

Answers submitted by the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking International Consortium

The answers to the eight questions below are submitted on behalf of the *Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking International Consortium (RWCT IC)*, a legally registered network of educational NGOs including members from across Eastern and Central Europe, and other continents (see www.rwct.net).

Contact for RWCT IC:

Maria Kovacs

Executive Director

6/22, Luceafarului St

400343 – Cluj-Napoca

Romania

Tel: 0040 745 397 612

Fax: 0040 264 438684

Question No. 1: How can schools be organised in such a way as to provide all students with the full range of key competences?¹

A1. We believe that it is paramount that schools Europe-wide should provide all students with the key competences laid down in the European Reference Framework on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning. The competences should be more accurately defined than they currently are in the Framework, and widely accepted instruments for measuring them should be in place. To develop the competences, the first thing to do is lay much more emphasis on *how* teaching is done, and as a consequence *how* students learn, and significantly reduce emphasis on content teaching.

A2. In order for schools to develop the above-mentioned key competencies, the school curricula should be built around those 11 key competences. Once various levels of competence are defined, the curriculum could be designed for the various age groups. We believe that such radical school reform could only be achieved by involving both initial and in-service teacher training institutions, because at present there is too wide a gap between what teachers are taught at the university, and what they are expected to do once they start teaching. Overwhelmingly rich theory and very little practice during initial training, and lack of institutionally provided support during the beginning years of a teacher's career are the defining aspects of initial teacher training in many EU countries.

A3. European cooperation could be effective in more widely promoting the key competences, and in precisely defining the various levels of competence (e.g. like in the case of foreign language competence).

Question No. 2: How can schools equip young people with the competences and motivation to make learning a lifelong activity?

A1.² I think that schools should provide more instruction time for the students to practice their social competences, which is expected from the new School Act (in Slovakia). More

¹ Answers to this question were provided by teachers in Romania.

² Most of the ideas in this paragraph were offered by Helena Nagyova, Basic School Bratislava

Answers submitted by the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking International Consortium

time for group work and project work is needed in schools. These forms of work develop competences of meaningful reading, writing, searching for information from multiple resources, communication skills, and other social skills (asking for help, helping others, etc.). The student must be provided choices, and at the same time the chance to practice adjusting oneself to others. I think that such activities allow students to experience both the pleasure of learning and success, rather than frustration and disillusion. For example, young students who start learning foreign languages: it is important not to disappoint and discourage them at the beginning. Happiness in learning is a powerful motivation for developing rewarding learning habits, including lifelong learning skills.

A2.³ Our membership in the European Union gives us a lot, but also expects a lot from us. The time when a person completed school, got employed and retired from the same job as s/he got after finishing school is over. The Slovaks, step by step, realize that lifelong learning is necessary for them to survive. However, only about 5% of the adult population is in education, which is far behind the EU average and the expectation that about 12.5% of adults will be involved in a form of adult education by the year 2010. This is why also the philosophy of basic education should change in terms of the lifelong learning. Instead of the encyclopaedic knowledge, students should be practicing competences that enable them to apply knowledge in life and prospectively on the labour market. The school's role is to equip students with the key competencies. The teacher's main role is to motivate students for learning, and guide their learning, their inquiries. Students need to see from real life examples that also adult people learn all their lives, and that the learning process continues also at work, and who is the best to model this than the teachers? Therefore, teachers' continuous professional development is crucial.

A3.⁴ Students should have such teachers who are able to involve them actively in the learning process through scientifically founded teaching strategies, so that children themselves feel the need to learn, want to know more, want to become independent, and responsible learners, and finally show them benefits and meaning of being competent. This is why it is necessary to support teachers in their creativity, provide them good conditions, and also give them opportunities for in-service, lifelong learning.

A4.⁵ The schools need to emphasise the development of cognitive, social, inter-cultural, and personal competences, which will prepare students for their life in nowadays' society. However, how can we motivate students so that learning becomes a lifelong activity for them? Some ideas:

- the approach to students should change so that students feel like the teacher's partners;
- the students should feel that the teachers care about their opinions and are interested in their experiences, conceptions, and understanding. In order for the students to share their opinions, learning tasks should be such that they require the students to offer their opinions, and facilitate the students' opinion-formation process.

³ Most of the ideas in this paragraph were offered by Emília Hlobenová, Basic School Trnava.

⁴ Most of the ideas in this paragraph were offered by Renáta Vávrová, Trnava University, Trnava.

⁵ Most of the ideas in this paragraph were offered by Viera Jakubovská, Constantine the Philosopher University, Nitra.

Answers submitted by the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking International Consortium

A5.⁶ I think it is very important that teachers are aware of their responsibilities toward the students and toward the society when they take on the job of teaching. In addition, the schools should create such working conditions for the teachers that they would not burn out so easily.

A6.⁷ The school should:

- develop students' positive attitude towards learning and gaining new knowledge;
- be the place where students are happy and joyful because they are involved in learning and have choices;
- help students to realize that learning (and lifelong learning) is a meaningful activity and that being better means to have a better job, which means a better life;
- convince students that learning is something natural and necessary (through effective methods and forms that are experience-based);
- show students how to learn, offer them resources and guidance, modelling;
- assist students to be able to select the important from unimportant and critically evaluate information;
- cooperate with families and the community to help them understand that new approaches in education help develop young people not only cognitively, but also socially, and prepare them for lifelong learning through developing their competences (independent learning, communicating, team work, etc.)

Teachers should:

- be more careful not to present themselves before the students as the only and unmistakable sources of information. If teachers see themselves in a realistic light, they will know that they themselves need to learn throughout their lives.

A7.⁸ The school should:

- teach students to find information by themselves;
- lead students to be more independent in learning;
- encourage and support young students' inquisitiveness, and their natural drive to discover and learn;
- create a pleasant and safe school environment;
- modernize forms, methods and strategies of school work;
- reduce memorizing and change the goals and ways of evaluation;
- change curriculum and replace the overwhelming theory with more practical activities;
- develop students' critical thinking by evoking their prior knowledge, facilitating their connection-making between personal experiences and the topic to be studied, build on students' willingness to learn, ask them to formulate and express their opinions, to be able to make choices and decisions, and solve real-life problems;
- motivate students to read
- lead students to take responsibility for their learning;
- increase the teachers' status in society;
- be allowed to develop its own curricula;

⁶ These ideas were offered by Jana Kotrusová, Basic School, Nové Zámky.

⁷ These ideas were offered by teachers from the Basic School of Banská Bystrica.

⁸ These ideas were offered by teachers from the Basic School of Zilina.

Answers submitted by the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking International Consortium

Question No. 3: How can school systems contribute to supporting long-term sustainable economic growth in Europe?⁹

Schools should be prepared to equally provide education about development, for development, and as development. The labour force should be flexible: schools should provide the kind of education which prepares people – psychologically and in terms of skills – to be mobile on the labour market. Students should be explicitly taught what it means to be a flexible and mobile labour market actor.

Schools should make sure to teach students the basics of sustainable development: planning one's life, healthy living, being careful with the resources we have (not taking them for granted) and all that is around us, recycling all that can be recycled.

Question No. 4: How can school systems best respond to the need to promote equity, to respond to cultural diversity and to reduce early school leaving?¹⁰

Each system has to have very clear policy or at least strategic guidelines to prevent early school learning. No policy document will work unless they it is followed suit by realistic programmes and the necessary means (financial, technical and human resources), or unless schools and communities support each other.

European practice shows that early school leaving can be effectively reduced by investing in early childhood education, when schools and local communities work in close cooperation using the following strategies:

At the school level:

- Systematic monitoring of school attendance;
- Immediate reaction to absence from school, including reporting to parents, class teachers, administration, etc;
- Professional consultancy to children, parents, teachers and other school staff, approaching the issue with a view to solve the roots of the problem, not the consequences;
- Constant revision of existing prevention programmes, applied tools and strategies;
- Attention to environment and microclimate of the school;
- Support for well working teachers, school specialists.

At the community level:

- Working in mixed community groups on the issue (parents, child protection centres, law enforcement agencies, etc.);
- Clear communication plans among community members;
- Sharing good practice examples among communities;

At the national level:

- More freedom granted to schools, and trusting that responsibility will follow;
- Constant monitoring and analysis of effectively working strategies (data collection);
- Support transmission of “know-how” strategies to other schools and communities;

⁹ Answers to this question were provided by teachers in Romania.

¹⁰ Answers to this question were provided by teachers in Lithuania.

Answers submitted by the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking International Consortium

- Review of curriculum, obligatory school programmes in order to reduce academic failure as one of the factors of early school leaving;
- Financial support for the best school prevention programmes and best teachers (based on the recommendations of the school and of the local community);

General recommendation: to work cooperatively on developing a positive, supportive school atmosphere that every child dreams about: “Dream school has to be filled by pleasant communication with teachers and friends.” (Civinskas *et al*, Vengianciu lankyti mokykla vaiku problemos ir poreikiai, 2006)

Question No. 5: If schools are to respond to each pupil's individual learning needs, what can be done as regards curricula, school organisation and the roles of teachers?¹¹

Schools should support each child to fulfil their own potential. The curriculum – if built around the key competences, and broken down by levels of competence – should allow for an individual pace of coverage, and the teachers’ priority should be to best support each student to fulfil his or her own potential. To this end, middle schools and above should provide much more choice for students in terms of what they would like to study.

Governments that still condition students’ moving from one year to the next by reaching a certain score should stop this practice. It is counterproductive because it discourages students, and disappoints parents, and instead of helping students improve, all this system of promotion from one year to the next does is burden teachers.

Question No. 6: How can school communities help to prepare young people to be responsible citizens, in line with fundamental values such as peace and tolerance of diversity?¹²

School communities can best help young people to be responsible citizens by constantly modelling responsible citizenship – starting with the adults in the school. If responsible citizenship is translated into concrete examples, and children are helped to practice those concrete situations where responsible citizenship can be demonstrated, and if actions of responsible citizenship are rewarded by teachers, children will indeed learn the value, and not only give it lip service.

The values of peace and tolerance should pervade the curriculum; it is not enough to just explicitly teach them by teaching content which is related to peace and tolerance of diversity. First and foremost, teachers and all adults in the school should model peace and tolerance, as well as acceptance of diversity. In the classroom, teachers should be able to model peace-making and acceptance of diversity including by formulating learning tasks that require polite discussion, collaboration, and opinion formation based on informed judgment.

Question No. 7: How can school staff be trained and supported to meet the challenges they face?¹³

¹¹ Answers to this question were provided by teachers in Romania.

¹² Answers to this question were provided by teachers in Romania.

Answers submitted by the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking International Consortium

School staff needs to be prepared to regard continuous professional development as part of their career as teachers. It is paramount to have a system which carefully identifies training needs, and makes teachers aware that what they teach and how they teach it are equally important.

Teachers are given too little if any support at the beginning of their career. There is too little practical preparation as part of pre-service training. A careful mentoring scheme should be in place, with a mentor who guides the beginning teachers' reflection on their own practice, and demonstrates, models them ways of improving.

Schools should periodically conduct training needs analyses on the entire school staff, and ask for tailored training that responds to their precise needs. The impact of such training should be carefully monitored and evaluated.

Schools should be encouraged to promote professional discussion groups so as to develop a teachers' learning community. In addition, a transparent and accepted system of quality management should be in place, with clear performance indicators, and well-articulated expectations from the school staff.

Question No. 8: How can school communities best receive the leadership and motivation they need to succeed? How can they be empowered to develop in response to changing needs and demands?¹⁴

The United Nations announced 2005-2015 as the decade of education for sustainable development. It is understood as a shared responsibility for safe educational and community environment, as the capacity of a system to engage in the continuous improvement of human beings. Sustainable development goes hand in hand with sustainable leadership. There are several important principles that schools and communities have to follow in order to be successful:

- To follow short term targets but to design realistic plans;
- To concentrate on what they judge as the important and work on it in depth;
- To spread good practise examples, to spread knowledge and skills – let others know what they want to do and what they have achieved;
- To network with other school communities – look at what one school can give the other, and what it can get from the other;
- To respect diversity – different views, opinions – and to take into account diverse opinions before making any decisions;
- To take care of resources;
- To learn lessons from the past – study what has been done and learn from others' experiences, from what has been achieved already, before starting anything new;
- To better be slow in progress than quick in achievements.

¹³ Answers to this question were provided by teachers in Romania.

¹⁴ Answers to this question were provided by teachers in Lithuania.

Answers submitted by the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking International Consortium

In order to be successful, school communities have to feel free and responsible. They have to learn to plan, to implement their plans, and reflect on what has been achieved, then – if necessary – revise their plans based on candid self-evaluation and self-reflection.

Nowadays, schools are too overwhelmed with reaching long-term objectives, administering tests and getting through controls imposed and designed by agencies or groups outside of the school, with the ensuing paperwork. In many cases, schools lose sense of their real mission – education as a learning process.

Needs and demands have to be reviewed critically in the light of reality and possibilities. Too high expectations make great damage to the individual child and teacher, to the school and ultimately to the community.

About the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking International Consortium

Mission

The RWCT International Consortium provides professional development opportunities for educators who bring up highly motivated and well-educated citizens capable of critical thinking, setting and achieving their own and community goals, and bearing social responsibility.

Goals

As a network of nongovernmental organizations, building on the efforts of our members, we strive for:

- quality education for all;
- democratic society;
- educators to become promoters of critical, creative, and caring thinking;
- educators, students and parents to become active participants in the learning process aimed at successfully meeting the challenges of the 21st century;
- effective collaboration between schools and the communities they serve;
- citizens to become lifelong learners, as a means of coping with an ever-changing world.

RWCT IC proudly offers the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking program to all interested educators. The Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking Program is a professional development program for teachers, which – among others – earned the recognition of the International Bureau for Education as one of the ten best peace-education programs. For more about the RWCT program, please, visit www.rwct.net.