Teachers And Students improving School Climate together

TASC

Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

THE TASC CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The TASC approach draws its ideas from the Social Constructionist perspective to education.

Social Constructionism is a theory of sociology that has exerted an enormous influence on the development of modern education. Social Constructionism, also known as Social Constructivism, comes from the work of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotskij, according to whom learning can be viewed as a social process. People form their ideas about the world, themselves and each other through the experience of interacting with other persons.

In the latter half of the 20th Century, educators began applying this concept in schools. Up to that point, the most common method of teaching was for teachers to stand in front of the class and deliver lectures while students diligently took notes, memorized information and reproduced it on worksheet assignments, in papers, or on tests, exactly as delivered by the teachers, in order to get a grade. This method was extensively used across the board, from early education all the way through college and graduate school. The teacher or professor was considered the absolute expert in the subject being taught, and the students were only there to listen, learn, and repeat word for word what was taught to them.

The Social Constructionist framework promotes the passage from a "teacher-as-expert classroom" to a "student-centred classroom", which considers that knowledge in the minds of students is created collaboratively. Students are not to be seen as empty vessels that need to be filled with facts, figures and rules, but as active participants in the learning process. This ensues the development of teaching methods like "project-based learning", "interactive assignments", "team research" and "real-world learning", which are becoming more and more familiar in the field of education.

In a student-centred classroom the role of the teacher is to guide the student to the discovery of new information, which can then be directed toward the next phase of learning. Though teachers are still considered as the ones who have more knowledge than the student, their role is not just to stand and deliver, but to present and interpret.

Social Constructionism can be seen as a source of other theoretical perspectives, which are all inspired, in some ways, by it and have contributed to its enrichment: postmodernism, complex system approach, poststructuralism, narrative perspective, solution-focused approach.

Postmodernism

Postmodern ideas in education focus on deconstructing the role of power and authority the teachers traditionally have towards the students.

In the traditional conceptualisation of teaching, educators are presented as culturally disposed and "programmed" to disseminate knowledge. In this light, teaching relies heavily on the technical aspects of the profession, under the direct influence of the scientific method of defining truth, reason, and value in educational terms. Behaviourism supports this perspective on instruction. Categories of student behaviour imply corresponding teaching strategies designed to ensure the achievement of the desired modification in behaviour. This kind of knowledge delivery system ignores the affective domain that plays an important role in teaching and learning. According to Postmodernism, schools reproduce the existing social structure by introducing students to pre-set socially accepted authority figures and norms to be used within specified procedures distributing knowledge and social order.

Breaking away from such an approach means acknowledging that learning places both teachers and students on equal footing in the co-construction of knowledge.

Complex System Approach

In the Social Constructionist framework teaching and learning are not one-way processes. They are complex phenomena, emerging from the collaboration between the teacher and the single student. Consequently, the classroom is a complex system where every actor makes his or her contribution in the development of knowledge: both students and teachers are part of this system and act, consciously and unconsciously, to maintain it.

Also, according to the systemic point of view, all elements in the system relate to and affect each other: the teacher's behaviours affect the students and the students' behaviours affect the teacher at every level. This also means that not only the educator teaches something to the students, but also the students teach something to the educator.

Poststructuralism

Poststructuralism is all about truth and power. It tries to answer the question: *Who has the power to control what is true and what is not?* The answer poststructuralist authors provide is that "truth" is up for debate: your truth and my truth may be completely different. Knowledge and meaning are in fact considered as

unstable and culture bound processes. Rather than organizing around universal truth claims regarding human experience, Poststructuralism recognizes the contingent nature of any single description.

Poststructuralists believe that language is key when seeking to explain the social world. They argue that there is no reality external to the language we use. The way we speak about things we see in the world – the discourses we make on these things, the words and expressions we use to describe them – define our experience of the world itself.

In this sense, the most common or popular way of speaking about something is called "dominant discourse". So, we could say that the "dominant discourse" about children is that they are innocent, because most people speak about children as if they are innocent. Another example of a dominant discourse is the discourse around climate change. The dominant discourse about climate change is that it is man-made. There are, of course, other, alternative discourses about children, climate change, or anything really – because different people have different opinions.

Poststructuralism suggests that what society believes as "truth" at any one point in time is simply the way of thinking (discourse) that has become dominant. But if truth is shaped by discourse (truth is whatever the dominant discourse says it is), then the people who have the power to influence discourse control what is seen as true and untrue by much of the population. Truth is always linked to the dynamics of power: people who have power and authority within a certain field are also, most likely, the custodian of what is true for that field. Consequently, objective truth does not exist, but there is a plurality of perspectives in the way we look at things.

Applied to education, the poststructuralist framework promotes diversity and inclusion by paying attention to the type of discourses that are used within the context of the classroom and the effect they can have both on the teachers and the students' side. It also asks teachers to critically re-think about their role of experts in the relationship with students, as they are not teaching objective truths, but they are most likely considered as bearers of truth because of the role of power they have towards the classroom.

Narrative Perspective

Closely related to Poststructuralism, the Narrative Perspective states that we all generate stories to make sense of ourselves and of the circumstances of our lives. We live our lives according to the stories we tell ourselves and the stories that others tell about us.

This narrative metaphor has a lot in common with the poststructuralist idea of "discourse": among all the stories we can tell about ourselves and the world, some of them become dominant and govern the way we experience our lives. However, we are not the sole authors of our stories. Many of the dominant stories that govern our lives were generated in our early experiences of childhood at home, at school, at a place of

worship, and in the neighbourhood. These local institutions are in turn given shape by the stories that are current in the wider social contexts in which we live.

Dominant stories regularly influence what we think about ourselves. The problem is that some of these dominant stories we and the others tell about us can be negative, belittling and humiliating. If a student is the object of a narrative describing him as dumb, mischievous, or disturbed, he might develop a tendency to live his life according to the contours of the problem story laid out before him by such a description. These negative character descriptions often stick like glue. What effect do such descriptions have on a person? How would one go about giving up identities like these, which follow a person around in files and have a life of their own in the cultural world of the school and in the minds of teachers?

The Narrative Perspective highlights the idea that the person is not problematic. It is the story about this person that is problematic. It is the culture of the context where the person lives and acts that is permeated by a problematic story about him or her. For the Narrative Perspective, problems are located in the cultural landscape. This emphasis on cultural positioning distinguishes this framework from approaches that profess a scientific grounding but scarcely recognize the role that cultural worlds play in the construction of problems and in their solutions.

Solution Focused Approach

Solution Focused Approach states that whenever something is wrong, there are two ways of approaching this issue.

The first way is focusing on the problem, that is examining the problem closely and understanding it, so we know what to do next.

The second way is focusing on solutions, that is examining what is already working in our life and figuring out how we can apply what is already working in the problematic situation. Also, focusing on solutions means exploring what we want to happen, what is the desired condition we want to achieve and how we can move towards it.

The difference between problem-focused and solution-focused facilitation is outlined in the following table:

Problem-Focused Approach	Solution-Focused Approach

Teachers And Students improving School Climate together

Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

• centers on reducing the "problem"   • looks at what you are doing "wrong"   • emphasizes what you do not want   • highlights what could be done better   • seeks to eliminate your negative weaknesses   • interested in "why" the problem happens (e.g., what "causes" & "maintains" the problem)

• centers on enhancing the "solution"   • looks at what you are doing "right"   • emphasizes what you do want   • highlights what is already being done well   • seeks to accentuate your positive strengths   • interested in when the problem does not happen (exceptions to the problem)

If we see school through a problem-focused lens, we see a lot of problems. Students are not always ready to learn, teachers are not always sure how to deal with the underachieving and/or defiant student and instead claim that he or she just "does not care". The overall school climate provides additional possible stresses, with school violence, bullying, gang activity, and other illicit behaviour happening on school grounds while school administrators try to maintain "zero tolerance" for these behaviours on the one hand yet foster a positive, student-centred learning environment to increase academic achievement for all students on the other. Furthermore, the educational system brings teachers focusing on what is lacking in the students' knowledge, skills and behaviour. And in turn it brings students and their families to mostly pay attention to teachers' failures and errors.

However, we can also see many possibilities for solutions at school. It can be a place for developing exciting projects, for developing significant relationships among peers and between the classroom and the teacher. It can be a safe environment even for students living in economically distressed and dangerous neighbourhoods. Schools can be places of solutions, strengths, and successes.

The Solution Focused Approach takes into consideration all these positive aspects, which are often taken for granted and backgrounded by the traditional idea that, in order to solve a problem, it must be deeply analysed, dissected and understood. Moreover, it emphasises that solutions (and problems) are created through a cooperative and co-constructive process involving all the actors in a specific context. Considering the classroom environment, this means that both the teacher and the students have an active role in focusing either on problems or on solutions.

The Solution Focused approach stimulates us to have a double attitude. It does not bear us to forget the problem, the negative elements, the deficiencies and shortcomings: it lets us to consider them while it leads us to pay attention to what is working at the same time.

WHY THE CLASSROOM CLIMATE

**Teachers And Students improving
School Climate together**

Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

Although Social Constructionism and the other perspectives connected to it have been used to some extent in the field of education and school, they have been poorly applied to the dimension of classroom climate. Nonetheless, we at TASC firmly believe that classroom climate is an important element affecting the quality of teaching and learning process at school. Classroom climate is created by all classroom events that include mutual relationships between students, between students and teachers, students' personal development, and the systematic characteristics of the classroom. It influences the students' overall success, their personal development, their learning motivation and their self-image, as well as the quality of the teacher's work within the classroom environment.

Classroom climate is commonly defined as a participatory phenomenon. It is shaped by the relationships between individuals involved in the creation of class work, management methods, class rules, classroom organization and school culture; in other words, it is the result of a cooperative and co-constructive process in which all people involved have an active role, both at conscious and unconscious level. Such a narrative seems to us aligned with the Social Constructionist framework and the perspectives connected with it, so it seemed logical and consistent to us developing a curriculum for classroom climate management that is inspired by all these approaches.

The TASC approach emphasises that by giving importance to multiple point of views, by deconstructing their role of power within the classroom, by paying attention to language and how it is used in the classroom, by seeing the classroom as an ever evolving and complex system, by giving space to everyone's narratives, teachers can effectively facilitate the development of a more positive and inclusive classroom climate which, in turn, can positively affect the quality of the teaching and learning processes.

THE C.L.A.S.S. CURRICULUM

The C.L.A.S.S. curriculum has been developed in two stages.

At Stage 1, a set of skills has been identified, based on the theoretical framework previously described- Such skills are those that we think need to be developed and/or enhanced in the teachers' approach in facilitating classroom climate improvement, if they wish to apply the TASC framework. Also, such skills have been organised in a set of clusters. Each cluster represents an important dimension of the management of the classroom climate according to the TASC framework. Every skill related to the single cluster represents an aspect of that dimension that should be developed or enhanced.

At Stage 2, the set of clusters and related skills has been subjected to a pre-piloting process, in which some expert teachers coming from each Partners' countries have provided their feedback according to their expertise. Based on those feedback, the curriculum has been implemented to its actual structure.

The name of the curriculum, "C.L.A.S.S.", is an acronym indicating five dimensions that we believe are important to take into consideration when managing the classroom climate:

C = Construct

L = Lead

A = Aim

S = Support

S = Solutions

We are now having a deeper look at each dimension and at the skills they cluster.

One important recommendation

Please bear in mind that the C.L.A.S.S. curriculum is not a five-stage path. You do not have to develop or enhance the Construct dimension, then pass to the Lead dimension, and so on.

The C.L.A.S.S. curriculum must be intended as a system, where no dimension is more important than the others. You can rely on all those dimensions, or you can use some of them, according to what you think is important in the specific context you are working in. Furthermore, if you decide to deepen all the dimensions in the curriculum, your learning path can start from whatever dimension you want.

All dimensions are in fact connected to one another, as we believe them to be different access points to what this curriculum is about: the practice of effectively managing the classroom climate.

You decide how to approach the curriculum, how to use it, which dimensions you think you should deepen more. In other words, we invite you to create your own narrative of the C.L.A.S.S. curriculum, as we believe that you are the expert of your work with the class, you know your context and its culture, so you are the one who better knows how to decline the curriculum's ideas in working with his or her students.

The C.L.A.S.S. curriculum does not aim to convert you to the world of Social Constructionism, Postmodernism, Complex System Approach, Poststructuralism, Narrative Perspective and Solution Focused Approach. It aims to enrich your approach, with a set of ideas we believe to be innovative, effective and

powerful in use your emotional intelligence to improve the relationships you establish in the classroom, at teacher-student and at peer-to-peer level. How you use them is up to you.

CONSTRUCT

CONSTRUCT dimension refers to two ideas:

1. That everyone involved in the classroom (teachers, students) have an active role in managing the classroom climate. In this sense, it highlights the skills of:

   Proactivity, that is the self-initiated behaviour that endeavours to solve a problem before it has occurred. It involves acting in advance of a future situation, rather than reacting. It refers to taking control of a situation and making early changes, rather than adjusting to a situation or waiting for something to happen.

   Personal and Group Agency, that is the sense that the single individual or the group has as the one who is causing or generating an action. A person or a group with a sense of agency perceives himself/herself or itself as the subject influencing his/her or its own actions and life circumstances.

2. That since every relationship is a process where all actors involved learn from each other, the classroom is a context where students learn from the teacher, but the teacher learns from the students as well. For instance, the teacher learns how to deal with the single student and his or her cultural background; or the teacher can learn new knowledge from students, about subjects or topics they are experts upon. In this sense, it highlights the skills of:

   ☐ **Considering the classroom as a co-construction of meaning**, that is considering that the classroom culture is co-constructed by the interaction between the teacher and the student and the fact that both sides learn from each other.

   ☐ **Considering the classroom as a mutual influence process**, that is approaching the classroom and the students taking into account that our work influences the students' lives at different levels, but also that the students' ways of staying in relationship with us influences our lives as teachers as well.

LEAD

LEAD dimension refers to the idea of using our authoritativeness and our role of power as teachers in the relationships with students. In this sense, it highlights the following skills:

Paying attention to the power dynamics in the relationship, that is considering that every relationship is characterised by the difference of the role of power each interlocutor has. Within the classroom context, for instance, this means that we as teachers are suggested to consider how we could exploit our role of power to facilitate the classroom climate improvement.

- **Leading from being one step behind**, that is exploiting our role of power as teachers in a way that helps students express their point of views. Asking questions, for instance, can be a useful tool to lead the process of improving the classroom climate by allowing the students to explain their ideas and tell their stories.

- **Collaborative leaderships**, that is the ability of involving the students in the process of improving the classroom climate, for instance encouraging them to explore their individual and collective skills and put them in place so that they can actively help us in managing the classroom climate.

AIM

AIM dimension refers to the idea of developing together with the students a vision of how an effective classroom climate should be. Since the TASC framework takes for granted the fact that students' and teachers' expectations (both in terms of classroom climate and subjects' teaching/learning) mutual influence each other, clarifying our goals and expectations as teachers can consequently help us identify what actions can be taken, at classroom climate and/or at teaching/learning level, to reach such goals. In this sense, AIM highlights the following skills:

- **Working on hypotheses**, that is the ability to develop hypotheses – and help students develop hypotheses – about specific topics related to the classroom climate management; it is also related to the ability of starting and maintaining a discussion about such hypotheses and their possible consequences.

- **Goal-oriented approach**, that is approaching the topic of classroom climate with clear goals in mind at short, medium and long term. Also, this skill refers to the ability of helping students clarify their goals and find a common ground between their objectives and ours.

☐ **Future-oriented approach**, that is the ability and the extent to which we think about the future, anticipate future consequences, and plan ahead before acting. Developing such an ability means managing to create thick descriptions of possible scenarios about the classroom climate – they can be desirable scenarios, as well as negative scenarios – and define the sequence of actions that can be done both from the teacher's and the students' side to develop the desirable ones and avoid the negative ones.

SUPPORT

Like LEAD, SUPPORT dimension highlights the idea that there are dynamics of power in every relationship, so that teachers should pay attention to how they use their authority and authoritativeness towards the students. In this case, SUPPORT refers to how we as teachers can use our role of power to provide students a safe and supportive environment that can facilitate the collaboration among peers and with us. In this sense, it highlights the following skills:

☐ **Suspending Judgement**, which is a cognitive process in which we withhold judgments, particularly on the drawing of moral or ethical conclusions. Practicing suspended judgement and helping the students adopt a suspended judgement approach with their peers and with us allows the classroom to give room to all the actors' different narratives, so that everyone can develop his or her own ideas about a certain topic. This, in turn, facilitates the development of critical thinking and the idea that everyone has his/her own view of the world.

☐ **Avoiding blame**, that is the ability to avoid – or better, to deconstruct – the practice of "pointing fingers" at the students. Most often, through blaming we attack the person as if he or she were internally done wrong. Blaming becomes a process of negatively labelling the person, in a way that does not allow us to see his or her richness and complexity. This problem worsens in case the blaming comes from people that are in a position of power towards the person, because in this case the chances the person has to step over from the label he or she received significantly decrease. Since we, as teachers, are in a position of power towards the classroom, blaming the students might create labels that blind us to opportunities for helping the students to connect with their own competencies and talents and actively contribute to the classroom climate improvement. Furthermore, the students blamed might experience a flattening of their identity on the negative labels they receive as persons. In other words, they might start to believe that they are just how the labels they got say they are, because "the teacher told me so". Consequently, they might start to believe that they have very few talents and strengths, or that they do not have any of them at all. **Avoiding blame** is the ability to avoid labelling the students as they were "wrong" persons, while at

**Teachers And Students improving
School Climate together**

Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

the same time adopting an attitude of criticising their actions in a way that can be helpful and fruitful for maintaining the collaboration with them in the process of classroom climate management.

☐ **Empathy**, that is the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from within their frame of reference. In other words, it is the capacity to place oneself in another's position. Empathy is not all-or-nothing; rather, a person can be more or less empathetic toward another. We exhibit empathy when we communicate an accurate recognition of the significance of another person's ongoing intentional actions and associated emotional states in a manner that seems accurate and tolerable to the recognized person. Practicing empathy towards students, and helping them practicing towards their peers, might help improve the classroom climate as all the actors in the classroom look at the others' position respectfully and try to see the world as the others see. Consequently, both we as teachers and the students might approach the questions rising in the classroom with more open-mindedness and flexibility.

☐ **Curiosity attitude**, that is the ability of listening to the students' ideas and narratives adopting an exploratory position. Curiosity does not allow us to be neutral or to rely on our role of experts. Instead, it solicits us to see students more like equal partners with local knowledge that may initially be inaccessible. In this case, our goal is to help the students express their ideas with the willingness to accept that these ideas might also be better than ours and might teach us something new about the classroom climate management.

SOLUTIONS

SOLUTIONS dimension refers to the possibility of shifting from the problem-focused approach to the solution-focused approach. It does not require abandoning the former for good; instead, it suggests adding the latter, as an alternative way of thinking about classroom climate management. In this sense, SOLUTIONS dimension is connected to the following skills:

☐ **Problem Solving VS Solution Building Mindset**, that is the ability to identify the differences between the two approaches and to use them according to what we believe are the needs of the context. Also, it refers to the ability of teaching such a difference to the students, helping them to identify the benefits and critical points of both mindsets.

☐ **Solution Focused Approach**, that is the ability to effectively apply the solution-focused mindset to face the issues and problems emerging in the classroom climate management.

**Teachers And Students improving
School Climate together**

Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

IMPORTANCE OF THE INQUIRY PROCESS

How to practically use the C.L.A.S.S. curriculum and empower the skills it highlights?

We at TASC developed a set of exercises and activities that aim to facilitate your learning experience and to help you better understand and practice all the ideas we described so far.

All the exercises and activities have one thing in common: they are based on the process of **inquiry**. With this term we define the use of questions and conversations that strengthen an individual or group's capacity to achieve their own best judgement in managing the classroom climate by focusing on listening, searching for solutions, achieving goals and respecting everyone's different narratives and points of view.

All the practices and activities help you to apply the inquiry process that provides you ideas and examples on how to develop questions that facilitate the conversations aimed at improving the classroom climate in a participatory and collaborative way.