



# *REciprocal maieutic Approach pathways enhancing Critical Thinking*

Project n. 621522-EPP-1-2020-1-IT-EPPKA3-IPI-SOC-IN

## D5.6 **THE LESSONS LEARNED FOR POLICY GUIDANCE**



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# 1. REACT Project Objectives and Outputs

The REACT (Reciprocal maieutic Approach pathways enhancing Critical Thinking) project is aimed to **enhance tolerance and acceptance of diversity through the implementation of innovative maieutic-based pathways rooted on critical thinking skills acquisition and practice by students aged 10 to 16 years old.**

The project starts from the application of a set of workshops based on the Reciprocal Maieutic Approach (RMA) for discovering and discussing the process that leads to the creation of intolerance and spreading of stereotypes. The RMA is enriched with some aspects taken from the Montessori experience: particularly, the application of the observation principle and the re-thinking of the learning space.

Key intellectual outputs of the project are the publication of a **Manual about the Model**, including theoretical background and the pathways for carrying out the workshops developed by REACT consortium, as well as **Guidelines for Teachers**, titled “**A certain formalism**” – based on the training of the trainers’ phase, which aims to enlighten the learning dimension of the REACT Model. The Guidelines also included a **Toolkit** for a smooth and effective piloting phase. The Manual was reviewed by researchers and teachers from all partner countries, and it served as theoretical basis of the project, enlightening the value of a dialogic-based approach to effective learning in a critical thinking skills’ acquisition perspective. The Manual contains sample pathways addressing a wide range of topics in which the fostering of critical thinking acquisition is of a paramount importance for nowadays European educating communities – such as ecological conversion, roots and identity, the shape and meaning of the learning space. The Guidelines was validated by teachers attending the training and it served as the basis for national training sessions and as a solid reference for conducting the piloting in classroom. Both the Manual and the Guidelines are available in **English, Italian, Greek, Spanish and Bulgarian.**

The REACT project was implemented in secondary and middle schools in four countries and five regions – **Italy (Umbria and Sicily regions), Greece, Bulgaria, and Spain. Seventy-six teachers** were trained and implemented REACT laboratories in **22 schools** with approx. **900 students.**



## 2. REACT Lessons Learned Log

The Lessons Learned Log is a recording of the lessons learned during the REACT project and especially during the training and piloting of the REACT Model in schools. It identifies key enablers and barriers to the successful and effective implementation of a dialogic-based learning from critical thinking approach to intercultural education. Lessons range in their focus from learning related to teaching and learning contexts and environments which are influenced by **macro-** (institutional level: public administration, policy makers, key stakeholders), **meso-** (systemic level: school & educating community) and **micro-level** (individual level: teachers and students) **factors**. The Lessons Learned Log also summarises some key recommendations needed to further support policy reform (refer to Del. 7.1 Support for Policy Reform).

### 2.1. Key enablers



In schools where the composition of the classrooms includes students owning **more than a cultural background** (multicultural classrooms), teachers found it easier to implement REACT workshops due to students' greater **prior acceptance of diversity** - being religious, cultural, ethnical diversities. More, a multicultural setting in the classroom empowers both teachers and students to critically evaluating their own cultural assumptions, and then discuss how learning materials, teaching practices and extra-curricular activities reflect cultural bias – if any.



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ATTENTION TO AN OPEN AND SAFE  
COMMUNICATION FOCUSED ON  
STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIP  
FOSTERS THE ACQUISITION OF  
CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

Inspiring students to think critically requires **open and safe communication with them and among them**, thus allowing the collective intelligence of the classroom to grow and expand. Communication processes that permanently exclude (or that don't take care of including) certain students or group of the school community are simply undemocratic. A school particularly sensitive to **social-emotional learning** is better equipped to create supportive classroom environment: when students are encouraged to express their ideas and collaborate, they develop essential skills such as **self-awareness, self-management and relationship-building** that are **pre-conditions for critical thinking** acquisition and practice.

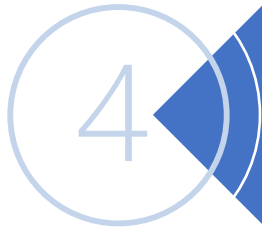
3

SPACE IN THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM FOR  
ALTERNATIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCES  
AND "CONCEPTUAL BRIDGES" BETWEEN  
CURRICULAR SUBJECTS ALLOW TEACHERS  
AND STUDENTS TO EXPERIENCE (AND  
EXPERIMENT WITH) NEW TEACHING AND  
LEARNING APPROACHES

By experiencing a variety of activities, particularly the **dialogic-based** ones, students gain a broader self-knowledge and an enriched perspective over their reality, thus **enhancing their critical thinking, problem solving and decision making**. Efforts are envisaged also in pushing an **interconnected pedagogy/transversalities in the curricula at school** that better prepare students to deal with complex problems that require multidimensional solutions. This "holistic" approach to education is expressly supported



by Montessori Method as “**cosmic**” **education** and proven – once again – its effectiveness during the REACT workshops in classroom.



## TEACHER PREPARATION/SUPPORT WAS CONSIDERED ESSENTIAL

**Teacher preparation** was perceived to be **essential** before the implementation of the piloting phase of REACT project. In all the implementing countries, an **ongoing support** was provided for teachers throughout the implementation of the RECAT workshops and this was considered highly valuable and enriching, resulting in **greater levels of critical reflection and learning**. Teacher support needs to focus on content (e.g. subjects and pathways) and methodology (e.g. Reciprocal Maieutic Approach, dialogic-based learning). In addition, discussion and support training regarding challenges that may arise when discussing sensitive issues related to cultural, religious, ethnical diversities need to be integrated in teacher continuous professional development and education – as a preparation for intercultural learning.

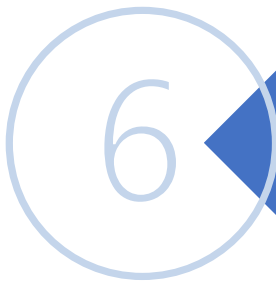


## USE OF DIALOGIC-BASED METHODOLOGIES ENHANCED POSITIVE AND EQUAL RELATIONSHIPS, INCREASED INTEREST AND COMPETENCY IN MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

After some initial difficulties during an adaptation phase where **students were less used to dialogic-based learning** and specifically to **reciprocal maieutic approach** for exploring sensitive topics, students and teachers enjoys and benefited from REACT methodology developing not only a **deeper understanding of the topics** afforded during the workshops, bot also **new soft skills** and **increased critical thinking**



**attitude.** Many teachers and observations conducted by partners' experts reported that students **engaged constructively with each other** because of the dialogic-based and RMA methodologies used and that **their interest in proposed topics** (e.g. ownership of their learning, school for social change and ecologic conversion of school) **increased** as they engaged with the workshops.



## LONG-TERM PATHWAYS FOR INVOLVEMENT OF THE EDUCATING COMMUNITY PROVEN TO BE EFFECTIVE IN A SYSTEM-CHANGE PERSPECTIVE

Building **school-wide and educating community support is crucial** for the success of education initiatives aimed at enhancing a positive approach to cultural diversity. Teachers' collaboration with REACT research centres, local administrators, parents, and community members created a **shared vision and commitment to drive a positive change in the involved educating communities.** By **engaging students directly in the process** (from the pre-assessment of their perceptions on cultural diversity to the evaluation of their workshops) they cultivated a **sense of ownership of their learning results.** On a longer perspective, the REACT workshops' experience instilled **values of empathy, respect, and inclusion** in all the participants, thus contributing to **create a more harmonious and interconnected learning environment.**



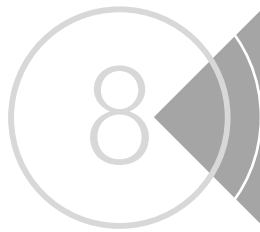


## 2.2. Key barriers



FIXED COMPULSORY SCHOOL CURRICULA LEAVE LITTLE SPACE FOR DIALOGIC-BASED TEACHING AND LEARNING APPROACHES

Content heavy curricula in many subjects allow **little space for the piloting of alternative approaches and/or learning experiences**. This problem was **exacerbated in the context of Covid-19** as many schools were focused on supporting students in ‘catching up’ on core subject content. **Rigid course schedule and curricula requirements** (e.g. the Greek Syllabus) and **complexity of national education system** (e.g. the Spanish new education law) pose a **challenge to innovation and flexibilization of the learning environments**.

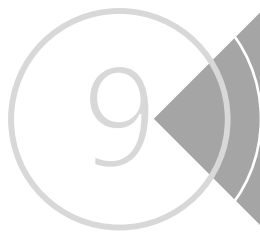


LACK OF EVIDENCE-BASED ASSESSMENT PROVING DIALOGIC-LEARNING EFFECTIVENESS IN ENHANCING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS ACQUISITION RESULT IN LITTLE TIME INVESTED

Promoting critical thinking in school curricula goes hand in hand with **adapting assessment systems and practices**. Teachers have **difficulties to assess their students’ critical thinking progression**. Most of the current practices presents qualitative assessment methods, based mainly on perceptions, and few adopted formal critical thinking tests, rubrics, or research designs with an experimental/quasi-experimental nature – in which the effect size of the intervention was measured. One consequence of this lack solid assessment is the **insufficient allocation of dedicated resources in terms of time, money and staffing** for the creation, development and evaluation of actions specifically aimed at

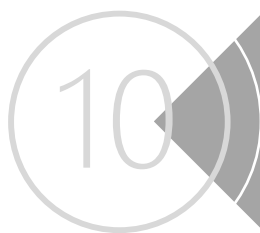


critical thinking skills acquisition. In fact, some feedback collected with semi-structured interviews to teachers highlighted **a gap between how confident teachers are in their ability to foster critical thinking skills in their students and the frequency with which they assign tasks to students that require these skills.**



STUDENTS LACK EXPERIENCE WITH  
DIALOGIC-BASED EDUCATIONAL  
ACTIVITIES AND MAY FEEL  
VULNERABLE WHEN SHARING  
PERSONAL BELIEFS AND EXPERIENCES

Many teachers reported difficulties implementing REACT Model initially, likely **due to teachers' and students' lack of experience with the dialogic based REACT pedagogical approach.** Students, who are often used to more structured and teacher-led learning of prescribed content areas, demonstrated **difficulties and/or were reluctant to participate actively and/or share their personal opinions/beliefs/proposals for change.** This initial reluctance was likely a result of their fear or embarrassment or perception of being judged.

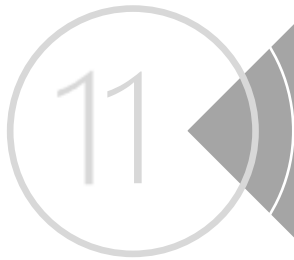


EFFORT AND TIME  
REQUIRED FROM  
TEACHERS IS SIGNIFICANT

Even with the support of the REACT Manual, Guidelines and Toolkit, **teachers needed to invest significant time and effort before and during the implementation of the REACT activities.** The 4-hours training originally envisaged as a minimum standard for participating teachers was **increased almost in all implementing countries.** **Extra meetings** with teachers were organized to tailor the REACT pathway as perfectly fit the specificities of each class chosen for piloting. **Logistical difficulties** were faced in terms of

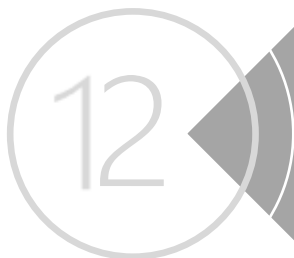


**environmental factors**, such as **school's routines & systems**. Particularly, the **size of classes** has been sometimes a problem – too many students in a class to properly conduct REACT workshops. Sometimes also **the shape of the school and organization of common spaces were challenging** to fit with REACT Model requirements.



COVID-19 AND RECENT  
INTERNATIONAL CONCERNS (E.G.  
RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR)  
RESTRICTED PEDAGOGICAL  
APPROACHES AND AFFECTED  
STUDENT MOOD AND ATTITUDES

The first meetings with school management and staff were organized **during the pandemic emergence** and this overlap unfortunately contributed to **slow down the empowerment of schools and teachers regarding the REACT project**. When students returned to school some teachers reported that they were **more passive in their approach** to learning and that social-distancing measure still **inhibited open discussion and collaboration**. A **loss of communication skills, difficulties with focusing for longer period** and the **need for re-adaptation to school life** were all reported as additional challenges for teachers in implementing REACT workshops. More recent international concerns, such as the ones related to **Russia-Ukraine war**, slightly changed the perspectives around some topics (e.g. multicultural education) that became suddenly **more sensitive and carefully to handle**.



WHEN STUDENT CONTRIBUTIONS  
REFLECT STEREOTYPES AND/OR  
PREJUDICE TEACHERS FACE  
CHALLENGES IN PROMOTING  
MULTICULTURALITY AND  
DEMOCRATIC CONVERSATION



Some **preconceptions, stereotypes and prejudices** picked up by students in the media and in their social encounters can contribute to challenging situation in the classroom, especially when the focus on **dialogic-based learning is explicitly on beliefs, culture, and diversity**. Teachers reported that it can be very difficult to manage classrooms when students make contributions to discussions, intentionally or unintentionally, which **reflect stereotypes or prejudices**. As some of these difficulties are predictable, they can discourage teachers from ‘taking on the challenge’ of implementing multicultural education especially when it involves active student contributions as with the application of dialogic-based methodologies.

### 2.3. Key recommendations



**FURTHER PILOTING OF THE REACT MANUAL AND THE GUIDELINES “A CERTAIN FORMALISM” WILL BE BENEFICIAL**

Project implementing partners recommended **further piloting and review/revision of the Manual and the Guidelines for teachers**. Regarding the REACT Manual, some teachers reported that some REACT pathways were **too difficult for student cohorts** (aged from 10 to 16 years old). **Many workshops took longer** than specified. About the Guidelines, additional efforts are envisaged for **more supporting materials** (for the preparation of the workshops) and classified basing on languages available and age group of students. The REACT piloting was initially planned in middle schools and lower secondary schools, but **also primary and VET schools students participated**. Efforts were made to **adapt the language, the tone, and the topics** but still, for some students/age groups some of the language was considered too difficult. Some teachers suggested that **preparatory activities other than pre-piloting** should be developed for them, to establish prerequisite prior knowledge about the REACT pathways.



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CONTINUE TEACHER  
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT  
IN THE AREA OF DIALOGIC  
BASED LEARNING  
MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

To successfully implement dialogic based multicultural education based on critical thinking practice, teachers need to have the **pre-requisite multicultural knowledge** as well as **advanced pedagogical and soft skills**. Teachers will benefit from sharing their experiences regarding approaches, challenges, and responses in national as well as transnational teacher learning events.

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DEVELOP FURTHER RESOURCES,  
FOR EXAMPLE MULTI-MEDIA  
INTRODUCTIVE RESOURCES WITH  
TEACHERS AND STUDENTS TO  
SUPPORT SMOOTH DEVELOPMENT  
OF DIALOGIC BASED WORKSHOPS

While teachers recognised the benefits of the REACT Manual and Guidelines, some also reported that the **provision of additional introductory and/or in-depth resources to support delivery would be helpful**, especially in the context of **heavy teacher workloads** and **little time available for teachers for additional preparation of students**. Some additional materials were included in the Guidelines, and short description of each pathway was given as appendix to the Manual. However, **additional resources section could be enlarged and enriched** to better accompanying teachers in their preparation of students.



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**CONTINUE SUPPORT FOR IN  
PRESENCE MULTICULTURAL  
LEARNING AMONG STUDENTS  
FROM DIFFERENT COUNTRIES AT  
TRANSNATIONAL AND  
INTERNATIONAL EVENTS**

All REACT partners and participants provided **strong support for, and strong desire to engage in, future international multicultural learning events for young people and teachers.** These events offer **unique opportunities** for real-life encounters for young people to **experience and practice respectful and meaningful engagement**, learn from each other, and build **multicultural friendships**. The recent events such as **Covid-19 pandemic**, the **Russia-Ukraine war** as well as **more recent tragic event such as the 7<sup>th</sup> of October 2023** massacre and consequent reactions of Israeli military force **increased the need to build safe, democratic, and open European space for debate and exchange ideas and perspectives, actively involving young people and the Educating Communities.** Project partners recommended **repetition of many of the team-building activities.** They also recommended to involve both teachers and students more actively in sharing and learning activities, possibly through the implementation of **dialogic based activities in transnational/international teams.** This will ensure deeper multicultural learning and more student ownership and initiative. Teachers can also provide valuable feedback on programmes for international events and/or recommend learning and sharing activities.