Teachers And Students improving School Climate together

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

TREE OF LIFE

MAIN FEATURES

Reinforced skills (TASC Cluster)	CONSTRUCT, AIM, SUPPORT
Suitable for	Teachers, Students
Difficulty level	Low
Setting	Individual, Group
Minimum number of participants	2
Average time length	1-2 hours
Specific materials	Yes
Online version	Yes, but limited

1. DESCRIPTION

The Tree of Life methodology, developed by Ncazelo Ncube (REPSSI[1]) and David Denborough (Dulwich Centre Foundation[2]), was initially developed to work with children affected by HIV/AIDS in southern Africa. This approach has proved so successful and popular that it is now being used with children, young people, and adults in a wide range of countries and in different contexts.

The tree of life concept is pretty simple and straightforward: it is a visual metaphor in which a tree represents the life of a person and the various elements that make it up–past, present, and future.

This practice can enable people (e.g., students) to speak about their lives in ways that make them stronger.

Students are involved in drawing their own 'trees of life' in which they get to speak of their 'roots' (where they come from), their skills and knowledge, their hopes and dreams, as well as the special people in their lives.

In a group setting, students can then join their trees together in order to form a 'forest of life' and, in groups, discuss some of the 'storms' that affect their lives and the ways they use to respond to these adversities and to protect themselves and each other.

The method enables them to speak about their lives in ways that are not retraumatizing, but instead strengthens their relationships with their own history, their culture, and significant people in their lives.

2. AIM / BENEFITS

The main benefit is that it allows students to reflect on themselves and how they have developed so far. The shared experience of thinking about, as well as moving on together, creates fertile ground for talk and reflection about our own (and others') 'stories' about our strengths, identity, values, friendship and belonging, learning and hopes for the future.

The Tree of Life can have a positive effect on the mental health and well-being of students, and can be used in different contexts and settings. It can be used in moments of transition, such as changing school, moving house, etc. as at these points one often looks both backwards and forwards, and think about ourselves, our hopes and experiences – our 'story' so far.

It can be used for students who are newly arrived to the country to talk about their culture and history as well as worries/anxiety about being newly arrived. And also how it can be used as a way to help children talk about themselves, their family and other support systems, and the strengths and aspirations they have for the future.

---

[1] https://repssi.org
[2] https://dulwichcentre.com.au/dulwich-centre-foundation

**Teachers And Students improving
School Climate together**

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

3. COMPETENCIES CLUSTER(s) related

The Tree of Life method is designed to reflect upon oneself and, when analysed within a group as the elements composing a "Forest of Life", to understand others and their own roles and importance within a community. This increases personal awareness, understanding of others and helps to construct a sense of agency and belonging to the community (CONSTRUCT).

Furthermore, this practice is conducted with the aim of analysing and reflecting upon the present, but understanding the past and identifying the resources that one has for the future (AIM).

Finally, by analysing the tree of life of others, this method naturally helps to generate empathy and a curiosity into the other person (SUPPORT).

4. HOW TO DO THE EXERCISE

Step 1 / Preparation
The facilitator (e.g., teacher) prepares the materials (paper, pencils, walls, pins, tape) and distributes one paper sheet and coloured pencils to each participant (e.g., student). The facilitator can prepare a powerpoint presentation or a flip chart describing the procedure step by step.

Step 2 / Drawing the "Tree of Life"
The facilitator tells participants (e.g., students) that the exercise is about drawing a tree representing their own life. Explain that they will draw the tree step by step starting with the roots and each part of the tree will represent an element of the person's life he/she considers important.

The students should be informed that the same elements can be put in different parts of the tree. For instance, "family" can be one of the roots, but also one of the leaves, and so on. The students do not have to worry about these repetitions.
For each of the steps below there is a series of examples of questions to be asked, depending on the age and characteristics of the students, the facilitator should adapt the wording and/or formulation to make it fit for their students.

Start with the **roots – they are the origin of the person all things that deeply impact their life**: the students are invited to draw the roots – the roots represent the answers to questions like:
- *Where do I come from?*
- *What is your place of birth?*
- *Where did you live when you were younger?*
- *What is my heritage?*
- *What/Who influenced me deeply?*

Depending on the age of the students the facilitator should allow around 10 minutes for this step.

The second element of the tree is the **soil – it represents the present life.** This part answers questions like:

- *What is my life like, at the moment?*
- *What are the representative elements of my life, at the moment, in different terms (e.g., place where I live, significant relationships, significant experiences)?*
- *Where do I live?*
- *What is the landscape of my life/nutrient soil of life?*

The third element is the **trunk – it represents the skills, abilities and competences** and focuses on questions like:

- *What am I good at?*
- *What are my skills and competences?*
- *What do others think are my competences?*

The exercise them moves further up to focus on the **branches – which represent the hopes, dreams and wishes** and addresses issues like:

- *What are my hopes, dreams and wishes?*
- *What are my visions for the future?*

The exercise then continues with the **leaves – they represent significant people in one's life who may be alive or already passed away.** The related questions are:

- *Who are/were the persons/supporters that play a special role in my life?*
- *Who, within your social network, represents social resources for you?*

The last step in this part of the exercise is then to address *the* **fruits – they represent the gifts one has been given,** and poses questions like:

- *What did those special people give to my life?*
- *What are the gifts I received in my life?*

(NOTE: the gifts can be of different types, e.g., objects, money, a special teaching, a special person, etc.).

Step 3 / Presentation and discussion

Once the "Trees of life" are drawn, each picture is presented and discussed. The facilitator makes sure to offer enough time for each participant – in case there are only a few or no resources, try to elicit more by asking questions.

Some examples of questions that the facilitator can use when discussing the different parts of the "Tree of Life" are reported below. The facilitator is free to adapt the wording and formulation to the age and characteristics of the participants.

**Teachers And Students improving
School Climate together**

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

The roots:

- How much do I know about my origin?
- Does my heritage have a big impact on my life?
- When I think about my roots – What kind of feeling do I have?
- What important principles and values did I learn in the past that contribute to develop my identity?
- What important experiences left a mark in my life (the first time I fell in love, my parent's divorce, moving to another town/city, etc.)?

The soil:
- What are the positive/negative/neutral aspects of my present life?
- Which advantages/disadvantages do I see?

The trunk:
- Are my skills clearly linked to my background (roots)?
- Do the skills I see in myself and those others see in me match? Am I surprised by this?
- Am I surprised about (the amount of) the skills?

The branches:
- Do I have big or little dreams/hopes?
- How can these hopes be connected to my family/others?
- Where do the hopes/wishes come from?
- Do I think I'm on my way realizing my dreams?

The leaves:
- Was it hard naming supporters/significant persons in my life?
- Are some of the supporters in my life for a long time?
- Are there times in my life with more/less supporters?

The fruits:
- Was it hard to find gifts given to me?
- Am I happy with my gifts? Can I appreciate them?

After discussing and reflecting the pictures, you can give another few minutes to supplement their pictures if they want to. They have a look at the complete tree.

The whole tree:
- Do you wish your tree would look different?
- What should be different to make you like your tree of life better?

**Teachers And Students improving
School Climate together**

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

Step 4 / Building a "Forest of Life"

This step is needed only if you work with a group.

After all the trees are presented and discussed, students are asked to imagine each tree as part of a bigger forest and to create a "Forest of Life" by putting all the trees together. With the support of the facilitator, students explore together how each tree can contribute to the forest.

In doing this step the facilitator can ask questions like:

- *If an earthquake shakes the forest, how could the trees work together to resist?*
- *If a lightning bolt strikes one of the trees, how could the others help him/her?*
- *How do these answers, the group provides, affect each one of you? How does the idea you have of this group change when you think of it as a forest?*
- *Out of the metaphor, if one of you talks about a problem/issue he/she has, how can the group, acting as a forest, help him/her?*
- *Etc…*

Step 5 / Conclusion

Ask the students to decide what to do with the pictures: whether keeping them displayed during the training or returning them to the owner.

5. DEBRIEF

The facilitator summarizes the findings of the trees' presentations and asks the students to reflect on the known and unknown resources and treasures discovered during the activity.
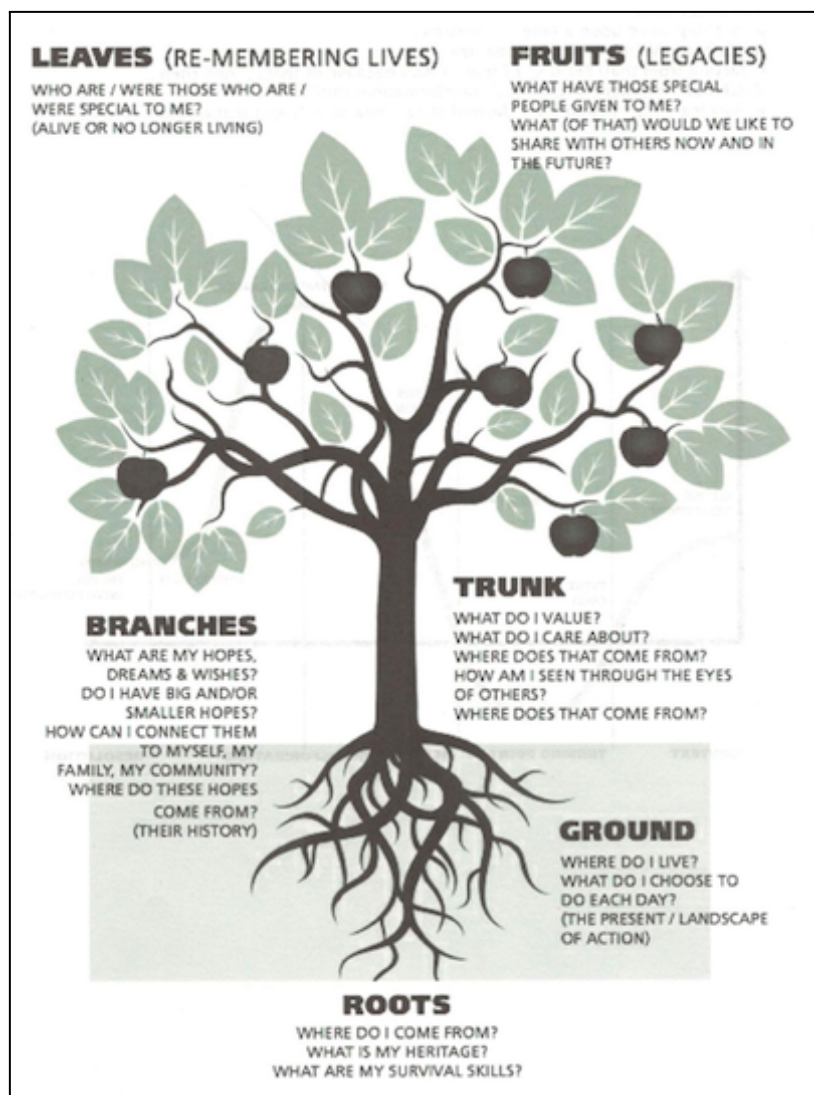
If they are happy with their tree of life, the students can be invited to memorize and keep it as an inner picture for times when awareness of their own resources is needed.

In fact, as the drawing represents the resources of one's life, it can be modified or redrawn at any time. Since it is an image of the person's life, it is not something fixed in time. People can draw it, then think about it, modify it, etc.

6. SPECIFIC MATERIALS

- Paper (recommended A3 or bigger), coloured pencils or oil pastels.
- Walls to display the pictures, pins or tape**.**

**Teachers And Students improving
School Climate together**

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

The picture below represents an example of a tree which can be used.

LEAVES (RE-MEMBERING LIVES)

WHO ARE / WERE THOSE WHO ARE /
WERE SPECIAL TO ME?
(ALIVE OR NO LONGER LIVING)

FRUITS (LEGACIES)

WHAT HAVE THOSE SPECIAL
PEOPLE GIVEN TO ME?
WHAT (OF THAT) WOULD WE LIKE TO
SHARE WITH OTHERS NOW AND IN
THE FUTURE?

TRUNK

WHAT DO I VALUE?
WHAT DO I CARE ABOUT?
WHERE DOES THAT COME FROM?
HOW AM I SEEN THROUGH THE EYES
OF OTHERS?
WHERE DOES THAT COME FROM?

BRANCHES

WHAT ARE MY HOPES,
DREAMS & WISHES?
DO I HAVE BIG AND/OR
SMALLER HOPES?
HOW CAN I CONNECT THEM
TO MYSELF, MY
FAMILY, MY COMMUNITY?
WHERE DO THESE HOPES
COME FROM?
(THEIR HISTORY)

GROUND

WHERE DO I LIVE?
WHAT DO I CHOOSE TO
DO EACH DAY?
(THE PRESENT / LANDSCAPE
OF ACTION)

ROOTS

WHERE DO I COME FROM?
WHAT IS MY HERITAGE?
WHAT ARE MY SURVIVAL SKILLS?

7. TIPS AND TRICKS

- If (some of the) students don't have ideas for resources, the facilitator can give examples for each part of the tree – be aware that the given examples may influence the outcomes.

- We recommend not to show the drawing of a tree, because it might influence the students and may reduce creativity.
- In an individual setting over a longer period of time, it can be useful to come back to this picture or repeat this exercise.
- Be aware to accompany this exercise very closely – it might have potential to get very emotional and it can open old wounds or hurts.
- If the exercise is done in a group, try to get all students to do the exercise. If this is not possible, ask the students who refuse to draw their tree to take the role of a tutor, that helps the other members of the group to do the exercise. Maybe, they will change their mind and decide to draw their own tree. During the debrief you can ask the tutor(s) how the exercise was for them and how it was for them helping others.
- Since the exercise can take quite a long time, it can be divided into two or more sessions. Actually, this could be helpful, as the students can think about their trees between the sessions and can modify them according to their wishes.

8. ON-LINE VERSION

The exercise is not easily adaptable to an online context, although discussions can take place in an online setting using video-conferencing, this will not generate the same benefits as in an face-to-face setting, as on-line communication is less rich in non-verbal communication elements and their transmission.

Our experience in online group settings shows that it is sometimes difficult to have all students well on the radar in order to notice whether massive reactions occur in individual participants or that it is then more difficult to deal with these reactions in the online group setting.

9. BIBLIOGRAPHY - SITOGRAPHY

- Dulwich Centre. The Tree of Life.
- Dulwich Centre. *The "Tree of Life" in a Community Context* by Georgia, Jovia, Kenny, Lucy and Sandra.
- EDU:PACT project[3]. *Activity 3 - Tree of Life*.
- Wisconsin Department of children and families. *Tree of Life*.
- Youtube Video Tree of Life

---

[3] https://edupact.sporteducation.eu