THE TASC "EPR" TEACHING METHODOLOGY

1. INTRODUCTION

In TASC we have developed a teaching methodology to guide teachers and ambassadors students with TASC school practices, based on the CLASS framework. The methodology is called "EPR", which stands for Explore, Practice and Reflection. With this methodology, teachers and ambassadors students will help other teachers and students in (1) doing inquiry, thanks to exploration, on classroom climate situation, in (2) practicing daily life school climate activities, and finally in (3) finding insights coming from the practices.

EXPLORE. Use the CLASS framework-based tools to explore the classroom climate situation with teachers and students. Explore the climate at least three times in a school year.

PRACTICE. After the Exploration, and based on the results, choose, with your colleagues and students, the practices that are more suitable for the situation. Enjoy the practices within your teaching.

REFLECTION. Use the CLASS framework-based tools to discuss with your colleagues and students the results coming from the application of the practices. Set the ground for a new EPR cycle.

Now we will explore in more detail the features of the EPR methodology.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The EPR approach has three main conceptual foundations, two for the exploration and reflection parts and one for implementing practices. Specifically, it is about (see fig. 1):

- Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky's zone of proximal development.
- Yrjö Engeström's expansive learning.
- The deliberate practices of Anders Ericsson.

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These are approaches partially developed in different fields: if the zone of proximal development and expansive learning have the same theoretical roots (in Vygotsky himself), the work of the Swedish psychologist Ericsson developed mainly within cognitive psychology, and in the study of expert competence. However, we believe it is important to have these three references for the EPR methodology in TASC, because they allow us to provide further strength and solidity to the operational choices to be proposed to schools and teachers. Let's see more precisely what these approaches consist of and why they are essential for the teaching methodology developed in TASC.

Fig. 1. Theoretical foundations of the EPR methodology.

Exploration/Reflection

Practice

Lev Semënovič Vygotsky

Yrjö Engeström

Anders Ericsson

Zona di Sviluppo Prossimale
Proximal Development Zone

Apprendimento espansivo
Expansive Learning

Pratiche deliberate
Deliberate practices

2.1 Proximal Development Zone (PDZ)

The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is a concept developed by psychologist Lev Vygotsky to describe the gap between what a learner can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with guidance and support from a more knowledgeable individual (Bozhovich, 2009; Ormrod & Jones, 2018).

The ZPD is the range of tasks that a learner can accomplish with assistance but cannot do alone (see fig. 2). This area of learning is important because it represents the next stage of development for the learner. It is the space where new learning can occur and where learners can gain new skills and knowledge with the help of a teacher or a more advanced peer.

Fig. 2. The Zone of Proximal Development.

Vygotsky believed that learning occurs through social interaction and that the ZPD is the key to effective teaching and learning. Teachers can use the ZPD to design activities that challenge and extend learners' thinking while providing the right level of support and guidance to help them succeed.

By scaffolding instruction within the ZPD, teachers can help learners gradually move towards more independent and advanced learning. As learners acquire new skills and knowledge, their ZPD expands, and they are able to take on more challenging tasks with less assistance.

2.2 Expansive Learning

Expansive learning is a concept developed by Finnish psychologist Yrjö Engeström (Engeström, 1987). It refers to a type of learning that occurs when individuals are engaged in complex work activities in a social context and face challenges that cannot be resolved using their existing knowledge and skills.

In expansive learning, individuals work together to transform the existing practices, tools, and knowledge systems within their community, creating new and more effective ways of working. This process involves collaboration, experimentation, and the development of new solutions that expand the boundaries of the community's knowledge and practices.
Engeström argues that expansive learning involves three stages:

1. Analysis of the existing practices and identification of the contradictions and challenges that need to be addressed.
2. Design and testing of new solutions that can help resolve these contradictions and challenges.
3. Implementation of the new solutions, and evaluation of their effectiveness.

Fig. 3. The Expansive Learning Circle.
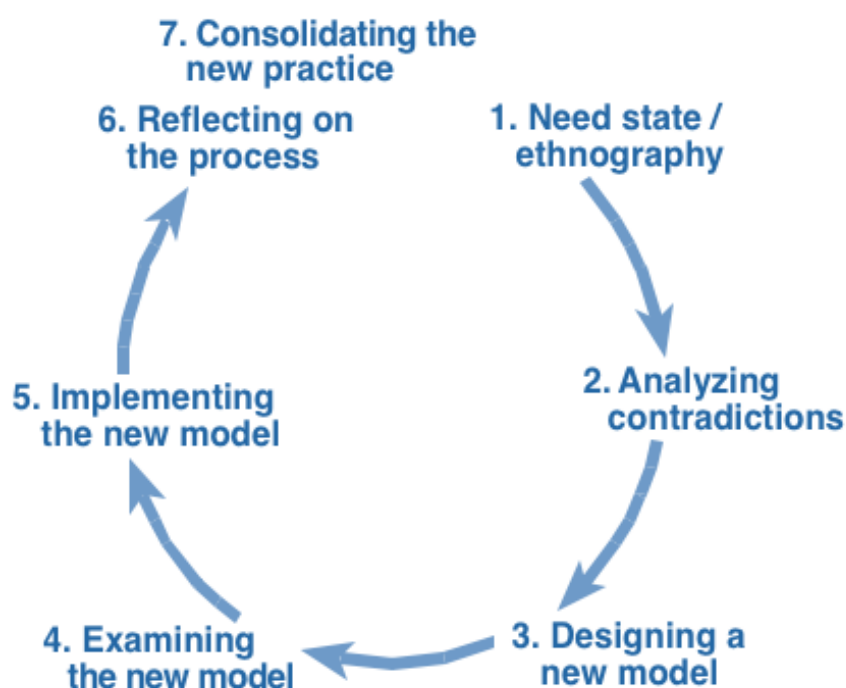
Expansive learning is often seen as a way to promote innovation and change within organizations and communities. By engaging in expansive learning, individuals and communities can develop new skills and knowledge, improve their work processes, and adapt to changing conditions and challenges.

2.3 Deliberate Practices

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The deliberate practice theory of Anders Ericsson is a framework for understanding how individuals can achieve expert-level performance in a particular field or domain (Ericsson et al., 2007; Ericsson & Pool, 2016).

According to Ericsson, deliberate practice involves activities that are specifically designed to improve performance, often with the help of a skilled coach or mentor. This type of practice is characterized by the following key features:

● It involves focused and structured training that is designed to improve specific skills or abilities.
● It requires the individual to receive feedback on their performance, allowing them to make adjustments and improvements.
● It is challenging and requires the individual to operate at the edge of their current abilities.
● It requires a high level of commitment and effort, often involving many hours of practice over an extended period of time.

Fig. 4. The Deliberate Practice Roadmap.
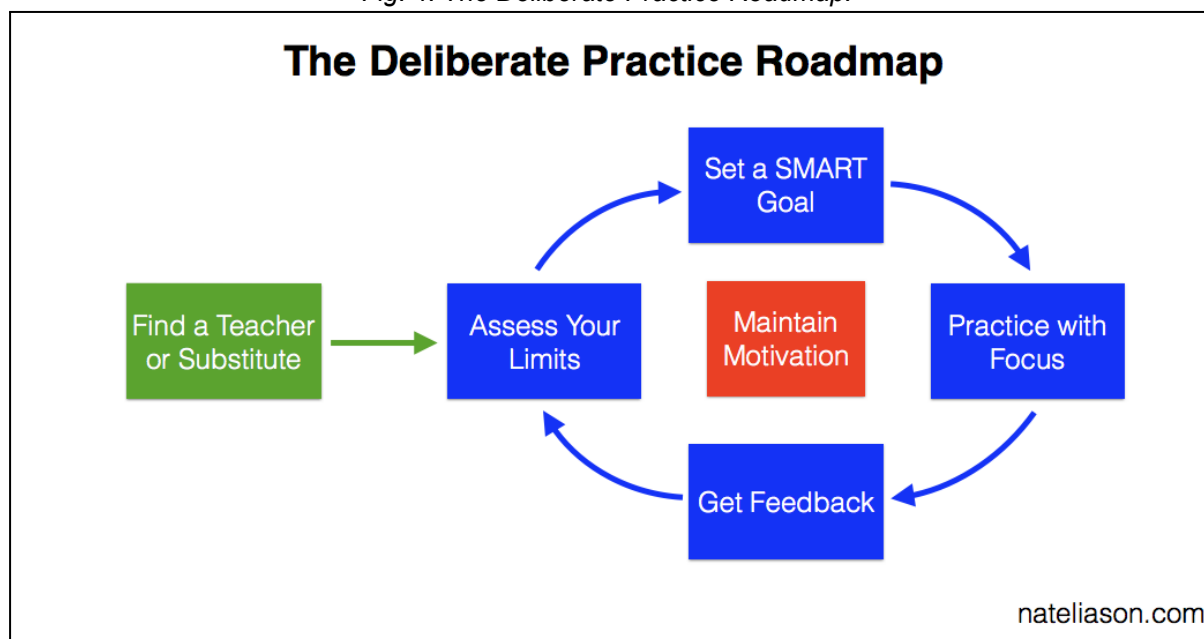
Ericsson argues that deliberate practice is the key to achieving expert-level performance, and that natural talent and innate ability play a much smaller role than previously believed. He suggests that with enough deliberate practice, anyone can achieve a high level of performance in almost any field or domain.

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Deliberate practice has been applied in a variety of fields, including sports, music, and business. The theory has been widely popularized in books such as "Outliers" by Malcolm Gladwell, and has influenced the development of training programs and coaching methods aimed at helping individuals achieve expert-level performance.

3. TOOLS TO EXPLORE THE CLASSROOM CLIMATE

The EPR methodology can be implemented through a series of tools that support teachers and students in the three envisaged phases, i.e. in the planning and implementation of the exploration, in the choice and implementation of the practices, and in the final reflection, to consolidate what has been learned in the experience, to introduce a new cycle.
The tools are available to everyone involved in enhancing classroom and school climates. In particular:

- Teachers = assess their skills; assess the skills of their students (individuals or groups).
- Students = evaluate their own skills; evaluate the skills of teachers.
- Teacher and Students = evaluate their own group skills.
- Other subjects (parents, ...) = evaluate the skills of teachers and students.

Based on this different type of subject, the EPR approach makes the following tools available:

- Rubrics for formative assessment (teacher ⇒ students; students ⇒ teachers).
- Rubrics for self-assessment and peer evaluation (students; students ⇒ students; teachers ⇒ teachers).
- Student questionnaire (students).
- Classroom poster (teachers and students).
- Exercises to explore (teachers and students).

In the general sense, rubrics for formative assessment are tools used by teachers to assess student learning and provide feedback that can guide future learning. Unlike summative assessment, which is used to evaluate student learning at the end of a unit or course, formative assessment is used to monitor student progress and adjust instruction as needed.
A rubric is a set of criteria that are used to evaluate student performance on a particular task or assignment. Rubrics for formative assessment typically include several categories or dimensions that are important for the task being assessed, along with descriptions of performance levels within each category. These rubrics can be created by teachers, students, or in collaboration between the two.
Rubrics for formative assessment can be used in a variety of ways, including peer assessment, self-assessment, and teacher assessment. They can assess a wide range of skills and knowledge, including writing, problem-solving, and collaboration.

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Erasmus+ Programme
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When used for formative assessment in TASC, rubrics can help teachers and students understand what is expected of them and what they need to do to improve their performance in applying the methodology and the practices. They can also help teachers identify areas where students may need additional instruction or support, and adjust their teaching accordingly.

In the TASC project, we have developed as the main tool of formative self-evaluation two rubrics: one for the self-evaluation before the application of the practices (see fig. 5), and one after the application of the practices, as a follow-up (see fig. 6).

Fig. 5. The competencies self-assessment tool: before the practice.

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The evaluation rubric before the practices has a straightforward structure which takes up the five competency model developed in the project (the "CLASS" model). For each of the five skills, there is a first section with a general definition, the sub-skills of reference, and the behaviours that may be matched with the skill. There is also a second section, which is the very heart of the rubric, in which the four levels of skill development are described, from the most distal level, therefore the most negative for the purposes of skill development, to the most proximal, i.e. the most positive. There are also two intermediate levels, definitively lateral and medial. The rubric makes it possible to map a possible development of competence mastery from the most basic level (inexperienced) to the most complex one (expertise).

Fig. 6. The competencies self-assessment tool: after the practice.

The post-practice assessment rubric consists of five main questions (labelled from A to E). The first three require a quantitative response to the questions, on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 clearly corresponds to the minimum, and 10 to the maximum. The three initial questions refer to how much the competence is perceived, following the application of the practice, as part of the respondent (teacher and student). Based on the answers, it is possible for those who respond to place themselves again in one of the four levels, from inexperienced or distal, to expert or proximal.

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The rubrics can be easily adapted in the questionnaire format, if the latter tool is considered, by teachers in the classroom, easier to administer to their colleagues or students. In this case, the items of the questionnaire can be the sub-skills or the behaviours related to them, while the measurement of each item can be a five-level Likert scale, for example, from completely disagree (1) to completely agree (5), or a self-anchored temporal scale, for behaviours, in which the levels can be the various frequencies of occurrence (for example, always on five levels, from never to always).

Fig. 7. The competencies self-assessment tool: classroom poster.

Another self-assessment tool that can be used both before and after practices is the classroom poster. The poster is a very powerful tool to stimulate reflection on a certain topic, especially if this topic is part of the students' daily life in the classroom.
In fact, classroom posters are important for a number of reasons:

- Visual Aids: Classroom posters serve as visual aids that can help reinforce important concepts, theories, and ideas in a more engaging and memorable way. They can also provide a quick reference for students to consult during class activities or assignments.
- Learning Reinforcement: Posters can help reinforce learning by providing students with a constant reminder of important information, such as key vocabulary terms, grammar rules, or math formulas.
- Classroom Decoration: Posters can enhance the aesthetics of a classroom by adding color and interest to bare walls. They can also serve as conversation starters and help create a positive and welcoming learning environment.
- Cultural Awareness: Posters that showcase diverse cultures, traditions, and perspectives can help students appreciate and respect differences. They can also help promote cultural awareness and sensitivity.
- Motivation and Inspiration: Inspirational posters with motivational messages can help students stay focused and motivated throughout the school year. They can also help promote a growth mindset and encourage students to believe in themselves.

Overall, classroom posters are a simple and effective way to support student learning, enhance the classroom environment, and promote positive attitudes and values.

The class poster developed in the TASC project (see fig. 7) has a sufficiently complex structure to allow for both learning reinforcement work and motivational work. In the upper part there is a general definition, or rather a proposal for a general conception of what is meant by classroom and school climate within the TASC project. This definition focuses attention not on the climate entity, but on the skills necessary for teachers and students to improve and in part direct the climate within their own class and school. In the middle part of the poster there are the general definitions of the five competencies that make up the CLASS framework developed within the project, where C stands for Building, L stands for Leadership, A stands for defining objectives, S for giving support, and S to find solutions.

In addition to the definitions, in the middle area of the poster there are fillable spaces where it is possible to insert text by students and teachers, for example to list the typical behaviors of a group or a class that demonstrates mastery of the building skills . Finally, in the lower part of the poster there is a simple anticipation and future exercise, which is generally useful for defining a psychological contract between teachers and students, and between students themselves. In this section, in the lower left part, there is an empty space where it is possible to insert a graphical representation (a graph, or any other way of representing the state of a group, also deriving from the pre-practice self-assessment) of the current state of the group considering the five competencies of the CLASS framework. In the lower right part there is the same empty space, but in this case it can be used to define, anticipating it, the future situation of the group in the middle of the year or at the end of the school year. This exercise of anticipation proves to be important for defining the present ("we are like this now") and for making commitments for the future ("we will be like this at the end of the school year").

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The poster can also be used as an educational activity in the classroom, to start putting more situated meaning into competency definitions and anticipation work for the school year. Here is the procedure to follow to carry out this activity:

● work in pairs: apply the poster to the current situation of your students: write the behaviors that should reflect the five skills and graphically represent the current climate situation and the imagined situation for the future.
● choose the first two strategies from which to start, based on the outcome of the poster, from the list of 37 in the booklet.

4. THE EPR CICLE: FROM SELF ASSESSMENT TO PRACTICE IMPLEMENTATION AND REFLECTION AND RETURN

The EPR approach can be viewed, as the zone of proximal development, expansive learning, and deliberate practices, as a potentially infinitely self-perpetuating cycle. There is in fact a constant connection between the activities of Reflection and Exploration: essentially, exploration is nothing more than a more operational reflection activity governed by a more analytical technical-methodological procedure.

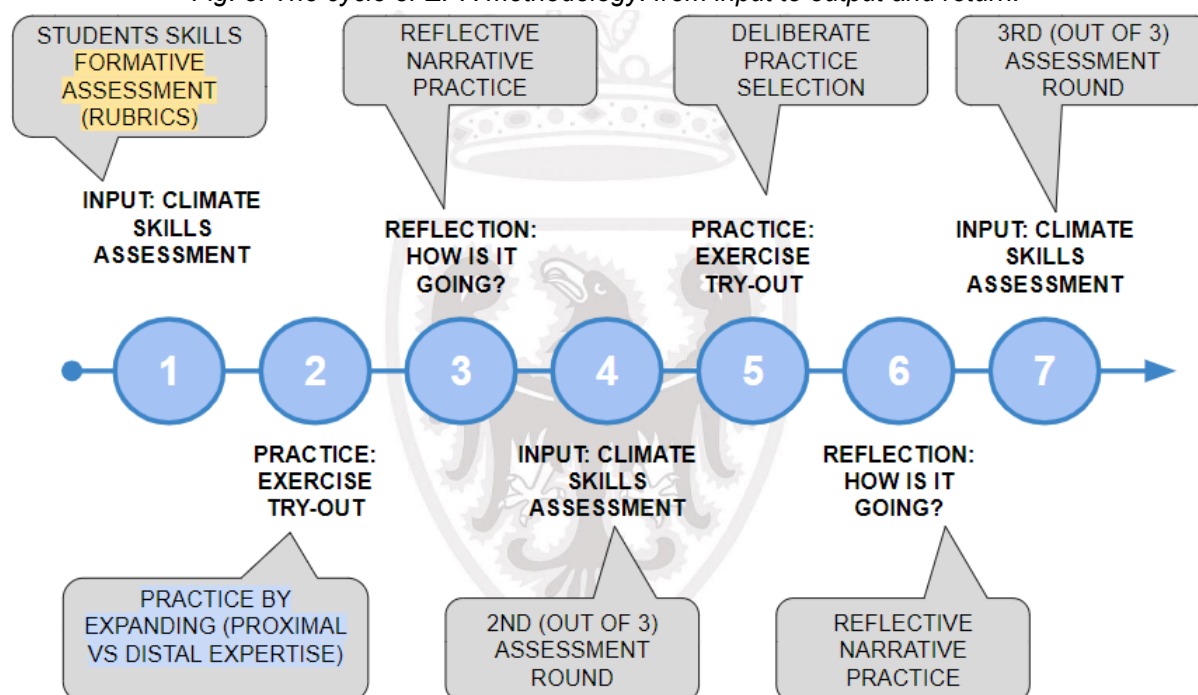*Fig. 8. The cycle of EPR methodology: from input to output and return.*

Fig. 8 describes the EPR process in all its phases.

1. As can be seen, the triggering part is the input deriving from the self-assessment, which can primarily concern the teachers (i.e. their own skills in climate management), and the students (i.e. the climate skills present within the class). The outcome of the self-evaluation is a part of the exploration process but, as we have seen previously, it can be accompanied by other types of exploration, for example through the use of the class poster, specific strategies or through other methods (the questionnaire version of the evaluation rubrics, for students). Inside the exploration phase there is also the guidance for teachers (in terms of support by project staff or in terms of self-guidance), which means the process to support teachers in selecting the proper practice based on the self-assessment results.

2. The next point is the choice and implementation of practices. The choice is substantially a tail of point 1 (the process of orientation towards the choice), while the implementation of the practices is the way that teachers and students have to define in operational terms their zone of proximal development defined in the previous point. In fact, through implementation, we have the actual process of building and strengthening climate skills. The reference to Ericsson and his studies on deliberate practices (i.e. those modes of conscious repetition and with increasing improvement objectives, which lead us to develop an expert version of competence in a given period of time) is more important than ever in this phase. From a methodological point of view, our suggestion to teachers is to start with more simplified activities, based on the outcome of the self-assessment, and then subsequently repeat at least another cycle of exploration and implementation. The implementation includes further sub-phases: a) an operational planning phase, starting from the booklets with the description of the practices; b) a preparation phase of the activity, in which students and colleagues are activated and the learning environment is prepared for the application of the practice; and c) the actual application of the practice in the times and in the foreseen modalities, which already foresees an internal first step of reflection (proximal reflection).

3. The third phase, the Reflection in the EPR model, allows teachers and students, after the application of the practice (and therefore not immediately after, but at least a week later, also following the indications coming from studies on learning transfer) to reflect on what has been done, and to understand when there is "left" experience in individual students, in the class group and in the teachers' skills. Reflection can be done through the post-practice reflection tool, which is always an evaluation rubric, in which, however, there are five stimulating questions to be answered both in a structured/quantitative way and in a qualitative and open way. In addition to the post-practice evaluation rubric, it is possible to use the class poster for reflection (for example by provisionally completing the part in the lower area of the diagram proposed in the poster), or a series of practices useful for this purpose, i.e. to encourage not only a final reflection, but also to activate a process of maintaining what has been learned during the activity.

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The successive phases present in the diagram in fig. 8 are substantially a replica of phases 1, 2 and 3, but, in the perspective of deliberate practices and expansive learning, as well as the saturation of the zone of proximal development, they are not simple repetitions, but a journey towards experience and expert knowledge. In fact, phase 4 of the new skills check starts from the final reflection of the previous phase, therefore allowing for an even more refined and precise level of exploration. The new application of the strategies (phase 5) is equally more evolved, in the sense that the choice of practice is towards a greater experience of competence, and management becomes more autonomous on the part of teachers and students. Finally, the second reflection phase (phase 6), is even more enhanced also by virtue of the previous step in phase 3, and therefore even more effective in terms of maintaining learning and developing expert competence.

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ANNEXES

SELF ASSESSMENT TOOL

DIMENSION	DEFINITION	SUB COMPETENCIES	BEHAVIOURS
CONSTRUCT	Considers "Cybernetic vision" and "Mutual influence awareness" and highlights a bit more the idea that everyone involved in the classroom (teachers, students) have an active role in keeping the classroom climate. It also takes into account the Vygotskyan idea that every relationship is a process where all actors involved learn from each other. Finally, it implies the idea that even a teacher can learn from his/her students.	Proactivity. Personal and Group Agency. Relationship as a co-construction of meaning. Relationship as a mutual influence process	I apply proactivity, personal group agency, and develop relationships with my students and colleagues as co-construction of meaning and as a mutual influence process.

LEVEL 1 DISTAL	LEVEL 2 LATERAL	LEVEL 3 MEDIAL	LEVEL 4 PROXIMAL
The teacher perceives to master the competence only in known/familiar situations and only with the support of others (teachers, students, headteachers, etc.).	The teacher perceives to master the competence only in known situations and throughout the support provided by others (teachers, students, etc.), both in an autonomous but discontinuous way, and not autonomously, but with continuity.	The teacher perceives to master the competence autonomously and continuously but only in a comfort zone (when warmed up previously, only with his/her students, etc.); he/she is able to master the competence in unknown situations only with the support from others (colleagues, students, etc.).	The teacher believes to be able to master the competence in different situations known and unknown, mobilizing a variety of personal and social resources, autonomously and constantly.
↓ INEXPERIENCE	← FIRST EXPERIENCE	→ COMFORT ZONE	↑ EXPERTISE

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DIMENSION	DEFINITION	SUB COMPETENCIES	BEHAVIOURS
LEAD	Considers "Creating a Proximal Development Zone" and the "Collaborative leadership". "Scaffolding" is a term used by Jerome Bruner and can be defined as a process «that enables a child or novice to solve a task or achieve a goal that would be beyond his unassisted efforts». (Wood et al. 1976, p. 90). It could be seen as a synonym of Proximal Development Zone but is a concept that focuses more on the "action" dimension. This new construct still focuses on the idea that every relationship is a learning/teaching process, so it highlights that helping students in improving the classroom climate can be conceived as a teaching process where teachers create Proximal Development Zones.	Collaborative Leadership. Power dynamics in relationships. Leading being one step behind.	I apply collaborative leadership; I manage power dynamics with my students and colleagues and I lead while being one step behind.

| LEVEL 1 DISTAL	LEVEL 2 LATERAL	LEVEL 3 MEDIAL	LEVEL 4 PROXIMAL
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DIMENSION	DEFINITION	SUB COMPETENCIES	BEHAVIOURS
AIM	Renames "Expectations for learning and achievement", shedding more light on the idea that students' and teachers' expectations (both in terms of classroom climate and subjects' teaching/learning) mutual influence each other; helping the target groups clarify their goals and expectations can consequently help them identify the actions to be taken, at classroom climate and/or at teaching/learning level, to reach such goals.	Goal-oriented approach. Future-oriented approach. Working on hypotheses ("Suppose that…")	I apply a goal oriented approach, a future oriented approach and I work with my students and colleagues with hypotheses in managing relationships.

| LEVEL 1 DISTAL	LEVEL 2 LATERAL	LEVEL 3 MEDIAL	LEVEL 4 PROXIMAL
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DIMENSION	DEFINITION	SUB COMPETENCIES	BEHAVIOURS
SUPPORT	Considers "Avoiding blame attitude", "Suspending judgement" and "Awareness of power in relationships". By deleting the word "attitude" we can avoid falling in the conceptual pit of the "personal traits". Also, it takes into account the narrative and Foucaultian idea that every relationship involves power dynamics and that teachers should then pay attention to how they use their authority and authoritativeness towards the students.	Avoiding blame. Suspending Judgment. Empathy. Curiosity Attitude.	I apply an avoiding blame strategy, a suspending judgment strategy; I work on empathy and with curiosity towards my students and colleagues.

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DIMENSION	DEFINITION	SUB COMPETENCIES	BEHAVIOURS
Focus on SOLUTION	Renames "Focus on what works" and highlights a bit more the change of paradigm from problem solving to solution building, with emphasis on the act of facilitation which is quite a frequent word in the education and pedagogy world.	Solution-Focused Approach. Problem Solving VS Solution Building Mindset.	I apply a solution focused approach and I support the development of a solution building mindset in my students and colleagues.

LEVEL 1 DISTAL	LEVEL 2 LATERAL	LEVEL 3 MEDIAL	LEVEL 4 PROXIMAL
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AFTER THE PRACTICE
SELF ASSESSMENT TOOL

After practice workouts think about your experience and answer the following questions:

A. *From 1 to 10, how much more confident do you feel than performing the practice?*
What are the differences compared to the first self-assessment?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

LEVEL 1 DISTAL	LEVEL 2 LATERAL	LEVEL 3 MEDIAL	LEVEL 4 PROXIMAL
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T A S C

B. From1 to 10, how much safer do you feel than the construct … evoked by the exercise? What are the differences compared to the first self-assessment?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

| LEVEL 1 DISTAL	LEVEL 2 LATERAL	LEVEL 3 MEDIAL	LEVEL 4 PROXIMAL
The teacher perceives to master the competence only in known/familiar situations and only with the support of others (teachers, students, headteachers, …).	The teacher perceives to master the competence only in known situations and throughout the support provided by others (teachers, students, etc.), both in an autonomous but discontinuous way, and not autonomously, but with continuity.	The teacher perceives to master the competence autonomously and continuously but only in a comfort zone (when warmed up previously, only with his/her students, etc.); he/she is able to master the competence in unknown situations only with the support from others (colleagues, students. …).	The teacher believes to be able to master the competence in different situations known and unknown, mobilizing a variety of personal and social resources, autonomously and constantly.
⬇	⬅	➡	⬆
INEXPERIENCE	**FIRST EXPERIENCE**	**COMFORT ZONE**	**EXPERTISE**

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D. *Among the resources we provide here at TASC, what do you think can help you increase your score?*

E. *How can the self-assessment you are doing by answering the previous questions helped you?*

TASC: Teachers and Students improving school Climate together

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SCHOOL AND CLASSROOM CLIMATE: what is it about?

IT IS THE SET OF SKILLS OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS THAT ALLOWS TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF RELATIONS, REDUCE AND MANAGE CONFLICTS, MAKE COMMUNICATION AND LEARNING MORE EFFECTIVE

CONSTRUCT

It is about being proactive (taking action even on your own), sharing your own points of view and proposals within the group, deciding together with others what strategies to be implemented in the classroom for learning activities, letting yourself be influenced by others and influence others.

The group that is able to "construct" is organized in part independently and in part in agreement with the teachers, has frequent moments of exchange internally and welcomes the points of view of all the participants.

WRITE HERE BELOW THE BEHAVIORS THAT SHOULD CHARACTERIZE A CONSTRUCT GROUP!

_____

LEAD

It is about collaborative leadership (being not only "guides", but "driving support" in groups), sharing power and decisions in the relationship between classmates and teachers, and leading the class group together.

The group with people able to "stay in a group", constantly varies their guides, having not only leaders, but also and above all effective followers; makes collective decisions, considering everyone's point of view.

WRITE HERE BELOW THE BEHAVIORS THAT SHOULD CHARACTERIZE A GROUP THAT CAN LEAD TOGETHER

_____

AIM

It is about having a goal-oriented approach, moving towards the future, constantly working on hypotheses related to the development of learning at school.

The group with people able to define learning objectives, constantly plans their work and their actions, verifies their achievement and proposes continuous improvement.

WRITE HERE BELOW THE BEHAVIORS THAT SHOULD CHARACTERIZE A GROUP THAT IS ABLE TO DEFINE ITS OWN LEARNING GOALS!

_____

SUPPORT

It concerns the avoidance of blame, the suspension of judgment between classmates, the spread of empathy in the classroom and the curious attitude towards others.

The group with people able to give support manages the interactions avoiding attributing judgments and labels to their classmates, but only to the actions performed; members listen to each other in troubled times, and are interested in what happens in the life of their peers.

WRITE HERE BELOW THE BEHAVIORS THAT SHOULD CHARACTERIZE A GROUP THAT CAN SUPPORT!

_____

focus on SOLUTION

It concerns the constant focus on solutions and not on the content of the problems, on the different strategies for solving problems, and on the group mindset useful for the construction of shared solutions.

The group with people who can find collaborative solutions is constantly active in solving problems and in understanding how to solve problems effectively in the future, in a collaborative way.

WRITE HERE BELOW THE BEHAVIORS THAT SHOULD CHARACTERIZE A CLASS THAT CAN FIND SOLUTIONS!

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OUR SCHOOL CLIMATE SKILLS TODAY ARE LIKE THIS

Use the information from the self-assessment or from class work done with the teacher

TRY TO IMAGINE YOUR SCHOOL CLIMATE SKILLS IN YOUR CLASSROOM AT THE END OF THE YEAR ...

OUR SCHOOL CLIMATE SKILLS AT THE END OF THE SCHOOL YEAR

Draw your imagined future situation as you like.