

The A CLASSROOM OF DIFFERENCE™ School Community Approach



Building Inclusive Schools

Schools around Europe face new challenges as a microcosm and reflection of social issues, changing populations, and intercultural tensions. Today's multiculturalism offers richness and promises for the construction of Europe, and it calls institutions to be accountable to democratic values of equality and tolerance. During periods of rapid social change (including technology, labour market, globalisation, cultural norms, etc.), conflict and tensions are part of the normal process of negotiating social limits, and schools find themselves in a kind of experimental sphere for preparing citizens to succeed in diverse societies.

The A CLASSROOM OF DIFFERENCE™ and Peer Training Programmes, both from the Anti-Defamation League, are two

complementary approaches to enhance the awareness and skills of the school community to be able to embrace diversity, confront discrimination, and create inclusive learning environments where all pupils can succeed. A CLASSROOM OF DIFFERENCE™ provides training and curricular tools for teachers to develop effective classroom strategies. Peer Training develops youth leadership and important transversal skills that empower pupils to actively participate in defining a positive school climate. These two programmes together, as part of a global project in which the administration develops a long-term view to school development, provide a clear framework within which schools are better prepared to address the social-educational challenges of today.

The CLASSROOM OF DIFFERENCE™ School Community Approach is mentioned as best practice in the publication Schools for Society: Learning Democracy in Europe. A Handbook of Ideas for Action ©2009 edited by Network of European Foundations.

Impact:

A long-term view to school development that involves the various actors of the school community in order to create a positive learning environment that respects diversity and where all pupils can succeed.

Goals of the School Community Approach

For the school to:

- Make an institutional commitment to create an inclusive environment.
- Recognise cultural diversity as an invaluable resource.
- Be prepared to confront prejudice and discrimination, and address intercultural conflicts.
- Have an improved climate and better communication amongst various actors in the school community.
- Develop a sustainable action plan.
- Achieve its own objectives set within the programme, such as: intercultural integration, violence prevention, active citizenship, better behaviour and performance of pupils, improved relations amongst staff, etc.
- Recognise and encourage the role of youth in the school community.
- Experience the positive impact of active citizenship in the school climate.

Assumptions

- The school is itself a community made up of: pupils, teachers, administration, non-teaching staff, parents, social workers, NGOs and others who interact with the school environment.
- The school is an essential part of a surrounding neighborhood, larger community, or communities, in society.
- Diversity is a reality and a richness for social and cultural development.
- Prejudice and discrimination are barriers to peaceful intercultural relations
- Active citizenship is a value and a skill that should be promoted for all ages and in all sectors.
- Training is a core component in processes of organizational development and social change.

Impact

From 2007-2008 the Paris-based European Institute for Education and Social Policy (EIESP) undertook an evaluation of the impact of the School Community Approach (SCA) on the school environment.

“The findings suggest that SCA is contributing in all the schools where it is implemented to making the learning environment of the students more conducive to their well-being and making

the school a place where they can grow positively... One of the first results of the training reported was increased mutual respect, a better capacity to communicate and therefore also to listen creating a firm basis for building respect and dealing with prejudice.”

The immediate effects reported by those who followed the training were:

“This morning, faculty were telling me how much they appreciated the opportunities you provided, the frank discussion, and they want more of the same.”

Elementary School Principal - American Overseas School of Rome

Teachers

Understood better the mechanisms of prejudice and discrimination and that they felt more confident to deal with discriminatory behaviour and prejudice, and to initiate discussion on sensitive subjects.

They felt they were more available to the students and better able to hear their needs. They said they had gained the confidence to be more open and some reported having undergone a reflection about their own beliefs and practices.

As a result, staff in the schools reported a more serene atmosphere in their schools in general, as well as in the classrooms. There were fewer incidents that became unmanageable.

Students

Become more active in their schools and demonstrated in the interviews that they experienced increased and enhanced confidence and self-esteem as well as a sense of belonging to the school community.

They initiated and proposed ideas both as follow up to the peer training and for other projects which they would like to see developed in the school.

Schools

Schools experienced a positive effect of the training in reducing conflicts and also physical and verbal aggression.