# REPORT ON THE RESILIENCE CURRICULUM FOR EARLY YEARS AND PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN EUROPE (RESCUR).

# Summary

The Resilience Curriculum for Early Years and Primary Schools in Europe (RESCUR) is a three year LLP Comenius project (2012-2015) to enhance teacher practices, instructional content, and classroom environmentsin preschools and primary schools, and to help ensure that young children develop the skills needed for children’s mental health and wellbeing. This project particularly serves vulnerable children (Roma, refugee and migrant, as well as children with individual educational needs) to develop age-appropriate social and emotional learning and resilience skills. The project coordinated by the University of Malta reflects the collaboration of six European countries (Malta, Greece, Portugal, Sweden, Italy and Croatia) about the kinds of skills that young children must have to become resilient European citizens. These skills include developing communication skills, establishing and maintaining healthy relationships, developing a growth mindset, developing self-determination, building on strengths, and turning challenges into opportunities. These skills are delivered by classroom teachers on a regular basis based on the activities provided in the 3 manuals for teachers (early years, early primary school years and late primary school years) and one parents’ manual (early years-primary school). This report commends on the quality of the curriculum and on the instructional content and practices in preschool and primary classrooms. In general, the RESCUR meets the needs and the problems identified by the project partners. The activities are respondent to the objectives of the RESCUR, and relevant to the policies of the European Union in the field of education. The program consists of a very promising and certainly imperative response to the social, cultural and economic challenges faced by many European children in our days.

**Context of the report**

RESCUR project is in line with Comenius which seeks to enhance the quality and reinforce the European dimension of school education through the promotion of the intercultural dimension. The project promotes European collaboration and creates the platform for joint reflection and cooperation among 6 European countries in identifying innovation and best practice in the area of resilience.

A first way to review the RESCUR project is by making a report which describes the development of the range of aspects/activities as mentioned in the project manuals, in order to assess whether or not the project can be carried out as intended. In addition, since the review is made in a flexible rather than in a rigid way because of the developmental character of the Comenius project, it addresses some points to be specified to the project. Questions relevant for the review purposes are:

1. To what extent do the objectives of the RESCUR curriculum meet the needs identified?
2. Were the objectives of the project meaningful and feasible to the target groups?
3. To what extent do the RESCUR curriculum activities supported the objectives of the curriculum?
4. How these objectives were channeled to participants?
5. What is the potential impact of the project to the target groups?

### **Definition of the project aims**

Individuals from ethnic and cultural minorities, such as Roma, immigrants and refugees are at risk of school failure, social exclusion and mental health problems (European Commision, 2011). Children with educational needs such as disability and giftedness are also likely to face obstacles in their growth and development. Improving school curriculum to support the development of the competences needed so that young learners overcome challenges in their lives and achieve academic success and social and emotional well beings is the central focus of the RESCUR. Interestingly though the resilience curriculum did not only target the vulnerable children. It was developed to serve as a universal and inclusive program for all the children in the classroom and to be delivered by teachers as a key area in the general curriculum, fact that underlines its feasibility. The curriculum was also designed based on the spiral approach, for the ongoing cultivation of the resilient skills to students of different ages, fact that enhances its sustainability.

The objectives of the project followed a thorough theoretical review on resilient literature and are in accordance with the third Strategic Objective of the EU Council about the need to support for vulnerable groups starting from early childhood education. The RESCUR curriculum was designed to provide with resilience skills all children in the classroom against the risks of labelling and stigmatization. Its meaningfulness clearly arises from its aims to develop emotional bonds between school and family, define concrete limits of behavior, cultivate life skills and provide support in a context of high expectations for both students and teachers.

More specifically the curriculum had the following objectives:

* to develop and enhance children’s social and emotional learning and resilience skills
* to promote children’s positive and prosocial behavior and healthy relationships
* to promote children’s mental health and well-being, particularly those at risk of mental health difficulties
* to improve children’s academic engagement, motivation and learning

These objectivesseems to be rather innovative and imperative according to the existing body of knowledge. Project partners adequately incorporated the existing body of knowledge in the manuals, not in order to reproduce what has already been achieved with explicit and boring details for teachers and parents, but to surpass this in order to offer better solutions for their specific problems. Therefore, they explicitly defined 6 major themes in the curriculum, which had to be accompanied with teaching activities.

Some thoughts with regard to the point of departure might contribute to project improvements. Questions that are relevant here are:

**Guiding questions for defining the project aims, to be further specified to the project**

* Which procedures have been used to identify the 6 major themes in the curriculum?
* Did the definition of the themes really function as a beacon for developmental activities?
* Which aspects have been stressed in the point of departure (e.g.: possible course contents, target groups of the project, didactics or ways of operating and existing measures for vulnerable youth that are being applied within the school system)?
* Were there any possibilities for regular reflections on the aims of the project?
* “The aim is to follow the process, do not deviate from the goals, assess the results and encourage the continuation of the effort”. How the encouragement actually happened? Were there regular meetings among the participants?

The project was also geared towards teachers’ professional development and meeting their own needs. Teachers’ manual included a section about the school staff’s own resilience and well being. Interestingly, teachers’ own attitudes and perceptions were taken into consideration –key to the project effectiveness. However, some questions can be posed with regard to the project aims in terms of teachers’ role to the curriculum design and implementation:

**Guiding questions for defining the project aims, to be further specified to the project**

* Were the participating teachers involved in formulating the project aims?
* What kind of training on resilience did teachers receive?
* Was there any formula for continuing consultation for teachers in the implementation of the curriculum?
* How were teachers’ ethical dilemmas/stereotypes addressed?
* Were teachers given any guidelines when the aims of the activities were not reached within their classrooms?
* What was the level at which they could incorporate information (are they experts in the field of concern or not?)

### **Determination of ways to reach the project aims**

In line with the objectives, the activitiesof the curriculum were developed so that the cultivation of resilience skills could be continuous, taking in consideration the child’s age and developmental needs, in a SAFE approach. From the preschool to late years of primary school, the activities were organized under six common major themes, accompanied with age appropriate activities, to ensure for the project comprehensiveness and generalization. Although there is little information in the manuals regarding the criteria according to which the resilience skills were selected, and how the suggested activities were designed, it seems that they accurately address the objectives of the project. One could hardly envisage alternative classroom activities or approaches for achieving these objectives.

The activities were designed to be meaningful to children’s interests, in line with their developmental needs and definitely in respect to their individual cognitive and psychological needs. The multisensory activities offer fun, amusement, address various psychomotor skills, provide incentives for cooperation with home, while addressing at the same time their main goal which is to cultivate thoughtful and resilient people within a context of diversity and disability. These activities actually coincide and further expand the aims of the main curriculum. The activities enable innovation and best practice to be identified and encouraged in each of the thematic areas of the RESCUR. Followed by teacher training and explicit description of the activities resources to teachers and parents, we could envisage that the outcomes of the implementation of the activities would serve their goal in long term.

Classroom activities were designed for each of the six curriculum themes. The taught skills were explicitly described and the activities were formulated according to children interests. The activities ranged from basic in the early years to more complex in the late primary years and included three degrees of difficulty (basic, intermediate, advanced). The ways of teaching the project activities were described in the manuals to a certain degree, but there are questions remaining in terms of the implementation of the activities.

**Guiding questions for the ways to reach the project aims, to be further specified to the project**

* How were the activities selected (literature review/teachers’ suggestion/ project partners ideas)?
* How could these activities be carried out in practice? (duration/integrated in courses of the main curriculum/taught in extra hours)
* In what ways RESCUR was infused in other academic subjects? It was up to teachers to decide?
* Were teachers received training for “mindfulness” activities? Who composed the “mindfulness” music for the program?
* Were the assessment checklists given at the end of each activity, or were there any types of tactical assessment procedures for the taught skills?
* What guidelines were given to teachers to continue with the activities based on their students’ achievement level (basic, intermediate, advanced)?
* Resilience is a process and not a set of characteristics. Were there any assessment methods of the process?
* How flexible were teachers to change the activities? What was the kind of contribution they might make to a further distribution of what has been developed?
* What was the language in which the materials had to be presented (only native tongue when national target groups are at stake or in other languages in order to reach target groups in other countries)?
* Did participating teachers from the 6 countries had a network for exchanging experiences about the implementation of the activities?

**Target groups of the program dissemination**

The RESCUR addresses different target groups with similar, cost-effective ways: a) specific categories of students, b) whole school community, c) teachers and educational staff, d) families and e) European community. All these target groups could be approached with simple and suitable tasks adopted to their context, and provided with easy access to resources. RESCUR program activities were explicitly described to all the target groups (parents, teachers and students) in their “own language” providing the certainty that these aims could be meaningful, feasible and efficient as well.

The first and probably most direct impact the project could have is at school level. The suggested innovations had the potential to directly or indirectly influence the contents or didactics in the schools that were participating in the project. RESCUR aimed at developing a new educational approach for specific categories of students. In order to reach the widest possible public the program provided the educational staff with the abilities to either participate in teachers’ training courses or give them an insight into the merits of the new educational approach. The curriculum could also become an integral part of the school. This means that project groups could incorporate the innovations in their own schools and in associated schools.

What the project also aimed was to exert influence that goes beyond the school context. RESCUR activities provide the mean for reaching students’ families. Exerting a clear impact on families could be more difficult for the specific program. Nevertheless, the partners engaged in the program (students/teachers/family) have the information provided to tackle the issue of dissemination to students’ home. The project provided parents’ with a manual, with guidelines consistent with the resilient literature. This guide was not intended as a ready-made recipe for parents on how to raise resilient children. Rather, it was a guide introducing parents to the RESCUR program, and how they may contribute to the development of the resilience skills which children are learning at school. It was therefore a guide for home-school collaboration on building children resilience on the basis of RESCUR framework. In similar lines with teachers’ manual, parents’ manual was written in an explicit manner, with no rigid scientific language. The information presented in parents’ manual was clearly defined, easy to be understood by parents of different educational levels, while the information presented in teachers’ manual was more elaborate, and in analogy to their professional experience and training. The ways of using the project activities at home were described in the parents’ manual, but there are still some questions in terms of their implementation.

**Guiding questions for the ways to reach the project aims, to be further specified to the project**

* How were the activities/real life examples/focused stories selected (literature review/teachers’ or parents’ suggestion/ project partners ideas)?
* What was the parents’ role in take home activities (follow the instructions)?
* Were parents explicitly informed about the aims of the activities?
* How parents and teachers consent to a common perspective of the topics?
* Did parents receive any seminars/training on RESCUR?
* How RESCUR provided continuous support to students and parents (kind of asking help for parents in the manual)?
* What if parents had a different perspective from the one suggested by RESCUR, how were disagreements solved (how were resilience skills modeled in that case)?
* Were any assessment checklists given at the end of each activity, or were there any types of tactical assessment procedures for the taught skills by parents?
* What was the language in which the materials had to be presented (only native tongue when national target groups are at stake or in other languages in order to reach target groups in other countries)

Finally, the RESCUR had an impact on regular educational practice in the Member States. The project group is the initiator of the project activities and the nucleus for disseminating the results to a wider public. The project partners can take advantage of the day to day contacts with colleagues, students and eventually management and supporting staff to disseminate the project results in their own establishments. Additionally, the six European countries not only create an optimal basis and support for the activities of the project (manuals will be translated in 7 languages), but also optimally facilitate the dissemination process aimed at reaching other target groups as well.

## **Final comments on the project**

For reviewing the project potential impact we could lean heavily on the results of the pilots of newly developed materials. The newly developed curriculum was tested in actual practice. Each partner country implemented 1 theme of the curriculum over 6 weeks. Seventy nine early and primary schools, 205 classrooms, and 2895 students from 6 European countries, participated in the pilot process. A number of instruments were used to gather information about the effectiveness of the RESCUR program such as teachers’ reflective diaries, teachers’ interviews, classroom assessment checklist completed by teachers, learners’ focus groups and classroom observations. In general lines, the pilot process, revealed that teachers observed a moderate positive change in the learners’ behavior related to the theme implemented, learners were very excited, highly engaged and participated actively in the activities, parents adopted a positive attitude for the program, and finally the curriculum turned out to be a source of teachers’ personal and professional development. It seems from the very initial implementation of the project that it could provide greater than anticipated.

Another positive element is that the project’s main purpose was to develop a resilience curriculum for early and primary education in Europe through the intercultural and transnational collaboration among the partner institutions. This type of international cooperation and exchange of experiences is by itself the best “activity” for resilience.

As is often said “programs don’t change people – relationships do.” Although we cannot expect that all affiliate schools will produce positive, fruitful relationships with everyone involved in the RESCUR, we can at least expect that the curriculum will delineate *what* kinds of relationships need to be developed, and *how*. Through RESCUR a large number of students are receiving prevention and early intervention that promote positive behaviors, provide academic enrichment, and promote the importance of staying in school and getting an education. For those at greatest risk for social and academic failure, RESCUR provides a safety net to keep these students from falling through the cracks. For some students, these targeted, sustained activities result in positive changes in academic performance and other outcomes; and for others, these activities may be the only thing keeping these students in school and their “head above water”. New directions and their outcomes however, - as is always the case with new directions - cannot be predicted in advance. After pilot evaluation and across the participating countries, we could anticipate that RESCUR will work, and it will work best when it will be implemented with fidelity to the resilience framework and with intentionality. The next step is to ensure “high” implementation of the curriculum, consistency and sustainability of the project participants, and finally the delivery of integrated student support within every school across the 6 European countries. According to a participant teacher “there is not golden recipe to build resilience in children, but I am sure that this program is a very good way to do so”

**What Remains to be studied: some suggestions**

As with any research study, in addition to answering the key questions you set out to address, the results always lead us in new directions or point to additional areas worthy of investigation. Possible areas of continued study include:

1. Identifying an optimal balance of whole‐school and targeted and sustained services, including an examination of optimal dosage of service necessary to achieve positive change in key academic and social and emotional outcomes for students with different risk profiles.

1. While prevention and intervention programs are essentially tasked with preventing students’ academic and social indicators, more work is needed to understand how long it takes for specific programs to take effect (from preschool to elementary school). Of course, trajectories of outcomes differ for individual students, so any work in this area will need to be grounded with detailed information, including qualitative interviews and case notes, describing student characteristics and tendencies, including measures of resiliency.