



# The Training of Teachers in Citizenship Education Through Theatre and Dialectical Method

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**Abstract.** This paper presents the results of an evaluation of a professional development programme to promote teacher skills in fostering young students' active participation in democratic society through the dialectical method and drama techniques. The blended training has been designed within the framework of the Erasmus+ project EAR (*Forming active European Citizens through the dialectical method and theater*) that addressed about 500 teachers in five European Countries.

Data collection tools such as questionnaires addressing the trainees and focus groups with pupils provided quantitative and qualitative pre- and post-data to evaluate the training programme. The discussion of findings focuses on the educational value of EAR pedagogical approach, teachers' perceptions of changing dynamics in the classrooms where EAR methodology was implemented and their confidence in teaching and evaluating citizenship education.

**Keywords:** Teachers' professional development · Citizenship education · Evaluation research

## 1 Background and Aims of EAR Project

The EAR project (*Forming active European Citizens through the dialectical method and theater*) was proposed in response to the EACEA call 10/2018 – Erasmus+, KA3 – Support for policy reform. EAR set out to address the call objectives of:

- Enhancing the acquisition of social and civic competences, fostering knowledge, understanding and ownership of values and fundamental rights
- Enhancing critical thinking and media literacy among learners, parents and educational staff

The ethos of EAR has been to promote the values of peace, democracy, freedom and tolerance, which are at the heart of European integration. The EAR project was conceived on the premise that these values are at risk in an era of social media, where young people are exposed to diverse and fragmented information that is difficult to

form into a coherent whole. Education, and in particular, citizenship education, have an important role to play in supporting the young generation to understand their role in maintaining the values which underpin democratic, tolerant and peaceful societies, and to equip them with the competences to achieve this.

The project took place against the backdrop of a concerted effort by the Council of Europe and European Commission to strengthen citizenship education in Europe under the umbrella of the Democratic and Inclusive School Culture in Operation (DISCO) joint programme for cooperation projects<sup>1</sup>. Underlying projects within the scope of this programme was the reference framework of competences for democratic culture (RFCDC) [1], which sets out in detail the values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge and critical understanding necessary 'to be responsible citizens in modern, diverse, democratic societies' [2].

Within the DISCO programme, a series of curriculum interventions and accompanying practitioner guides and resources have been developed to support students to develop citizenship competences. These depart from the traditional knowledge-based curricula, and shift responsibility to the student to navigate their learning and relationships. And so, for example, service learning features as a key intervention, where students are required to make decisions and problem solve, in ways which have real world consequences [3].

Other interventions under the DISCO programme supported students to navigate controversial issues [4]. Such approaches are of particular value in regions which had seen conflict, but also of increasing relevance universally, where students experience extreme views online, and in an era of increasing migration. Added to this, were digital resistance interventions, which explicitly set about equipping young people with knowledge and tools to deal with misinformation online.

While not a DISCO funded programme, EAR nevertheless fitted well within this direction of travel of citizenship education. At the centre of the EAR intervention is the dialectical method - discourse between two or more people holding different points of view about a subject, but seeking to establish the truth through reasoned arguments [5–7]. This pedagogical focus was chosen because of its potential to promote the four competence areas of citizenship of: interacting effectively and constructively with others; thinking critically; acting in a socially responsible manner; and acting democratically [8].

Students are supported in developing skills in dialogue through theatre techniques. These provide modes of interaction which significantly aid children and pupils' communication and ability to express themselves [9, 10]. In this way they provide an engaging element to encourage discourse, and as such are an appropriate accompaniment to the dialectical method.

The project used a cascading approach consisting of multipliers, trainers, and teachers, and sought to enable teachers to implement EAR practice with fidelity and encourage changemakers in each partner country to embed practice in training for future teachers and trainers.

The training of teachers was critical to the success of the project, because of the intricate, 7-step design of the methodology. In addition, teachers require particular support to develop skilful, open questioning. Findings from research indicates teachers

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/disco>.

tend to dominate talk in the classroom, preferring closed questions [11]. Furthermore, while the presence of theatre techniques was intended to provide scaffolding, and a way into dialogue and Socratic questioning, there was a danger that, as the more accessible, and immediately enjoyable, activity, trainers and teachers may focus primarily on theatre techniques. Without appropriate professional development activity, there was a risk teachers would lose sight in the training of the central role of questioning, and not adequately hone this skill for application in the classroom.

The evaluation of the project was designed to help support the training and implementation process to ensure fidelity with the EAR methodology.

## 2 The Value of EAR in an Era of Demographic Change in Europe

Country situation analyses were carried out in Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom and synthesised into a project situation analyses [12].

The situation analyses identified nine challenges and constraints of citizenship education from teachers' perspectives. These are set out below, along with an indication of how the project was able to help address these.

A key finding from the situation analysis, was that teachers across participating countries often felt there was a tension between the democratic ethos promoted by schools and less favourable attitudes externally, including in the media and many family homes. By providing a structured forum to discuss issues and norms, along with coaching in the necessary skills of communication and cooperation, EAR ensures pupils develop agency to critically evaluate external messages, as well as what they learn at school, and so position themselves in relation to both. In this way too, teachers should be reassured that the methodology avoids an indoctrination approach to citizenship – telling pupils what to think – but rather, equips them to engage critically with information and opinions.

The introduction of the methodology and teacher guides for a range of scenarios, addressed the second issue identified by teachers: limited resources for teaching citizenship.

With regard to issues around time: limited time to implement citizenship education and teachers' workload, it was important that partners promoted the EAR methodology as a key strategy to develop pupils' learning to learn skills. Effective questioning is a critical skill for both teachers and their pupils across all learning situations, and a method for developing this is what EAR provides. The methodology also provided the potential for pupils to learn important cooperation and communication skills, as well as a disciplined approach to enquiry and critical analysis. These are essential skills for pupils' wider learning, higher education and the world of work. Where partners helped teachers and school leaders make links between EAR and other areas of the curriculum and pupils' learning, they also addressed the perception of marginality of citizenship education, expressed by several respondents in the situation analysis.

The professional development element of the project addressed the lack of training in citizenship education, as well as the gap between the intended democratic curriculum and education practices. EAR modelled good continuing professional development practice, and so added value to schools' participation in the project. This raised teachers' confidence in teaching citizenship education. While for the purposes of the project a

single methodology is presented, the professional development design had the potential to support teachers' identity and skills as professional learners, building a culture of seeking out and trialling other approaches.

Finally, teachers found evaluating learning in citizenship education a challenge. This issue was addressed through collaboration between the external evaluator and partner organisations to create and implement the competence ladder tool. The competence ladder enabled teachers to assess progress in particular competences related to the teaching resources, and also generated data for the external evaluation.

### **3 The Educational Scenario**

The main organizing tool for the methodology is the educational scenario. This provides a 7-step framework, by which practitioners can plan the delivery of EAR, adapting it to the needs of their students, while keeping fidelity to the process. The stages of the scenario are set out below, with examples of activities teachers implemented to illustrate practice at each stage:

#### **Warm Up**

- Brainstorming words and ideas associated with the topic of the lessons – using a ball or handheld cards to regulate contributions
- Miming actions
- Formulating questions around a topic to be revisited later in the lesson
- Frozen images – pupils created tableaux with their bodies to represent ideas and concepts

#### **Discussion to Explore Topic**

- Response to stimulus materials with reference to the topic in various formats (video, pictures, written texts, etc.)
- Creation of mind maps to establish starting points

#### **Binary Oppositions to be Explored**

- Must we always comply with the law or are there times when it is ok to disobey the law?
- Should we change our body appearance to impress our friends?
- Is it always helpful to help others?

#### **Using Theatre Techniques**

- Acting a character written on a slip of paper for others to guess
- Simulation of scenes/interaction related to the topic, e.g., victim and aggressor
- Forum theatre

### **Dialectical Discussion to Understand Topic in Depth**

- Response to statements about the topic
- Questions to bring to the surface points of view, prompt deeper thinking, and re-evaluate assumptions, e.g.: Is x something to worry about? Do you agree with the statement?
- Facing each other, pupils formed inner and outer circles, which moved to enable alternation of discussion partner.

### **Personalising the Topic**

- Allowing pupils to choose the focus for lessons
- Recreating events which had happened in the school/lives of pupils which related to the topic, for example an incident of racist bullying in a playground.

## **4 The EAR Training Model**

The training model consisted of 20 h of face-to-face workshops in which theory and practice of the Dialectic Method and theatre techniques for learning were introduced. This was supported by a specially compiled handbook for the EAR methodology [9], and the educational scenarios planning template. Teachers were also introduced to ‘competence ladders’. These guided focused assessment of students’ developing CDC development. Based on earlier work carried out on behalf of the Royal Society of Arts Opening Minds programme [13].

During implementation, practitioners maintained teacher logs to support reflection, and were engaged in debriefing activities at the end of implementation, to embed practice further.

To ensure a collaborative approach to the professional development in Italy, in-service teachers and teachers in training were formed into quads. Each teacher planned a series of lessons with a group of three teachers in training, who in turn would observe and debrief the lessons with the teacher.

## **5 Research Methodology**

The research was designed for the purposes of the EAR project, and so was informed by the project objectives. The general objective was to improve the acquisition of four key competence areas related with citizenship education, i.e., Interacting effectively and constructively with others; thinking critically; acting in a socially responsible manner; acting democratically.

The specific objectives were: 1) enhance the ability of the teachers to teach citizenship education in a more effective way; 2) mainstream the dialectical method (with the support of theatre techniques in mainstream education).

The objectives were then operationalised into evaluation questions, and measures formulated in accordance with the intended pedagogical foci: social responsibility, critical thinking, understanding of concepts related to democracy and human rights. The

Council of Europe Competences for Democratic Culture (CDC) framework [1] was drawn on to define relevant pupil outcomes and provide indicators for data analysis for each of these areas.

Data collection tools provided quantitative and qualitative pre- and post-data relevant to the evaluation questions, and as close to implementation as possible. These consisted of:

- teacher pre- and post-questionnaires
- teacher logs, for completion after the implementation of a lesson and/or peer observation
- focus groups schedules for pupil feedback at the end of implementation
- competence ladders.

The teacher questionnaires included a combination of quantitative and qualitative items. In both pre- and post-surveys, teachers indicated using a 5-point likert scale their confidence in teaching the four aspects of citizenship education which were the focus of EAR. They also indicated the prevalence of six aspects of students' learning behaviour in EAR classes in comparison with regular classes. These were followed by prompts to provide examples of student behaviour, and explain in what ways EAR lessons differed from regular lessons.

Teacher logs/observation schedules prompted practitioners to provide contextual information, approaches to planning, a description of student activity, an indication of which competences students developed in the session, with justification, and of their learning, and finally what the teacher themselves had learned from the lesson.

The competence ladders were an additional reflective tool for teachers whereby they focused on the actions and talk of an individual student in the lesson and assessed where the student was in terms of mastery of the competence. This was a four-stage model, beginning with recognising examples of the competence in others, being able to describe examples themselves, explaining the nature of the competence, and explaining why it is important. Figure 1 shows the competence ladder for 'respect' from the RFCDC.

Given the nature of the project, teacher participation was encouraged throughout the two years of the project, and partners in each country needed the freedom to implement training and oversee classroom delivery at times and durations which were suitable for them. This meant that there was uneven participation among teachers, which it was impossible to control for research purposes. Instead, teachers were encouraged to complete data collection tools at each stage. The pivotal sample were the 216 participants who completed both pre- and post-surveys, enabling a comparison of quantitative items. Table 1 shows the number of practitioners who received training in EAR, and implemented the methodology in some form in their setting, completing each data collection tool by country.

For the analysis, where quantitative data were collected, a comparison of scores was run for those practitioners who had completed both pre- and post-questionnaires to indicate trends in increased confidence in relation to four areas of citizenship education.

For the qualitative data a content analysis was carried out, the coding aligning to the evaluation questions, and data grouped accordingly. Texts were then subject to a content

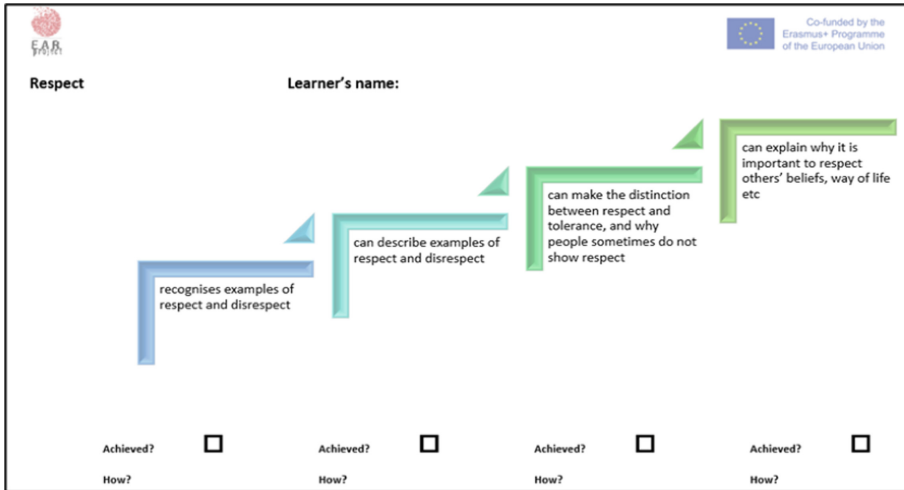


Fig. 1. Example competence ladder: respect.

Table 1. Data collected by tool and by country.

Country	Pre- & post survey	Pre-survey	Post-survey	Training evaluation	Teacher logs	Focus group	Observation	Competence ladders
<b>Total Partner</b>	<b>216</b>	<b>532</b>	<b>230</b>	<b>243</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>57</b>
Greece	35	88	43	6	25	19	0	0
Italy	151	198	155	158	15	2	0	39
Portugal	7	139	7	45	3	0	3	4
Spain	8	40	9	10	9	1	7	9
UK	15	32	16	20	1	1	0	5

analysis [14] to identify the key messages emerging from the qualitative data, and these used to answer the evaluation questions.

This paper presents the outcomes of the data analysis which focused on how teachers implemented EAR, and its impact on their confidence in teaching and assessing citizenship skills. The focus is on teacher professional development, in terms of changes in confidence in teaching citizenship skills.

The results are presented for the whole project, for which pre- and post-data were collected for 216 participating practitioners. A particular focus in reporting qualitative findings is on the cohort of Italian practitioners who participated.

## 6 Teacher Perceptions of the Changing Dynamics in the EAR Classroom

A recurring theme prevalent across all teacher logs was the use of theatre activities and stimuli to provoke thinking and discussion. The impact of this can be seen in the changes in the balance of teacher talk vs pupil talk (see Fig. 2 below).

In EAR lessons:

- The balance between teacher talk-time and pupil talk-time shifted, so pupils were more actively involved in learning conversations
- Pupils were more likely to listen to each other
- Pupils worked more independently (less dependent on teacher), and in greater collaboration with each other.

Given the emphasis in EAR on pupil activity, both through drama techniques and dialogue, changes in classroom dynamics would be expected. This turned out to be the case. For most teachers, their talk-time was lower and pupil talk-time higher in EAR lessons. Good learning behaviours of independent learning, pupils working together, and pupils listening to each other were all more prevalent in EAR lessons compared with regular lessons.

At the same time as providing the lesson structure – drama and dialogue – which would naturally ensure greater pupil talk, the focus on binary oppositions and questioning skills also had a positive impact on the quality of talk. For example, in Italy both pre-service and in-service teachers acknowledged how dialectical discussions resulted into an opportunity to consolidate and develop students’ analytical and critical thinking skills.

*During the discussions the boys often did not repeat the same things as their classmates but gave original and personal answers. Each time they took up their companion’s speech it was to analyze it or to make a personal reflection. (teacher in training, Italy)*

Interestingly, in the Italian context, practising teachers have different views about their relationship with students when adopting EAR methodology in the classroom. On the one hand, many teachers observed how students’ active role in the learning process and the simultaneous presence of pre-service and in-service teachers in the classroom enabled them to stand back, observe and listen young people from a novel perspective.

*At first I was tempted to correct the students’ answers but then I held back, I took a “step to the side” to make the children express more freely and then they positively surprised me with their insights on the topic of solidarity (Practising teacher, Italy)*

On the other hand, for some teachers EAR methodology was not an impetus to change teacher practice, but in those cases where teachers were already promoting learner interaction, it reinforced and provided new activities for that practice.



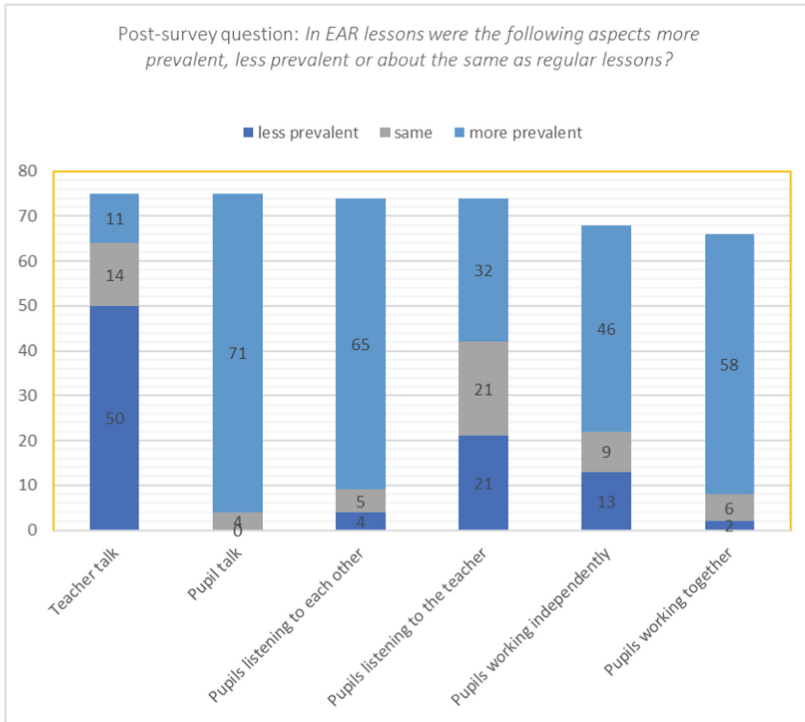


Fig. 2. Prevalence in EAR lessons of teaching and learning interaction.

## 7 Teachers’ Confidence in Teaching and Evaluating Citizenship Education

At the end of the implementation period teachers generally noted improved confidence in teaching pupils the core competences of EAR. Because a far larger number of Italian participants completed pre- and post-surveys, this also skewed the statistics across the project (Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2. Trends in practitioner confidence in teaching the foci of EAR.

How confident are you about teaching young people the following?	Pre-	Post-
Critical thinking	3.4	3.7
How to behave in a socially responsible way	3.8	3.8
Concepts related to democracy	3.3	3.5
Concepts related to human rights	3.6	3.8

(Respondents scored 1-not at all confident to 5-very confident, the scores here are the average for those who completed both pre- and post-survey)

**Table 3.** Country in practitioner confidence in teaching the foci of EAR.

How confident are you about teaching young people the following?	Greece N = 28	Italy N = 150	Portugal N = 5	Spain N = 8	UK N = 15
Critical thinking	+0.3	+0.3	+0.1	+0.9	+0.9
How to behave in a socially responsible way	+0.2	0.0	0.0	+0.5	+0.5
Concepts related to democracy	+0.3	+0.2	+0.5	+0.6	+0.8
Concepts related to human rights	+0.4	+0.1	+0.4	+0.4	+0.7

The positive trends were less pronounced among Italian participants. This may be due to the fact that a large number of participants were teachers in training and may have encountered the challenges of teaching at the same time as implementing EAR. Indeed, in the Italian context, practising teachers experienced a larger increase in confidence in teaching citizenship competences than teachers in training. Teachers' in training comments reflect the more uncertain stage of career they are in, and more tentative judgement on progress in their professional learning and development:

*I do not feel like giving the highest rating as I think that to feel confident that you can promote these skills requires long and intense work... The EAR project was definitely a good start. (Teacher in training, Italy)*

Overall, it is also noticeable that the trend in confidence to teach pupils how to behave in a socially responsible way is also less pronounced than in the other three areas. Qualitative data indicates that opening the classroom up at times presented classroom management difficulties in the early stages of implementation. In some cases, in particular in reports from Italy, the setting up of collaborative activities was initially accompanied by disruptive behaviour. Likewise, the opening up of the classroom, and allowing greater space for pupils to talk and interact on also brought occasional problems around behaviour. However, the structure of the activities and their certainty of next steps, enabled teachers and students to manage this well. Where teachers reported having to deal with inappropriate behaviour, pupils tended to respond well. This was also a part of their learning. In Italy, when some small conflicts occurred students actively managed them peacefully.

*The pupils interacted in the working groups recognizing and respecting the various points of view, providing their own contribution to the realization of the common task. Sometimes small conflicts arose within the class group but also in these occasions the pupils proved capable of resolving them independently without the intervention of the teacher. (Teacher in training, Italy)*

An important strand of the project was trialling ways teachers could assess competences. For this purpose, competence ladders and a section on the training logs drew teachers' attention to specific aspects of citizenship learning. The post-survey indicated that in the area of assessment teachers had indeed developed confidence. Analysis of the scores participants gave on the confidence scale of 1-*not at all confident* to 5-*very confident*, no participants scored '1', and of the 23 who scored '2', 19 were teachers in training in Italy. At such an early stage in the profession, this cohort can be expected in any case to question teaching and assessment skills (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Practitioner confidence in assessing citizenship competences.

How confident are you about assessing young people's competences in citizenship?	
<b>EAR/N = 231</b>	<b>3.5</b>
Greece/N = 43	4.0
Italy/N = 156	3.3
Portugal/N = 7	4.6
Spain/N = 9	3.9
UK/N = 16	3.7

(Respondents scored 1-*not at all confident* to 5-*very confident*, the scores here are the average for the whole project, and by country)

Practitioner comments on assessment were generally positive.

*The competency ladders were an excellent framework and progression model on which to judge pupils' responses as well as how to scaffold and extend. (practising teacher, UK)*

*As I work on issues that have to do with human rights, I will have more confidence in evaluating the competencies of young people. (Practising teacher, Spain)*

The variation in quality of teachers' thinking about the progress of their pupils was reflected in the variety of detail different teachers went into in completing the reflective tools. Nevertheless, the shift of focus from teacher actions, to pupil learning was evident across competence ladders and tools, and was at times forensic.

In Italy, only one teacher stated explicitly the benefit of the training programme in relation to the understanding of how to use the competence ladder. However, several participants mentioned the capacity to observe – and reflect on – episodes of learning and participation during classroom activities as an important achievement in their training path.

*They [classroom activities] gave the possibility to the pupils to interact differently on issues that were previously addressed. In this way I was able to ascertain what had been understood and reworked by the students. (Practicing teacher, Italy)*

## 8 Conclusions

Citizenship education can often be seen as a less important element of the curriculum, but the focus in EAR in developing questioning and communication skills demonstrated how it can have broader pedagogical value. Opening the classroom up to student questions so they are truly leading their own learning, can be a risky strategy if it leads to behaviour management problems. The EAR model and approach to training demonstrated that it provides an adequate framework to enable this to happen, and that the result is changing, more favourable dynamics in the classroom.

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