RE.MA.C.: AN INTERCULTURAL EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVE

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the EU-funded initiative, Reinventing Mainstream Classrooms (RE.MA.C.), in particular on Work Package 2 and its needs analysis phase, developing a "Pedagogical Framework for Intercultural Education." The framework integrates intercultural studies, inclusive education, and the Council of Europe's RFCDC, while references are also made to translanguage pedagogy and critical interculturality. The paper advocates for dynamic cultural perspectives in mainstream education, aiming to address visible separations or hidden exclusion mechanisms. RE.MA.C. strives to create an inclusive environment in primary education, aligning with UN's 17 SDGs and RFCDC to foster open-mindedness and manage racism. The RE.MA.C. framework guided the needs analysis phase which included, among other aspects, 36 educational material reviews as these are used in various content lessons, and the piloting phase of a questionnaire distribution to 72 teachers across the five countries of the consortium (Cyprus, Greece, Malta, Portugal and Italy). Based on the needs analysis phase and the framework innovative second language and intercultural learning tasks were introduced through a Blended Learning Model. In conclusion, the paper underscores the need for intercultural curricula respecting RFCDC, addressing migrant learners' needs, providing a foundation for future research and tailored curricula development in intercultural education.

Keywords: intercultural education, critical interculturality, sustainable education, mainstream classrooms, inclusive education.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context

The EU-funded initiative Reinventing Mainstream Classrooms (RE.MA.C.) represents a pioneering effort to revolutionize mainstream education settings thanks to the implementation of intercultural learning materials firmly rooted in Intercultural Education principles and methodologies.

Five countries (Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, and Portugal) participate in the RE.MA.C. project. The project introduces a holistic approach to the mainstream education where linguistic, intercultural and digital skills are considered and developed while allowing for a broader impact and effectiveness in European countries and beyond.

This paper, focusing on the intricate aspects of Work Package 2, titled "Needs Analysis Phase" extents the current landscape of intercultural education theoretical and pedagogical research. Drawing insights from subject materials, handbooks, and CEFR descriptors spanning A1 to B1 levels in various countries, the research delves into critical subtopics such as intercultural studies, inclusive education, education for sustainability, translanguaging, critical interculturality and the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) by the Council of Europe.

Embracing an Inclusive Education stance, as articulated by Leijen et al. [1], the paper addresses the dichotomy between verbal commitments to inclusivity and the observable separations or concealed exclusion mechanisms in certain educational institutions. Central to RE.MA.C.'s mission is the education of mainstream teachers and students, fostering a genuinely inclusive environment that honors all forms of diversity.

This study explores the pivotal role of intercultural education aligned with Inclusive Education principles, the UN 17 SDGs [2], translanguaging, critical interculturality and RFCDC, emphasizing their collective contributions to nurturing an open-minded society and effectively managing racism in early childhood and young adults. Drawing on insights from studies such as Timoštšuk et al. [3], the research underscores the profound impact of intercultural education on social cohesion.

In addition to establishing theoretical foundations, RE.MA.C. introduces innovative aspects by creating and piloting 1600 Second Language (SL) and intercultural learning tasks. Tailored for students aged 7 to 12 within the A1 to B1 language proficiency spectrum as well as native speakers, these tasks leverage a Blended Rotation Model with four stations (teacher, collaboration, independent study, technology). The approach showcases the efficacy of online platforms in enhancing language learning outcomes and underscores the adoption of cutting-edge methodologies.

In conclusion, this paper aligns crucial findings with the overarching objectives of RE.MA.C., emphasizing the imperative for intercultural curricula that respect the Council of Europe Framework while addressing the specific needs of learners within multilingual and multicultural mainstream education. As a comprehensive framework for contemporary intercultural education practices, RE.MA.C. lays the groundwork for ongoing field research and development of tailored curricula, charting a path toward more inclusive and culturally enriched educational landscapes.

1.2 Theoretical Background

The theoretical foundation underpinning the development of the innovative materials presented in this study is rooted in multicultural approaches to education. These approaches encompass Critical Interculturality ([4], [5]), Sustainable, Intercultural, and Inclusive Education [6], Council of Europe Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) of 2022, [7] Multicultural Education [8], Translanguaging Pedagogy ([9], [10]), and Intercultural Competence ([11], [12]).

An in-depth exploration of Critical Interculturality reveals its unique educational modus operandi, delving into power dynamics, social structures, and historical contexts while acknowledging cultural differences. This approach challenges traditional educational paradigms and endeavors to reshape power imbalances. In the context of the RE.MA.C. project, Critical Interculturality has influenced both the formulation of objectives and the creation and distribution of surveys to mainstream teachers. Notably, the development of 1600 SL and intercultural tasks for students aged 7 to 12 reflects a broader consideration of the intercultural aspects of teaching and learning methods. This approach recognizes the agency of individuals within power structures, assisting teachers and students in framing migration-related issues in classrooms as multi-causal and multidimensional phenomena.

The adoption of "Translanguaging Pedagogy," as defined by Wei in 2011, directly aligns with this approach. RE.MA.C. aims to cultivate a fluid approach to multilingual education, acknowledging the value of individuals with migrant backgrounds leveraging their complete linguistic repertoire. Creating SL and intercultural tasks, educators will practically pilot translanguaging in multicultural classrooms, promoting multilingualism and encouraging students to utilize their linguistic skills effectively within the educational community.

Banks and Banks [8] influential work in defining aspects of multicultural education and the implementation of the Rotation Model, are two pivotal elements of the research underlying the RE.MA.C. project. On one hand the model introduces content from diverse perspectives without altering existing curricula and extends to blended learning techniques and content creation. The dimensions of multicultural education described by Banks find broader application, encompassing both content and methodologies within RE.MA.C.

Moreover, the project delves into the dimensions of intercultural competence outlined by Deardoff, with a specific focus on the cognitive and behavioral dimensions. These dimensions include cultural awareness, knowledge, understanding, adaptability, and interpersonal effectiveness. These concepts play a crucial role in the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC), which was conceived in 2018 and has three main components: context, concepts, and model; descriptor of competencies; and guidance for implementation. It should by mentioned however that despite the framework's utility, scholars criticized Eurocentric discourses, highlighting the need for careful consideration when developing materials aligned with its principles and values, which this project takes under thoughtful consideration.

The literature review conducted throughout this study identifies a consistent thread leading to the innovative features of the RE.MA.C. project. Grounded in solid literature findings, RE.MA.C. leverages the opportunity for innovation through extensive piloting sessions and in-field research.

2 METHODOLOGY

This paper presents results from two different research tools used during the needs analysis phase of this project. Firstly, it shows the results deriving from the review phase of educational material used in mainstream classrooms across the consortium's five countries. Secondly, results collected through an online questionnaire during the piloting phase are also shown. The questionnaire was distributed to mainstream educators. It examined educators' intercultural training needs and the degree to which they had developed intercultural skills.

Regarding the educational material review, this included 36 educational materials reviews used in all six grades of primary school. The University of Algarve, based in Portugal, reviewed six handbooks used in Environmental Studies and Natural Science. SOS Malta reviewed a series of Maltese reading books. Frederick University, based in Cyprus, reviewed six different educational materials as part of the Health and Life education subject, while CARDET reviewed six handbooks used in the religious subjects. Democritus University, based in Greece, researched six handbooks used in the environmental studies subject in all six grades. CESIE, based in Italy, reviewed six history handbooks.

The review process occurred during March and April of 2023, where consensus was achieved among all consortium partners regarding a predefined set of criteria. These criteria, inextricably linked to the theoretical underpinnings of RE.MA.C., draw heavily from intercultural education perspectives, notably influenced by research fields and theoretical approaches such as those presented by Banks and Banks [8], the Council of Europe Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture [7], as well as language learning methodologies including languages of schooling [13] and pluriliteracies [14].

The established criteria encompass various dimensions, including text themes, representations, curriculum, digital educational materials, competencies, visuals, types of activities and learning tasks, student and teacher roles, content, and assessment methods/types. This comprehensive framework provided a robust foundation for the subsequent evaluation.

The questionnaire piloting phase transpired in May and June 2023, with the instrument co-constructed by the consortium in English before being translated into three additional languages: Standard Modern Greek, Italian, and Portuguese. Employing the snowball sampling technique [15], 72 mainstream teachers from the five participating countries were engaged. The questionnaire comprised three main sections: a) a personal information section with 7 questions, b) a section focused on teachers' skills and professional development with 9 questions, and c) a section dedicated to teachers' needs analysis on educational materials with 6 questions.

For the quantitative data analysis, a descriptive approach was adopted, involving percentages and frequency calculations. Concurrently, for qualitative data, a summative content analysis method was employed [16].

3 RESULTS

Following are the results derived from the reviews and questionnaires described earlier.

3.1 Mapping and reviewing existing educational materials in various subjects in Cyprus, Italy, Greece, Malta and Portugal

In order to map and review existing educational materials in Cyprus, Italy, Greece, Malta, and Portugal, a comprehensive assessment of the available learning resources in these countries across various subjects was required. This process was crucial for understanding the state of the art and identifying areas for improvement. Here are the main results from this process.

3.1.1 Text themes

The majority of the texts' authors used in these handbooks are part of the majority group in each country, while there are few examples of authors representing minority groups and cultures, as indicated by the following extract from an Italian history handbook for 6th grade.

Extract from Italian History Handbook (6th grade) Review: "Culturally appropriate content: respects the cultural identity of the learner through the provision of culturally appropriate examples". The book includes texts written by members of the different nationalities living in the country.

3.1.2 Representations

Some partners pointed out that there is an avoidance of categorizing people, while others mentioned that the material is often not inclusive enough. Examples from Greece and Cyprus highlight these concerns.

Extract from Greece Environmental Studies Handbook (6th grade): "Most of the examples given and most of the images included in these sections, do not reflect the experiences and habits of every child. On the contrary, many of them are, in fact, not relevant to their everyday life. Consequently, the examples given do not promote flexibility in interactions with cultural others".

Extract from Cyprus Health and Life Education Handbook (2nd grade): "[...] In another activity, the students are asked how they would treat the children in the picture if they visited their school, which promotes flexibility and interactions with cultural others."

3.1.3 Curriculum

Most members highlighted the effort in each subject via their respective books to develop global issues, following each country's curriculum. However, language difficulties were observed due to the use of academic language along with tendencies towards stereotypical categorization.

Extract from Malta Reading Handbook (1st grade): "The content is mostly intended for native speakers" (Malta, reading book, 1-6th grade).

3.1.4 Digital tools

Most reviews reported that digital learning materials were not available for the chapters in handbooks evaluated. Exceptions were found in History courses in Italy and the Environmental Studies and Natural Science courses in Portugal.

Extract from Environmental Studies and Natural Science Textbook (3rd grade): "This is an interactive textbook that allows teachers to use diverse and interactive digital resources: videos, quizzes, practice activities, etcetera. Students can also use some of these resources: watch videos and listen to versions of the texts from books, study through dynamic presentations, and answer questions interactively. However, the text is in Portuguese."

3.1.5 Competencies

Among the reviews, many referred to 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking and self-awareness. There is no description of collective biases and how they may affect communication.

Extract from Cyprus Health and Life Education Textbook (3rd grade): "[...] students must role-play the mother mouse indicating to her baby all its abilities as a mouse. In this way, they must look at this conversation from different perspectives. The perspective of the baby mouse and the mother mouse promotes multi-perceptivity and self-awareness. They also must use critical thinking to spot the arguments used to convince their child that he is capable and unique just the way he is".

3.1.6 Pictures-Visuals

Images with people from different backgrounds (nationality, gender) are detected but they do not escape folkloristic representations, nor do they ensure their equality.

Extract from Cyprus Religion Handbook: "There is a representation of people of multiple ethnic backgrounds. There are several examples regarding this aspect. However, we may say that, in certain examples, folklorist approaches to culture are not avoided.".

3.1.7 Task activities and learning tasks

Most partners commented that there are a variety of activities, some of them requesting working individually or in groups. Nevertheless, language often remains a challenge, as per the case of Greece.

Extract from Environmental Studies Handbook: "Most of the activities are to be completed individually by each student. Only some of them promote cooperation among students. Participation in almost all activities demands knowledge of the oral and written use of formal Greek language, especially for the latter grades of primary school. Students with difficulties in speaking and writing in Greek cannot participate".

3.1.8 Student's role

Concerning students' role during lessons, interviewers identified a variety of responses. In particular, they depend on age, subject, and country.

In the extract from the National Sciences Handbook review in Portugal (5th grade): "The activities/tasks proposed in the textbook do not allow the student to be at the center of learning processes. There are activities that include the observation of images, the choice of correct options, the experimental procedures of practical activities, etcetera. These activities do not allow the development of cultural biases and multiple and complex identities".

3.1.9 Teacher's role

Results underscore the role of teachers in the organization and facilitation of the learning processes. Nonetheless, except in the case of Italy and some examples from Portugal, teachers do not implement culturally sensitive approaches.

In Portugal, such as in this extract from the 5th grade, in the Natural Science handbook review: "The teacher assumes a more traditional, transmissive role. The activities presented here should allow the teacher to play the role of a facilitator or of a mediator of student learning. In this textbook, there is no opportunity for the teacher to enable culturally sensitive teaching and a critical understanding of cultural biases."

3.1.10 Content

For the most part, partners stated that the content of school textbooks promotes multi-viewing and openness but does not seem to promote cultural relativism and recognition of the value of human rights.

As presented in this extract from Greece: "The content promotes openness to some degree to other aspects of the world. It does not promote cultural awareness, openness to other cultures, awareness of human rights, and access to multilingual resources. There is only a slight reference to the impact of context/environment/cultures. Non-sensitive language material. Participation in almost all the lesson's activities is only possible for students with a very good knowledge of the Greek language, thus excluding students with a minimum level of knowledge of the specific language".

3.1.11 Assessment methods and types

The results present various forms of self-assessment in some cases, a common strategy of self-assessment in others, and no self-assessment activity in others. In Italy and Portugal, there are exceptions.

In particular, in the Italian review of the History Handbook for the 3rd grade: "It promotes cooperation among students and delivers positive learning messages to the classroom".

3.2 Investigating teachers' professional development needs when teaching in mainstream multilingual and multicultural classrooms

Understanding teachers' professional development needs when teaching in mainstream multilingual and multicultural classrooms requires understanding their challenges and identifying areas for improvement. Here are the main results from the piloting phase.

Find the most relevant demographic results in the following table:

Table 1. Demographics.

	Cyprus and Greece	Malta	Italy	Portugal
Gender	33, F	8, F	13, F	11, F
	3, M	3, M	0, M	1, M
Age	10, 22-35 years old 22, 36-50 years old 3, 51-67 years old	5, 22-35 years old 6, 36-50 years old 0, 51-67 years old	4, 22-35 years old 5, 36-50 years old 4, 51-67 years old	0, 22-35 years old 6, 36-50 years old 6, 51-67 years old
Studies	4, bachelor degree 22, Master's degree 7, PhD 2, other or PGCE	4, bachelor degree 4, Master's degree 0, PhD 3, other or PGCE	3, Master's degree or socio psycho pedagogical 1, three- year degree 8, Master's degree 0, PhD 1, other	6, bachelor degree 72, Master's degree 0, PhD 0, other or PGCE
Teaching experience	5, 0-5 years 8, 6-10 years 14, 11-20 years 6, 21-25 years 2, 26+ years	3, 0-5 years 3, 6-10 years 2, 11-20 years 1, 21-25 years 2, 26+ years		2, 0-5 years 0, 6-10 years 0, 11-20 years 3, 21-25 years 7, 26+ years

In the section of the questionnaire dedicated to assessing teachers' abilities to impart Competencies for Democratic Culture, confidence levels were categorized based on respondents' self-assessment. The amalgamation of "advanced" and "expert" responses was considered indicative of high confidence, while the combination of "fundamental knowledge" and "novice knowledge" responses represented lower confidence levels. Among Cyprus and Greek educators, a substantial majority expressed confidence in teaching openness (n=26, 74%) and collaboration (n=24, 69%). Conversely, confidence levels were lower for cultural awareness (n=9, 26%) and civic-mindedness (n=8, 23%). Maltese teachers reported higher confidence in teaching civic-mindedness (n=9, 82%) but displayed lower confidence in flexibility (n=2, 18%). Portuguese teachers demonstrated average confidence across all competencies, with lower confidence levels in sociability (n=7, 58%) and collaboration (n=7, 58%). Italian teachers, on the other hand, exhibited high confidence in developing all competencies.

Regarding the question related to intercultural education, teachers were queried about competencies they believed required additional training for optimal student development. Greek teachers identified a need for further training in civic-mindedness (n=11, 18%), cultural awareness (n=10, 16%), and conflict resolution (n=11, 18%). Maltese teachers expressed a need for additional training in cultural awareness (n=5, 38%). Portuguese teachers cited training needs in cultural awareness (n=6, 18%), while some emphasized the importance of teaching Portuguese and acquiring basic knowledge of students' mother tongues (n=3) out of a total of 33 references. In Italy, cultural awareness emerged as the primary training need (n=7, 28%) among a total of 25 references.

In response to an open-ended question allowing teachers to elaborate on their training needs, a Portuguese teacher emphasized the necessity of addressing cultural and social differences, particularly to students from "closed" religions or cultures such as Sikh, Tamil, or Islamic backgrounds. This response underscored the need to reevaluate educators' perceptions of diverse cultures and avoid biased terminology. Conversely, an Italian teacher highlighted the importance of continuous training in cultural awareness, acknowledging the influence of personal predispositions on teaching practices and expressing a commitment to enhancing openness towards each student in the class group. This response reflected a conscious recognition of individual biases and their potential impact on teaching behavior.

In the concluding section, a closed-ended inquiry prompted mainstream teachers to delineate the types of resources required for effective instruction in multilingual and multicultural classrooms. To assess the perceived utility of resources, responses categorized as "very useful" or "extremely useful" were amalgamated to determine the frequency of "more useful material." Conversely, responses indicating "not at all useful" or "not so useful" were combined to estimate the frequency of "less useful material."

Cypriot and Greek educators identified materials focusing on valuing human rights (n=37, 97%) and those creating an empowering environment for students from diverse backgrounds (n=33, 94%) as the most useful. Notably, none of the respondents considered any suggestions from the questionnaire as not useful, except for a reference to understanding prejudices. In Malta, teachers expressed a unanimous need for educational materials fostering an empowering environment (n=11, 100%), aiding students in integrating into multicultural societies (n=11, 100%), and emphasizing human rights (n=11, 100%). Similarly, none of the Maltese teachers found any suggestions from the questionnaire not useful.

Portuguese educators highlighted the importance of materials facilitating student integration in multicultural societies (n=12, 100%), promoting academic success for all children (n=12, 100%), and emphasizing human rights (n=12, 100%). Remarkably, none of the Portuguese teachers considered any suggestions from the questionnaire as not useful.

Finally, Italian teachers underscored the significance of materials fostering an empowering environment, promoting academic success, aiding integration into multicultural societies, instilling civic-mindedness, and emphasizing human rights (n=10, 83%). Strikingly, none of the Italian teachers deemed any suggestions from the questionnaire as not useful. This collective perspective illuminates a consensus among educators across the surveyed regions regarding the perceived utility of resources in cultivating inclusive and effective learning environments.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The outcomes of the needs analysis phase within the RE.MA.C. project reveal a discernible trend wherein certain educators exhibit pre-established conceptualizations of culture, identity, and religion. It is imperative to address these preconceptions, as they may significantly impact pedagogical approaches. A return to a critical interculturality framework becomes essential, offering a lens through which the construction of difference and diversity can be analyzed within the context of a colonial framework [4]. Moreover, the findings underscore that educators frequently incorporate various facets of students' backgrounds and educational needs into their instructional strategies.

The dynamic and evolving nature of the student population emphasizes the necessity for comprehensive intercultural approaches. Such approaches are crucial for ensuring that forthcoming generations benefit from the educational goals we aspire to achieve for the current generation [6]. Furthermore, the data reveals a noteworthy willingness among teachers to acquire proficiency in students' mother tongues for classroom use. However, it is noteworthy that some instructors exhibit specific preferences regarding language varieties to be employed in the learning environment.

Nevertheless, scholarly literature advocates for a departure from rigid ideologies, particularly in social identity, including linguistic identity, within culturally diverse social contexts. The translanguaging theory, among other relevant theories, underscores the imperative for individuals, including educators, to transcend fixed conceptualizations and embrace fluidity in understanding social identities ([18], [19]). This paradigm shift is particularly salient in culturally diverse educational settings.

The RE.MA.C. initiative is oriented towards cultivating and advancing the imperative objective of empowering students to emerge as active participants within a democratic culture at the macro level. It emphasizes the cultivation of competencies for democratic culture and intercultural dialogue at the micro level, specifically within the school community [7]. A critical observation arising from the needs analysis phase highlights a discernible disparity among educators in their confidence levels regarding the development of competencies for democratic culture.

A substantial proportion of teachers lack the requisite confidence to instill competencies associated with democratic culture effectively. This discerned deficiency underscores a compelling requirement for educational materials that not only address this deficiency but also actively promote the integration of intercultural educational dimensions into routine teaching practices. This strategic intervention aims to bridge the existing gap and empower educators with the necessary tools and knowledge to instill competencies for democratic culture and foster intercultural dialogue within the microcosm of the school community. In alignment with the overarching goals of RE.MA.C. This initiative seeks to equip students with the essential skills and perspectives needed to actively participate as informed and engaged citizens within the broader landscape of democracy.

Regarding the educational material reviews, it was soon realized that all students are asked to participate in the same teaching experiences with very few exceptions. This realization stands far away from the main aspects of intercultural education [8]. None of the consortium's countries have any sort of linguistic provisions for multilingual students. Thus, it is as if we are admitting that to a large extent, these countries teach as if they had monolingual student populations in their mainstream classrooms, which couldn't be any further from the truth. Admittedly, culturally sensitive teaching was not present, and there were not enough examples of how these five countries' multilingual and multicultural character is presented in this educational material.

As in most research studies, it's always important to acknowledge and communicate its limitations. Following a transparent approach helps readers interpret the findings presented here more accurately

and understand the scope within which the conclusions can be applied. We should acknowledge that the consortium has realized that their participants were not fully acquainted with the terminology used in the questionnaire. Because this was a pilot phase, the number of participants was quite limited. Both the types of questions as well as the overall structure of the questionnaire have been addressed for the main data collection phase which is planned for February 2024.

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