Transversal competences in education for sustainable development and international solidarity – A book review

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Motto: "You can't go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending." C.S. Lewis

In the current educational scenario of training students for the 21st century, when teaching methodologies are rapidly changing to suit the more and more challenging demands, there is a stringent need to equip pupils, students, teachers, educators, and not only, with the adequate skills to succeed in their activities. Particularly teachers, teacher trainers and trainee teachers, since they are the real protagonists of change when it comes to educating and shaping the society they live in and bringing up responsible and actively engaged citizens. In a year like no other, this need has become even more obvious in the case of the recent pandemic, which forced teachers to adjust their capabilities to the new environment and to resort to reskilling and upskilling strategies, so as to better cope with the unique, unprecedented educational setting.

In this context, the book edited by Monica Tilea, Olivier Morin and Oana-Adriana Duță, and entitled *Transversal Competences in Education for Sustainable Development and International Solidarity* advocates for the use of inter- and transdisciplinary educational tools in developing and assessing transversal competences in classroom practice. It materializes the results of the research carried out in the Erasmus+ project *Acteurs du Territoire pour une Éducation à la Citoyenneté Mondiale (ACTECIM)*⁸ by a team of academics with solid background in educational sciences: Olivier Morin and Sandie Bernard from the Claude Bernard University of Lyon 1 (France), Davide Della Rina, Roberto Trincherio, Selena Notaro and Alessio Tomassone from the University of Turin (Italy), and Monica Tilea, Claudiu Bunăiașu and Aida Stoian from the University of Craiova (Romania)⁹.

Published at the Universitaria Publishing House (Craiova) in 2019 as a bilingual edition, in Romanian (pp. 5-107) and English (pp. 109-202), the book is structured in four chapters, which are complemented by six annexes and bibliographical references. As stated above, the analysis presented in this volume is based on the experimental results and data collected within the ACTECIM project, and proposes a characterisation of the transversal competences associated to Education for Sustainable Development and International Solidarity (Éducation au développement durable et à la solidarité internationale – EDDSI). Overall, the main objective is linked to the general idea that EDDSI provides “solutions for understanding economic, social and global interdependences all around the world, reinforcing social

⁸ As stated in the editors' introduction to this book, the Erasmus+ project *Acteurs du Territoire pour une Éducation à la Citoyenneté Mondiale (ACTECIM)*, implemented during 2015-2018, was aimed at “providing a better understanding of the means to achieve education for sustainable development and international solidarity and helped take a further step in modelling tomorrow's citizens” by reuniting universities, schools, colleges and non-governmental organizations from three European regions: the Rhône-Alpes region, the South-West Oltenia region and the Piedmont region, which engaged in a joint reflection on education for sustainable development and international solidarity (p. 111). More information about the ACTECIM project are available here: <http://www.piemontecooperazioneinternazionale.it/actecim/>

⁹ The research carried out within the ACTECIM project included two interdependent phases: (i) observations and analyses performed by university researchers on the experiences of training and transversal skills acquisition in the three partner regions, and (ii) the collaborative production of a joint analysis of transversal competences associated to world citizenship.

cohesion and the people's capacity to act" (p. 111), and helps to train responsible and actively engaged individuals at a local and global level.

The first chapter is entitled *Transversal Skills Associated to World Citizenship: Definitions and Indicators*, and, as the title suggests, it focuses on education for world citizenship as a means of shaping the future generations, not just by endowing them with "stereotyped and reproducible abilities", but also by enabling them "to learn *for* citizen action and *through* citizen action" (p. 113). Moreover, the authors acknowledge the role and importance of an educational approach of world citizenship, and state that "education for world citizenship should be seen as a transformative learning process" (p. 113) as it deals with "interconnecting and implementing all possible means to provide enough equality, social justice, comprehension and cooperation between peoples" (p. 113). To this end, four important competences were chosen and described in relation to Education for Sustainable Development and International Solidarity: critical thinking, active citizenship, embracing complexity and interculturality. Based on state-of-the-art bibliographical references, theoretical and methodological insights obtained from previous research carried out in similar projects (i.e. the REDDSO programme¹⁰, cf. Morin & Bernard 2015), and experimental results obtained within the ACTECIM joint research, the authors elaborated the competence description sheets for teachers and pupils associated with each of the four competences discussed herein. The structure of these description sheets includes: a general description of the competence (with bibliographical references), a definition of the competence from the point of view of EDDSI, a presentation of the indicators for the assessment of pupils' and teachers' competences (116-124).

In the second chapter, *Identifying Specific Descriptors for Problem-based Tests*, the authors describe the process of designing an educational resource for the development and assessment of competences related to education for world citizenship in the form of assessment grids, subsequently applied to each of the four competences discussed in the previous chapter. Starting from the idea that "competences – both individual and collective – represent people's abilities to mobilize and combine resources in a specific manner" (p. 125), the authors claim that, in order to properly characterise such competences, a distinction should be made "between *indicators* – which are general and applicable to categories of situations – and *descriptors*, which are specific to a precise situation" (p. 125). The indicators are then applied to different precise problem-based tests, against which the competences levels are assessed. Thus, a descriptor is "an indicator associated to the specific content of the problem-based test", which reports an observation under the form of a statement, using a verb of action (p. 125). The interesting and novel idea behind the use of assessment grids is that not only the general indicators of the envisaged competences should be detailed, but also the descriptors, in order to relate the achieved performance to the problem-based test-specific measurement scale. Therefore, in the latter part of the second chapter, the descriptor grids of the four areas of competence are described in accordance with the elements of the RIZA model (Trinchero 2012)¹¹, which are said to characterize the possibility to act effectively in a situation and to assess the level of the subject's competence, based on possible learning descriptors, subsequently associated with interpretation, action and self-regulation structures. These competence description sheets were then applied to two problem-based tests (i.e. the "Philippines" problem-based test, described in Annex 1 and the "Honeybees" problem-based test, described in Annex 2) and resulted in four competence levels associated with each structure of the above-mentioned EDDSI competences (Level A Advanced, Level B Intermediate, Level C Weak and Level D Non-autonomous).

¹⁰ More information about the programme *Régions pour une Education au Développement Durable et Solidaire – Regions Supporting an Education for Sustainable and Solidary Development* (REDDSO) are available here: <https://reddso.wordpress.com>.

¹¹ The four elements that form the R-I-Z-A model are Resources (Risorsse), Interpretation (Interpretazione), Action (aZione), Self-Regulation (Autoregolazione). The model is described in detail in chapter 2 of this book, pp. 126-131.

What is particularly useful about these educational resources is that they could be set against many different competences and are applicable to different cognitive areas at different school levels.

The third chapter, *A Competence Descriptive Tool*, is aimed at discussing the interdependence relation between the mental structures described in the RIZA model which are associated with competences, regarding critical thinking, embracing complexity and active citizenship. The stated purpose was to validate the “creation of indicator and descriptor grids for competences associated to world citizenship” (p. 146), by studying i) to what extent the descriptors help reveal a spectrum of acquisition levels in a given situation and ii) the existence or absence of a relation between the mobilization of mental structures of interpretation and the mental structures of action (147-148). The authors also tried to find out whether the three competences are manifestations of the same mental structure or they can be independently examined. To this end, a study corpus was created, consisting of answers to a question-based test provided by 106 pupils aged 12-18 on an online platform (the test, which is described in Annex 1, only included questions explicitly related to the three competences). The answers were analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively, and the overall results were interpreted and compared. The tool based on the “Philippines” problem-based test was then used by the Italian researchers in 2016/2017 and in 2017/2018 as a pre-test and a post-test to measure the evolution of the pupils’ competences for each field of expertise, before and after their involvement in the ACTECIM project. The results indicated a statistically significant improvement in the two groups for each assessed competence (for example, critical thinking competence improved by 28.6% and citizenship competence, by 21.4%).

The fourth chapter of the book, *The “Honeybees” Problem-based Test: an analysis of competences*, draws a parallel between what the pupils are expected to do when answering the questions of the “Honeybees” problem-based test (Annex 2) and some excerpts of the pupils’ actual answers. This concretely shows how competences can be measured through specific elements of answers to various questions.

The six Annexes include useful context and background materials that aid the readers’ understanding of the topic and felicitously complement the content of the book. They are organised as follows: Annex 1. The “Philippines” Problem-Based Test, Annex 2. The “Honeybees” Problem-Based Test, Annex 3. Summary of Discussions with the Teams of Pilot Institutions of Rhone Alpes Auvergne at the End of the Experimental Phase, Annex 4. Report on the Activity of the Romanian Focus Group, Annex 5. Report Pursuant to Interviews with Italian Teachers, and Annex 6. Questionnaire for teachers.

Considering the above, the strengths of this book lie in its proposed methodology and research results, which make it a versatile educational resource, adaptable to heterogeneous audiences and various national and educational settings. Moreover, the use of indicator grids for the description of EDDSI-related transversal competences highlights its transferable character across subject areas, contexts or educational needs. In support of this claim, the competence assessment model described in this book has been successfully applied and validated in subsequent research studies (Tilea, Duță&Reșceanu, 2020; Reșceanu&Tilea, 2020) that proved its efficiency in designing activities for the development and assessment of various transversal competences in foreign language classes (i.e. competences related to education for democratic citizenship: critical thinking and active citizenship). Therefore, this book quite obviously relates to the ERL Journal Scope Major, whose rationale is based, among others, on developing interdisciplinary educational studies highlighting the educational role of language in fostering transversal skills and 21st century competences.

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