etc.).
    - Fully equipped laboratories and libraries.
    - An equipped gym and sports teacher.
    - Play facilities in the playground.
    - Heating and a school power generator, including a budget for fuel.
    - A first-aid kit (it might be more practical to refer the high urgency of a medical kit to a non-governmental organization such as the Red Cross for more pragmatic intervention).
- Promoting computer literacy by providing computers, software, and training for teachers and administrative staff, and by encouraging the use of the computer.
- Organizing extra-curricular activities (e.g. intellectual, cultural, environmental, arts and sports activities).

Other:

- Providing support services to pupils (e.g. remedial classes), particularly at primary and intermediate levels, in order to prevent underachievement, failure and consequent dropout.
- Collaborating with parents' committees and activating their role.
- Encouraging the establishment of a partnership between school and home and increasing parents' interest in participating more actively in their children's education.
- Enhancing communication and interaction between school and the surrounding community, and building school's capacity to reach out, advocate and lobby for improvement of the educational situation.

8.2. Pedagogical Referral

This is probably the central issue, as emphasized by the students themselves. Violence is the primary cause of de-motivation and subsequent loss of interest, which leads to underachievement and temptation to drop out. Pedagogical reform is best undertaken by a specialized non-governmental body that possesses the capacity to meet high demand in the following:

- Awareness: Training is needed. Many teachers and directors resort to violence because they lack knowledge of an alternative. When people are presented with an alternative that works, they will likely adopt it. Therefore, a program is needed to raise awareness on non-violence and alternative disciplinary methods. This effort on child friendly pedagogy should not only engage school staff but also parents in the process. Establishing a good partnership between home and school based on a common pedagogic approach is key to the realization of a positive, non-violent learning environment.
- Counselors: Employing counselors at schools to offer psychological assistance to students and to assist and monitor teachers in their implementation of a child friendly teaching methodology in the classroom.
- Control: Establishing, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, a mechanism to report the use of violence and to instill fear of punishment (for violators).

8.3. Disability Referral

This area of focus needs to be addressed separately across the spectrum of needs, from the physical structure of the school to the attitude toward children with special needs. This is why it is best referred to a specialized non-governmental body to tackle the following:

- Physical Structure: Making the school setting accessible and safe for students with physical disabilities.
- Capacity Building: Providing extensive training in the basics of education as to the different capacities of students and the methods to reach them; a focused training module on how to identify learning disabilities and how to teach students with learning difficulty is best presented as an independent session.
- Awareness: Raising awareness among school staff, students and parents on disability issues and the rights and dignity of persons with special needs in order to change the attitude of society in general. Part of the training for teachers should include instructional tools that they can use in their classes to disseminate the same message of awareness to their students.
- Facilities: At a relatively higher level of intervention, an aid center at the school equipped to facilitate learning for students with disability of sight and hearing.

8.4. Environmental Referral

As shown above, the attitude toward the environment in the area is less hostile than uninformed. People care for nature but simply have no idea as to how to cope with the demands of modern life. Clearly the need is for raising awareness. On a practical level, specialized help is needed to tackle the following:

- Awareness: Training on tools and techniques of communicating environmental awareness in the classroom; further training involves extra-curricular activities, bodies and clubs that promote this awareness more proactively.
- Mobilization: Involving the school community in a bonding process around a common interest; this interest being the environment, a directly intervening approach should be started in the form of active environmental clubs managed by specialists in the first stages while members of the school community are trained by example and method to proceed themselves in the stages to follow.
- Curriculum Development: On a more feasible and practical level than a nationwide campaign, the local curriculum of Akkar can be enriched with relevant material about the flora and fauna of the region. This can be put into hands-on application through the clubs mentioned above.

ENDNOTE

Mada regards each of these recommendations as its responsibility to the community of Upper Akkar, thus putting itself in action toward mobilizing developmental actors in order to improve the situation of education in the region. However, it is Mada's hope that a unified, comprehensive, and collaborative methodology in tackling the deep rooted problems of Akkar will serve more effectively than a larger bulk of work done without coordination of effort. Moreover, since no work is reasonably fruitful in a vacuum, parallel channels of intervention on the socio-cultural and economical levels are a necessity. It is also important to work on mobilizing the local community and raising awareness of active citizenship and basic rights. Mada would gladly share the data collected with any entity interested in working on improving the situation in this region.