

ACTive Citizenship Projects to Enhance Pupils' Social and Civic Competences

**QUALITATIVE EVALUATION
NATIONAL REPORT
FRANCE**

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Contents

Introduction

1. The ACT protocol and its implementation in the classrooms

- 1.1. Teacher selection and training
- 1.2. The protocol
- 1.3. Varied conditions for implementation
- 1.4. Assessment of completed projects

2. A program that contributes to learning citizenship

- 2.1. Approaching citizenship differently
- 2.2. Project experience

3. Issues and limits of the pedagogical stance behind the ACT project

- 3.1. Is it possible to avoid the vertical teacher-student relationship?
- 3.2. Unequal dispositions for autonomy
- 3.3. A program that trains teachers in active pedagogy

Conclusion

Introduction

The ACT-Project (Active Citizenship Training, reinforcing students civic and social competences through active citizenship) is an international program for secondary students aged 13 to 15, and their teachers. It is designed to promote active citizenship among students. As part of the program (and after the teachers have received specific training), the students conceptualise, choose, and implement civic projects. They define the objectives of their projects and the means to carry them out, their only constraint being to situate their project in one of these three themes: cultural diversity, social inclusion, or the fight against discrimination.

The hypothesis behind this program is that students' active participation in setting up civic projects will improve the transmission of fundamental values (democracy and citizenship, social and civic skills). The objective of the ACT Project is therefore to allow students to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to become active citizens in their schools and their communities. It also seeks to engage teachers to adopt more horizontal teaching strategies so that they can provide their students the opportunity to practice active citizenship in the classroom and in the school.

The ACT Project is funded by the European Commission's Erasmus+ initiative.¹ It is implemented in conjunction with government ministries, research centres, and public bodies in the United Kingdom, France, Greece, and Spain.² The program is based on a specific protocol that participating teachers in the different countries must follow, and its application and effects are measured by research teams. It will be implemented over three years (2017-2020):

- The pilot phase (2017-2018) enabled the testing and improvement of the protocol;
- The deployment phase (2018-2019) consisted in implementing the program in schools and assessing it;
- The analysis phase (2019-2020) is dedicated to the research teams in the different countries processing, analysing, and collaborating on results (including the results presented in this report).

In France, the program was implemented in the education *academies*³ of Aix-Marseille, Amiens, Nancy-Metz, Nantes, Orléans-Tours, and Versailles.³

¹ The funding of the ACT program falls under *Key Action 3: support policy reform* and aims to “stimulate innovative policy development, policy dialogue and implementation, and the exchange of knowledge in the fields of education, training and youth.”

² Project coordinator: CIEP, France. Partner institutions: Ministry of Education and Youth, France; Ministry of Education, and Vocational Training, Spain; Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs, Greece; Department of Education, United Kingdom; British Council, United Kingdom; Paris School of Economics, France; London School of Economics and Political Science, United Kingdom; European Foundation for Society and Education, Spain; Sciences Po Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France; University of Athens, Greece; Institute for Educational Policy, Greece.

³ “Academies” is the term used in France to refer to an administrative unit regrouping a number of education authorities in a particular geographic area. They oversee teacher training, organization, and applying national education policy at the local and regional levels (in collaboration with local authorities responsible for different aspects of the education system). They are managed by a *recteur* who is appointed directly by the President. For ease of reading we have chosen to use the term regional education authorities as an approximate equivalent.

The action research program

The ACT Project is an action research project of which the analysis has two distinct aspects:

- A quantitative aspect: in all participating countries, the teachers who volunteered to participate in ACT were randomly assigned to one of two groups:
 - the teachers in the test group received the training and implemented the program in their classes during the deployment phase;
 - the teachers in the control group did not receive the training: their participation in the program was deferred until 2019-2020.

- A qualitative aspect: in each country a research team conducted a qualitative study on the project's deployment in their country. This research is based on in-depth monitoring of the implementation of the ACT Project in a small number of schools, through:
 - interviews with school principals, teachers, and students participating in the project;
 - observation of sessions dedicated to the ACT project.

Methodology

The research team at the Chair of Citizenship at Sciences Po Saint-Germain-en-Laye selected ten schools in which the project was implemented (test group). Establishments were chosen with a view to constituting a sample that was diverse in several respects:

- the schools selected are situated in five different regional education authorities (out of the six participating in the project);
- five of the 10 establishments selected are part of the REP network (*Réseaux d'éducation prioritaire*, priority education with additional means for schools in disadvantage areas), and three are in the REP+ network (*Réseaux d'éducation prioritaire renforcés*, for schools in extremely disadvantaged areas).
- The project is carried out in *4ème* (third year secondary school, when students are roughly aged 13) in six of the schools, and in *3ème* (fourth year secondary school, when students are roughly aged 14) in four schools.
- The projects are conducted by teachers (or pairs of teachers) from different disciplines.
- The schools also vary in size (from 249 to 731 students), their geographical situation (urban, semi-urban, or rural), the average score on the National Diploma (*le brevet*) which is sat by students in *3ème*, at age 14 (scores ranging from 10 to 13), and the proportion of students from socially-economically privileged backgrounds (between 4% and 37%).

Research materials

Although the study was implemented in ten schools, fifteen teachers and twelve projects were monitored in total. The conditions for the deployment of the ACT project varied according to

the school:

- In four schools, a single teacher attended training and a single class participated in the ACT Project (one teacher → one class).
- In four schools, a pair of teachers attended training and one class participated in the ACT Project (two teachers → one class).
- In one school, two teachers attended the training and each of them involved their class in the ACT Project (two teachers → two classes).
- In one school, one teacher attended the training and had their two classes (4ème) participate in the ACT project (one teacher → two classes).

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

- Interviews with school principals: 8 interviews.
- Interviews with teachers at the beginning of the project: 14 interviews (with the teachers who received training, either individually or in pairs, before or at the beginning of the implementation of the project in their classes).
- Interviews with the teachers at the end of the project: 12 interviews (individually or in pairs, conducted at the end of the school year).
- Focus groups with students: 17 focus groups (with groups of 3 to 7 students).
- Observations: 28 observations (sessions of 1 hour or an event associated with the realisation of the project).

In addition to this, there were innumerable email exchanges, conversations (by telephone or in person) with the teachers. The research teams also attended several training sessions with the teachers and had access to a digital platform designed for exchanges between the teachers and the ACT teacher trainers.

These interviews, as well as the presence of the research team in certain sessions helped valorise the ACT Project in the eyes of the students and the teachers, which possibly created a slight bias. It is possible that the presence of the research team reinforced the students' motivation and that the teachers may have been more careful in respecting the protocol. A second possible bias identified by the researchers is the non-representativity of the students who participated in the focus groups: those who volunteered were often among the most active in setting up their civic project. Although this selection bias produces an imbalance in the population of the study, the students interviewed had different profiles nevertheless.

Objectives and outline of the assessment report

This report, which provides the qualitative assessment of the implementation of the ACT Project in France, aims to enable it to be compared to the assessment of the project in other countries, and also to be associated with the quantitative aspect of this action-research project. It therefore constitutes an element of the overall assessment of the ACT Project. It also fulfils a second objective, this time at the national level: to provide useful analysis of the implementation of similar programs, shedding light on their pedagogical advantages as well as on the obstacles and limits associated with their application in the French context. In particular

the ACT Project will be continued in France beyond the year 2019-2020 in a simplified form (the “protocol” will be abandoned in favour of proposed “activities”), as a training program that could be proposed as part of the standard teacher training by regional education authorities. This report therefore aims to shed light on the actors involved in the continuation of the program.

The first part of the report presents the pedagogical framework of the project and describes the way it was implemented in the classes observed, in order to give the reader an overview of the ACT Project as it took shape in the field. The second part looks at the contribution of this program to citizenship education and presents its effects on the students. Finally, the third part analyses the issues, the advantages, and the limits of the program’s pedagogical position.

1. The ACT protocol and its implementation in the classrooms

The implementation of the ACT program is based on a two-day training program for the teachers who volunteered to participate, during which they received a specific protocol that they then used to deploy the program in their classes. The first part of this report presents the process of selecting and training teachers, as well the protocol that they had to apply. It also assesses the implementation of the program in the schools studied by the research team.

1.1. Teacher selection and training

The teachers who volunteered to participate in the ACT program were recruited through the regional education authorities, most often via a group email calling for volunteers. Different people received this email in different areas; in some education authorities it was sent to school principals, in others to history-geography teachers, and in still others it was sent to teachers’ associations focusing on issues related to these themes. The content of these emails also differed depending on the authority, but they were all quite short and relatively vague about the objectives of this training. This means that the teachers enrolled in the training program without really knowing what it would cover, other than that it involved the students independently producing a “civic project”. This form of recruitment had certain consequences for the profile of the teachers who volunteered to participate:

- Firstly, these teachers were primarily history-geography teachers, not only because this discipline was specifically targeted for participation by certain education authorities, but also because the teachers spontaneously associated the theme of citizenship with Civic and Moral Education (EMC - a subject that is taught in French high schools by history-geography teachers). A small proportion of participants, however, taught other disciplines and were generally paired with another teacher and/or were the home teacher for the class they implemented it with.
- Secondly, this form of recruitment attracted teachers who were already experienced with and sensitive to pedagogical experiments. Not all teachers are interested in this kind of training, nor want to experiment with projects in their classes. The reluctance of teachers who were not used to pedagogical experiments may have been accentuated by the fact that they were encouraged to sign up for the project without really knowing what it consisted of. As a result, the teachers participating in the ACT Project were either already used to experimenting or wanted to experiment with the new teaching

practices. They are therefore not representative of teachers in general – but given that this project is based on the teachers volunteering, this specificity should not be considered as “selection bias” but rather simply as a characteristic of the actors in the program which must be taken into account in the analysis.

The teachers who volunteered were randomly selected (see the description of the methodology in the introduction) to be part of the “test group” and followed the training program in the first trimester of 2018. This training was provided at the education authority level and brought together roughly a dozen teachers per session. It was designed to both explain the protocol to be implemented and train the teachers to use more active teaching practices in assisting the students with their projects. The first day was dedicated to discovery and implementation, putting the teachers in the role of students: the teachers were testing activities that they would then later use with their students (in the preliminary activities, see below). On the second day, a more “lecture-style” approach was dedicated to the presentation of the protocol and the transmission of the various tools for animating exchanges and debates

1.2. The protocol

The protocol implemented in the classrooms was made up of three distinct phases:

- Preliminary Activities: a first group of activities was designed to allow teachers to initiate the compulsory lesson plans (see below) with the students. These activities aimed to present the ACT project and methods for project work. The teachers were free to choose which activities they wanted to use in the classrooms. They covered the following subjects: basic rules for group work; holding debates; introduction to self-assessment and peer-assessment; the use of student portfolios.
- Compulsory lesson plans: the teachers were obliged to follow three lesson plans, although had they had a certain leeway in how long each lasted, in order to be able to adapt to the rhythm of different classes. The students were randomly divided into small groups and remained in the same group during the whole of this second phase.
 - The first session, entitled “Introduction to the ACT project” was dedicated to the presentation of the program: its framework, its objectives, themes, and organisation. It was divided into several activities (roughly 2 hours total), which aimed to have the students think about the notion of citizenship; raise their awareness of the skills that they already possess in terms of project management (for example to organise an outing); to take into account their expectations and representations in the area of citizenship; to define what a civic project is and what it is based on; and to specify what the ACT project is and the working themes of the civic projects (see below).
 - The second session was dedicated to the “the elaboration of proposals for civic projects” (one hour). At the end of the session, each group of students had to have a proposal for a civic project they could present to the rest of the class. The only constraints given to the students were as follows: the proposals had to be based on one of the three themes of the ACT project (social inclusion, cultural diversity, and the fight against discrimination); they also had to be realistic, feasible, and authorised in the school setting.

- The third session, entitled “vote on civic project proposals”, in fact included three stages (1 hour to 1.5 hours overall): 1) the groups presented their civic project proposals to the class; 2) the class voted on the project that would be implemented at the end of the year; 3) the teacher and the class worked together to decide how to incorporate the best elements of the other projects into the conception of the chosen project, in order to involve and motivate all the students to participate in the selected project.
- Implementation of civic projects: once the projects had been defined, the protocol was very flexible. The teachers had to assist students in bringing their projects to fruition; the way in which they monitored and supervised this depended on the project selected. Certain activities were nevertheless proposed to help the students in completing their projects (distribution of tasks, research, etc.). Teachers were explicitly asked to not impose their point of view or their ideas, and to not “act and think for the students”, the role being to guide students and oversee the sessions.

The students also had a “portfolio” which was to accompany them throughout the program. This had several sections: one dedicated to the presentation of the student and their role in the project; one for the description of the civic project; a GANTT chart (a list of activities and planning), and finally a “skills booklet” this in which various skills are listed for self-evaluation, peer evaluation, and evaluation by the teacher. Finally, the students were presented with a diploma at the end of the year attesting to their participation in the program.

Exchanges with the teachers and class observations suggest that most teachers respected the protocol, with only slight adaptations (lengthening certain sessions, minor additions or modifications to certain activities), the trainers having emphasized the importance of consistency between practices, particularly for the validity of the action research. However, although the teachers were initially interested in the principle of peer-evaluation, the portfolios, which were considered too dense and difficult for the students to appropriate were ultimately not often used (most of the teachers printed them out, used them at the beginning, and then abandoned them). The research team was therefore unable to observe any project that incorporated the evaluation of skills.

1.3. Varied conditions for implementation

The projects were carried out in very different contexts, not only because of the variations in the profiles of the actors involved (whether the students were in *4ème* or *3ème*, the teachers were alone or in pairs, the different disciplines, etc.), but also because of the concrete conditions in which they were implemented:

- The projects conducted by the history-geography teachers (who were in the majority) were often prepared during the classes dedicated to civic and moral education (EMC);
- Those conducted by the class’s home teacher (this was generally the case for teachers in disciplines other than history-geography, were generally conducted during class time;
- In two schools, the projects were conducted during specific class time that was added to the students’ timetables: in the first case, a timeslot dedicated to “temporary

activities” was occasionally used by the teachers for the ACT project, in addition to sessions conducted during class time; in the second case, the students in 3^{ème} had a one-hour timeslot dedicated to project work (the civic project only being one possibility among others) – in this school, the group participating in the ACT project was a group of students from different classes.

The number of hours that teachers were able to dedicate to the ACT project therefore depended on these conditions, but also on the year level of the students (teachers being more reluctant to sacrifice an hour of class for students in 3^{ème}). Moreover, the teachers sometimes monitored the projects through ten-minute “check-ins” with the teacher at the beginning or end of class, rather than whole sessions. Aside from sessions held during class time, some teachers also organised “exceptional” sessions (particularly in the run-up to the realization of the projects), for which they were not paid, outside the students’ class hours. Similarly, the realisation of projects often took place during events or outings outside class hours. Moreover, in two schools, the students themselves organised working sessions without the teachers, during study hours for example (but also sometimes before or after class).

For these different reasons it is difficult to calculate the time required for the ACT project. Teachers dedicated at least five hours (in a 3^{ème} class in which the students were completely independent once the project has been decided on) and at the most 35 hours (in one specific case where there was a specific timeslot allocated for the completion of the project). But in most cases, it can be estimated that the class time dedicated to the project was between 10 and 15 hours (not counting the time that students potentially spent on it without the teacher present).

1.4. Assessment of completed projects

A diverse range of projects

The table below provides a list of the different civic projects monitored by the research team, to provide the reader an overall vision of the implementation of the program.

Theme (as it was identified at the beginning)	Initial project	Result
Cultural diversity	Organisation of a day celebrating cultural diversity (“World Delicacies”) for the families at the school	Modification of the project: the day became an evening restricted to the families of the students in the class.
Cultural diversity	Organisation of a festival of culture	Project abandoned due to a lack of enthusiasm among students in other classes
Social inclusion	Intergenerational exchange in a retirement home	Project successful but only seven students participated
Social inclusion	Collection of donations in supermarkets for homeless people	Modification of the project: the collection was held at the school
	Multi-aspect project to help foreign	Project abandoned due to lack of

Theme (as it was identified at the beginning)	Initial project	Result
Social inclusion	language students at school (tutoring, games, additions to the library)	motivation; tensions among the teachers.
Social inclusion	Multi-aspect project relating to homelessness (donations, food stalls, awareness-raising etc.).	Several aspects of the project were successful, others were not completed.
Social inclusion	Donations for homeless people: creation of a "donation box".	Project redefined: the box became a call for donations in a supermarket to be used by an association working with homeless people.
Social inclusion	Activities in a retirement home to promote the inclusion of the elderly in society.	Project successful; although it was essentially limited to organising a bingo game.
Fight against discrimination and social inclusion	Activities to raise awareness about discrimination in a primary school.	Project successful but only nine students participated in the action.
Fight against discrimination	Awareness raising in several primary schools.	Project successful; but was only carried out in one school.
Fight against discrimination	Project to create videos to raise awareness and condemn prejudice.	Partial success: the editing on some videos was not completed and no form of distribution was identified.
Fight against discrimination	Theatrical intervention in the final grade of several primary schools.	Project successful; but the project was only carried out in one school.

The students therefore chose projects that covered a range of subjects and that were destined at a variety of audiences. It is important to note that there is a certain similarity between the themes and forms of action chosen by the students. The two projects on cultural diversity for example took the form of an event aiming to draw attention to the different cultures present in the class or in the school. Similarly, projects relating to donations for the homeless was a frequent mode of action for projects in the area of social inclusion. Finally, projects concerning the fight against discrimination systematically took the form of awareness raising activities (by video or class presentations).

This table also reveals the variety of results among the different projects:

- The completed projects (7 projects out of 12): most of the projects were successful and took the form that was initially planned. However, the initial objectives were often reduced, either for internal reasons linked to student participation (for example video editing that required the mobilisation of a single student) or for external reasons linked to partner organizations (for example the organisation of a bingo imposed by the retirement home instead of the activities planned by the students).
- The modified projects (3 projects out of 12): certain projects were modified over the course of the year. They were completed, but with a different result than the one initially planned.

They can be distinguished from the previous group by the discrepancy between the original project voted on and the project ultimately produced. These “changes in the program” sometimes resulted from the realisation that the forms of action initially chosen (for example distributing gift boxes) were not appropriate for the objectives of the project (providing concrete assistance to homeless people). In other cases, the projects were redefined because it did not seem possible to achieve the initial objectives in the timeframe because of various obstacles.

- The abandoned projects: only two projects were not completed. In both cases the abandonment was due to obstacles within the school itself: either among the students in the class (the core group of students invested in the project was not large enough to generate a fruitful group dynamic); but also among students of other classes (whose cooperation was solicited but who showed little enthusiasm for the project); and also among the teachers (little investment by the teacher responsible for the project and/or tensions in the school generating obstacles for the project). It is worth noting that the various obstacles are unexceptional and that they were also encountered in other schools. It was the accumulation of these issues that was decisive for the projects that were abandoned.

Recurrent stages in the projects

Most of the projects observed in the schools saw similar evolutions, that can be roughly divided into three major phases.

- The launch phase: dynamic and structured. The program launch created a certain emulation in the classrooms; the preliminary activities, and compulsory lesson plans proved to be enjoyable and well structured. The teachers respected the different stages of the protocol, which they considered reassuring, and the students were generally enthusiastic about the activities and the prospect of producing a project.
- The project definition phase: punctuated by pauses and fluctuations. The phase that followed the vote on the project proved to be more difficult for the students and for the teachers. It was during this period that the shape of the project took form and that the students were asked to break down and stagger their methods of action. These activities, often conducted during class, proved to be extremely time-consuming. The initial dynamic and enthusiasm waned somewhat because the students felt they were not progressing, and the teachers did not always know how to help them. Following this period of wavering, there was a generally a pause in the project’s progress, which could result from obstacles linked to its organisation (for example students’ difficulty in contacting an association). In the projects that were observed, these pauses lasted between three weeks and more than two months. It was during this phase that the project was potentially redefined or abandoned. Certain teachers then conducted a vote to decide what the project would become.
- The progress phase: acceleration and concretization. Towards the end of the school year, when the date for the concretisation of the projects was approaching, the rhythm tended to increase. For the students, the project became concrete, and the tasks that needed to be done were more clearly visible. The deadline often encouraged them to intervene more, particularly by removing obstacles (for example making contact with an association) or taking control of the organisation to move forward more efficiently.

2. A program that contributes to learning citizenship

Through their participation in the ACT program, the students were given the role as citizens in two separate ways: not only by producing a project around civic themes, but also because the implementation of this project was in itself a “democratic experience” during which they moved outside their role as students and organised themselves and made all decisions collectively. This second section analyses how this program contributed to students, both in terms of citizenship education and the acquisition of various skills (organisation, communication, planning, et cetera) that result from setting up a project. Here we are not evaluating the impact of the project on the students’ long-term positions, opinions, and perceptions, not only because the (qualitative) methodology used here is not ideal, but above all because it is impossible to deduce a major impact on socialisation from a temporary project by isolating the effect of that project from other social experiences. Instead, we look at the immediate effects of participating in this program, with a view to demonstrating the advantages of an approach that encourages learning citizenship rather than being taught it.

2.1. Approaching citizenship differently

The ACT program provides an opportunity to take a practical approach to citizenship. This program was therefore a tool for civic education, which could also encourage the acquisition of various skills that could then be used in other disciplines. Here we look at the way in which the ACT project can interconnect with objectives for academic success.

Learning citizenship through action

ACT participates in the transmission of civic and social abilities that are interdisciplinary in nature. The project therefore corresponds to various objectives laid out in the school curriculum:

- Firstly, ACT helps students recognise and step into their role as citizens. It therefore corresponds to one of the transversal objectives in the curriculum: “to allow the student, in the concrete situations of life at school, to develop an aptitude for independent living, active participation in the improvement of collective life, and preparing his or her civic engagement.”⁴ ACT indeed means that citizenship is understood not as an abstract notion, but is incarnated in an experience of socialisation that students experience over the course of the year. As one student said, this program represents “something that allows students to live their citizenship”, in opposition with more conventional top-down educational methods. This is the opportunity for students to test citizenship in practical terms, by moving out of their traditional role as receptacles of the curriculum content.

Teacher interview – end of project

Whether we want it or not, they have developed the ability to act as citizens, they have had a role in social citizenship

Implementing a citizenship project allow students to understand that active citizenship is something that concerns them directly and immediately. The ACT project allows them to break

⁴ The curriculum can be found here (in French): *Socle commun de connaissances, de compétences et de culture*, Decree n° 2015-372.

down the barrier between student and citizen.

Teacher interview – end of project

[Through the ACT project] they are not students, they are citizens, we do not look at them in the same way, like students setting up a school project, but like future citizens, it is another way of seeing them.

- ACT is the opportunity to explore themes that are essential to the EMC (moral and civic education) curriculum. The project's three themes (discrimination, social inclusion, and cultural diversity) also run through the EMC curriculum in these year levels. The history-geography teachers therefore take time for the ACT program during the class hours dedicated to EMC, instead of the activities that they generally do during that time. As one teacher said, "doing the project is following the curriculum". ACT can therefore become a tool for EMC classes.

Teacher interview – end of project

I came to totally support the ACT teaching method, before I used to do EMC in an old-school teaching style, I struggled with pedagogy based on projects, but I think this is great.

In the methodology proposed in the ACT project, the students achieve remarkable understanding of the program's themes. Over the course of the actions they undertake, the discussions and meetings, the students are forced to confront a certain number of questions for the first time; themes to do with discrimination, inclusion, cultural diversity are no longer purely abstract, and become part of the students' lived experience.

- The ACT program constitutes a vector for the transmission of certain fundamental values. This program may also be an element in the process of becoming a citizen, which participates in the overall objective of the students' education "aiming to build moral and civic judgement, acquire critical thinking and a culture of engagement."⁵ In participating in the ACT program, the students conceptualise and implement action that is directed at other people, that contributes to the general interest. Because they aim to fight discrimination, or promote social inclusion or cultural diversity, the students' projects lead them to take concrete actions to defend values like solidarity, fraternity, tolerance, and challenge certain prejudices (see above). Implementing a civic project is therefore the first experience of committed action for the students.

Focus group (students)

-Student 1: It makes us want to do other projects, perhaps not with school, perhaps more open

- Student 2: Me, I think that its just the beginning, and that it can go further

-Interviewer: What would you do to take it further?

-Student 2: Well, help in associations, help people who don't have much...

Beyond the final objectives of the projects themselves, the modalities of their implementation

⁵ Circular of June 23 2016, Ministry of Education, Higher Education and Research (*Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche*).

are also important in the transmission of fundamental values, promoting group work and collective decision-making. Developing respect for other people and tolerance is one of the central objectives of the education system. The EMC program in secondary school states that “moral and civic education is particularly well- suited to studies that put students in situations of cooperation and group work encouraging the exchange of arguments and ideas.” With the ACT project, working together towards the project, students develop skills in listening, taking into account different perspectives, working together according to shared rules (see below, part II.2.b).

Focus group (students)

What I like in this project is that everybody does something, everybody contributes in their own way, even the students who are often less enthusiastic about doing things.

The ACT program therefore addresses different objectives of citizenship education. It is worth noting that it is more the teachers that see this advantage than students – they tend to see ACT as part of an academic, democratic, and civic project more generally, whereas students have less of a tendency to generalise from their experience, they tend to minimise the “civic” aspect given the generally limited objective and audience of their intended action. Although, as we will see, they are on the whole proud of their projects and aware that they have learnt a lot, the role of the teachers as an intermediary seems to be important for them to take a step back and see their project as “real” civic action.

Tackling prejudice

One of the side effects of participating in the ACT program is the effect it has on students fighting prejudice, on three levels:

- Students deconstruct their stereotypical representations of different groups (homeless people, the elderly etc.). Indeed, the projects allow students to gain contact with institutions of which they have only partial and often stereotypical impressions. For example, one project gave a group of students the opportunity to meet former homeless people, which allowed them to improve their reading and understanding of social issues.

Focus group (students)

-Student 1: Me, before, I thought that the homeless well they were just... For me, if I was homeless, it would be a choice, because with all of the help that exists today, I thought that really, well it wasn't possible to be homeless. In fact, I was surprised that, well... It can happen really fast.

-Student 2: I didn't realise there were so many homeless young people.

-Student 3: Me neither, huh, I didn't know much about homeless people, so in fact I learned everything in there.

Similarly, the students whose projects related to retirement homes also came to deconstruct the stereotypes they had about these institutions. Specifically, they came to realise that there are numerous activities organised there.

The ACT program allows students to break down prejudice and stereotypes of their own

accord. For example, in one of the projects for homeless people, students began by imagining the collection of objects and food that they could distribute to homeless people in the form of gift boxes. They were also initially opposed to the idea of relying on an association to act as an intermediary. They were suspicious of the way in which associations might use donations and they wanted to be directly in contact with homeless people themselves. The two teachers overseeing the projects did not force them on this issue but guided them so that they would progressively develop a more lucid understanding of what might be relevant and feasible. They thus suggested the students organise an outing to see the film *Les Invisibles* (Invisibles, directed by Louis-Julien Petit, about the closing of a homeless shelter), which helped them realise that the project was disconnected from the reality homeless people experienced.

Focus group (students)

One group had started to look at how we could set up the box, and we realised in fact, with the film “invisibles”, that it was not possible, that it would take up too much room, and that homeless people already had lots of bags to carry because they carried all of their stuff with them and, well an extra box, it would be too much in fact, and so that’s why we decided to do this.

The students had to think critically about their project after watching the film, and they finally decided to contact an association for homeless people to work with them. The students, therefore, progressively and of their own accord, changed their perceptions of homeless people and the associations who help them.

- The students sometimes became “mini experts” on these civic themes. Where the projects led them to develop awareness-raising campaigns (for younger students in primary schools for example), they had to themselves acquire and collate knowledge on the subject. They therefore became “ambassadors” on questions of discrimination, racism, equality and so forth. In working on the forms of this transmission (theatre, debate, games, questionnaires, quizzes, etc.) they had to think about the way they could deconstruct other people’s preconceptions and become “spokespeople for these themes”, as one teacher said. These high school students therefore experienced the fact that as they move forward in the project, they were forced to challenge their own preconceived ideas. For example, in the projects targeting discrimination through events in primary schools, the students were often led to talk about homophobia, which was difficult for some of them.

Teacher interview – end of project

I mean, A., who covered the fight against homophobia [during the presentation at the primary school], ummm, he is a kid who has made extremely homophobic remarks in the past, and yet when he was in front of the kids, he was great. He explained why it is important not to be homophobic. I am not sure that his positions will be affected, I think he will always find it disgusting to see two boys or two girls together, and all that, but I think the idea of equality has helped him progress [...] And I think that here, this civic experience, can change things because it is a tangible experience.”

Transmitting things to other people is also clearly a very efficient tool for learning. The students therefore directly experience the need for openness and curiosity that is at the heart of what citizenship education means as an intellectual position.

- The civics projects are also the opportunity to promote a different view of young people. The students were able to have an impact on the representations they are subject to. Through the meetings that they organise (with the elderly in retirement homes, with children in primary schools) or the ways in which they took control of the process of concretely bringing about their actions (telephone calls, organising meetings, public speaking, and so forth), these high school students meant to break away from the perceptions that had them trapped in the position of students or “kids”.

Focus group (students)

- *Student 1: [the retirement home residents] see how young people today, they evolve, with technology that they don't necessarily have access to...*
- *Student 2: Break down the preconceptions that they have about us as well.*
- *Student 3: They say we are too stuck to our screens, whatever, sometimes it is true but...*
- *Students [together]: Not all the time, not everyone.*

Through their participation in the project, the students therefore help to create the image that they project to adults:

Focus group (students)

The associations don't take us seriously because we're teenagers, and so, well for them, they think it's a joke, in a sense they don't really take us seriously.

Being able to bring their projects to fruition enables the students to contradict the negative representations the adults have of them.

ACT therefore seems to be a good vector to encourage openness among the students and help them become aware of their own preconceptions of other people, as well as the preconceptions and stereotypes people have about them.

Openness to the world outside the school

The experimental framework produces an effect that is all the more strong when the students' actions incorporate an interaction with the world outside the school. This interaction may take various forms (partnership with an association, collection of donations from outside the school, meeting with people from outside the school, and so forth) and materialise in different stages of the project (in its conception and/or realisation). The openness of civic projects to the outside world has a threefold benefit for the students:

- Their experience is richer: the participation of people outside the project and confrontation with otherness has an effect on the understanding of the target audience, and more broadly of the theme covered in the project. The “outside” sheds additional, specific, and non-academic light on the project, particularly based on concrete examples in situations that are experienced.

Focus group (students)

Finally, when we met the people from the association and the homeless people, we

realised that we could ask them lots of questions. We asked questions on suicide, on “what do you do to eat?” But they were really nice, because they responded very sincerely to our questions. And it was like a slap across the face, so to speak, really it was so concrete, we could put ourselves in their place, and that’s when we understood, in fact, the situation, well... Yes, that’s how we understood how they lived, so, how we could position ourselves in relation to these situations.

The project became a way to meet people they would not have had the opportunity to frequent, and enter spaces that are generally closed to them, which helps to deconstruct certain stereotypes (see above) and enrich their knowledge of the social world.

Teacher interview – end of project

For two students, it was a space that they saw every day, and a space that was closed, because you do not go into a retirement home if you do not have someone there, you do not go to say hello, or say hello to people that you do not know, so they had never been inside, which was quite remarkable [...] They saw a space that was both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.

These “outside” projects led them to become aware of potential intermediaries for their actions (for example associations), and to understand how they worked.

Focus group (students)

So, we learnt what an association does [...] Before, I didn’t know, I had no idea in fact. Now you can see what it does and how it works.

They also confront the difficulties associated with otherness and outside relations. Examples from the projects collecting donations in supermarkets or doing surveys in the marketplace are an illustration of this.

Focus group (students)

I was there for the three days, people just walked by and pretended they couldn’t hear you, and the ones... there are plenty of them, who just pretend to be deaf or something. You see that it’s difficult to do that [...] Collecting donations, you realise how generous some people are... and how others are just hypocritical.

- External contacts energise the project: interacting with the outside world gives momentum to the civic projects. Going outside the school’s walls is exceptional for the students and makes the project important for them. A project that is connected to the outside world is not seen in the same way as a project that is limited to the school environment, and which remains therefore more embedded in school culture.

Focus group (students)

We realise that we really had to get out and do something outside the school

As we saw in the first part of the report, the projects generally went through a phase of “stagnation”. In several cases, this inertia was broken by intervention from an outside source.

Focus group (students)

After, we were a bit demoralised, the project did not go forward. And then we got back to it when we had [the visit from the association].

Collaborating with external structures also gives the students the tacit responsibility of bringing the project to fruition, in order to not disappoint the association, the institutions, and the people they have committed to helping. This partnership also plays out on the timeline of the project.

Focus group (students)

We needed them urgently [tents and sleeping bags collected by the students]; they had sent an email to say that we needed the products quite quickly... Because there were the school holidays and so, we had to collect them before we... we finished classes and wouldn't really be able to get them after...

By setting deadlines, the external organizations or people helped combat a certain inertia among students.

- Building bridges between the school and communities and families: civic projects can allow schools to develop long-term partnerships. This relates to the question of how to open the school institution, beyond the project in itself. One teacher, for example, expressed her satisfaction that the project led the students to meet the local primary school teachers – with whom they hoped to maintain contact and conduct other activities.

In certain neighbourhoods, particularly with working class populations, the schools' openness often began with families. One of the ACT projects, whose objectives were to encourage families to be involved with the school, made it possible for parents to become more mobilised, and create connections between the school and the family.

Teacher interview – end of project

The mothers were really happy to exchange, there were two mothers in particular who suggested that every month the parents get together to exchange recipes, talk about food, different cultures. Because these are the families we don't see much, so [the principal] said, "great idea", we'd never managed, we tried lots of things and here [...] we're not calling them into talk about their child's education, we're not saying "he is doing well, or not doing well." The mothers came (because they're mostly mothers), they came with something that they know how to do, that they are good at, these meals that they know how to do, they know that it will be good and that others will like it, and they came thinking "great, I'm going to show them something that I know how to do", and so that is how we attracted them [...] Because we have offered so many things at school, but here it was not us that proposed but them who proposed, and that changed everything!"

We know the importance of being able to invent new ways of making connections between the school community and families, with a genuine concern for articulating these two spheres of socialisation for children and young people.⁶ The ACT projects provided an unprecedented

⁶ G. Zoïa, L. Visier (2016), "Construire l'école du bien-être dans un quartier pauvre. Une expérience

opening for propositions from parents who took this up, and therefore played a role in activating this new form of relationship.

Although the ACT program offered students the possibility to experience active citizenship, this was all the more powerful when it allowed students to break with their daily routine and move outside the school environment.

2.2. Project experience

Conducting a civic project allows the students to acquire many new skills that could be used in the context of their schooling. The students learned to organise themselves independently, communicate with institutions, and work in groups. Conducting a project was also a source of pride for the students and helped contribute to developing their self-confidence and improving their relationship with the school as an institution.

Acquiring practical skills

The projects lead students to perform numerous activities that are rich in learning benefits: contacting associations, shops, journalists, school principals, primary school teachers, cinemas, etc.; collecting donations; creating a questionnaire and analysing it; talking to people in the marketplace, writing an article, participating in a radio broadcast, requesting authorisations from the school principal, getting families involved, etc. Through these actions, students acquire various abilities, depending on the projects, their theme, the form that they take, and the stages required to bring them to fruition. Moreover, not all students always participate in all activities. The skills that the students may acquire through participating in the ACT project fall into four major areas:

- Communication skills: the students are immediately confronted with the issue of communication when they have to present their proposals to their classmates. To transmit an idea and convince other people that it is interesting, one has to be able to find the right words. The students thus learn the importance of language, presentation, self-expression – and realise that often the idea that wins is the one that is communicated the most convincingly.

Email from a teacher

This has demonstrated that those who know how to speak in public, who can promote their ideas, have more chance of winning the vote, even though their ideas may not be great... Other interesting ideas were not accepted because their authors were not able to present them successfully...

The students also worked on communication when they had to contact adults they wanted to solicit as part of the project:

Focus group (students)

Well, I had to call the retirement home several times, and calling a retirement home when you're not an adult, well, we're not used to it, so at the beginning I didn't want to have to

do it, but I could tell there was only me who would dare... Because nobody else wanted to do it, I don't know what they were thinking, feeling that they were not up to scratch, or they were afraid... so I had to do it, that isn't great either, but it is true that it should have been several people. It might also have helped to be on the phone with an adult, to talk...

Talking to adults on the telephone, writing an email, or meeting them to set up a partnership, ask for an authorisation, or cooperate: the ACT project puts students in communication situations that they are not used to and that are particularly enriching for them. Similarly, awareness-raising actions constitute an unprecedented experience for public speaking.

Focus group (students)

It helped us be more comfortable in public speaking, after going around presenting to all the classes

- Decision-making skills: ACT teaches students to make decisions in a group. The protocol encourages them to use voting to make decisions. This is specifically the case for the choice of the particular project; the students have to evaluate the proposals put forward by each group, and then make a decision. It is worth noting here that in spite of the use of tools (an evaluation framework with several criteria) aiming to encourage rational evaluation of different projects, the students' choice is often based on intuitive, or affective criteria (they often admit to having voted for a friends project) – or even cronyism (some students beg or buy votes from their schoolmates). Like other educational exercises where students are encouraged to vote (during the election of class delegates for example), the ACT program therefore does not manage to necessarily produce voting behaviour in line with the democratic ideal. The tools available to the students and the instructions from the teachers do however contribute to transmitting the idea that choices *should* be made according to rational criteria. Even if the students do not necessarily conform to this, they do learn about the legitimate way to make democratic decisions.

The following stage, during which the project is appropriated by the class as a whole, can provoke frustration. This stage is interesting in itself because it puts students in the situation of ordinary social life. We have to accept the decisions made by the majority as the result of democratic voting, and we have to adapt to the direction that was collectively decided on. By reshaping the chosen project and bringing together the relevant aspects of other proposals, the students learn to make readjustments, once again in a collective dynamic.

Focus group (students)

Even though I didn't vote for this project at the beginning, I think it is a good one.

Later, the students are once again led to make decisions and decide between options as part of the concrete implementation of the project. They therefore experience the different ways in which decisions are made within the group; generally, they are based on “a consensus” during discussions with the class as a whole, most often conducted by the teachers. Where there is disagreement, voting is frequently used to arbitrate, whether initiated by the teachers or the students themselves. Moreover, working groups are generally set up to manage the different tasks: “small” decisions are frequently delegated to these little groups.

Students therefore experience a range of different decision-making methods (consensus, vote, delegation) that they are then encouraged to reuse during their group work.

- Institutional skills: the civic projects often lead the students to make contact with institutions. In particular, they often have to ask for authorisations and deal with legal questions or issues of protocol (for example when they have to plan to have image rights authorisation forms signed in advance)

Teacher interview – end of project

The contact with the school principal was interesting, because they went to see the principal who said “well, no, this is no good; this has to be changed”, so they also went to ask for the authorisation to collect donations, they asked where they could stock the donations, and so forth. The same thing for the survey, they went to present the survey to the principal to ask him for his agreement before publishing it. So, in terms of the institution, it was pretty good too. And for all that they managed it by themselves.

They therefore became aware of how institutions function and the different procedures that need to be put in place for their actions:

Focus group (students)

-Student 1: [that allowed us to] realise how...

-Student 2: The difficulty in elaborating a project, the procedures that you have to follow ...

-Student 1: Even, how it works for example, us, normally, for excursions, when you go to the cinema, you just need to have your parents sign a piece of paper, but here we realised that we had to ask for a budget, ask the cinema...

- Student 2: For their opening hours [...] get authorisation...

-Student 3: Ask for someone to supervise.

-Student 4: The teachers’ timetable.

As well as teaching them about how to exchange with outside institutions like businesses or associations, the students’ actions also help them to understand the institutional functioning of their own high school.

Teacher interview – end of project

Next year if they need to set up something, now they know that in a high school you have a principal, a registrar, and that you can call on one person or another [...] I think that they really have learned things here.

- Organizational skills: more generally, students are led to identify needs, actions to be completed, people to be contacted, authorisations to request, communication methods to be implemented, logistic issues to be anticipated. They have to identify the different stages and plan time management in advance.

Focus group (students)

-Interviewer: What have you learned?

-Student 1: Independence. Independence, that improved, in this sense.

-Student 2: Decision-making, debates, argumentation...

- Student 1: Leadership, a bit.
- Student 2: Yeah, that's right, being a leader, well, when we had to do little groups, for example, being able to... be organised, I guess.
- Student 3: Yeah, finishing things, constructing things...
- Student 4: And also communicating. Because for me, for example, at the market, when I had to approach people, and then when I called the associations... we called at least, more than five, and so I had to clearly communicate what... our project was.

All the stages that the students go through, during which they have to design, construct, adjust, react, overcome, communicate, and valorise their actions, push them very concretely to become organised and take initiatives. The ACT project therefore constitutes an unprecedented experience for group work.

Learning to work in groups

From the very beginning of the “compulsory lesson plans”, the students were divided into small groups based on random selection and asked to come up with their proposals for projects. This organisation forced them to have to work with students with whom they did not particularly have any affinities, which was sometimes a source of difficulty or discontent. In spite of the differences in perspective, each group had to succeed in producing a proposal, which was in itself a quasi-professionalising experience. Negotiating, working together, debating, finding compromises: the ACT project pushes students to deal with difference and otherness.

Once the projects were voted on, the working groups were more often constructed based on friendship relations. In any event, in order to work within these groups, and to coordinate between groups, the students had to develop their ability to listen to others, to dialogue, and to adapt.

Focus group (students)

- Student 1: Each group worked together.
- Student 2: Some wrote, others came up with ideas, and everyone had to agree.
- Student 3: Everyone had a role to play.

Organisation within classes of up to 30 students is by no means a simple matter – in fact it is a challenge that is full of learning possibilities in itself. From this perspective, the program was all the more educational in that the students genuinely had to organise themselves independently, and were responsible for organising the exchanges without the teacher:

Focus group (students)

- Interviewer: So, what was easy and what was difficult?
- Student 1: Managing the class. Sometimes we went a bit far, we yelled a lot, and so the supervisors got annoyed.
- Interviewer: Who was responsible for managing the class like that?
- Student 1: D. [student's name]. But I had to help him because he couldn't get them under control (laughs)!
- Student 2: It's true that he couldn't get them to respect him much; when it isn't an adult who makes, you know, the rules...
[...]
- Student 3: And after, there was, putting them into place, everything to do with...filming, putting people in place, and everything. I had to do that. I told them where they had to be and all, but after, with all the ruckus, it wasn't easy, but it was okay. It wasn't that complicated.

To successfully bring the project to fruition it was essential to be able to organise with others, and distribute roles, to be able to count on each other, and to follow shared objectives together. Students had to adapt to the diversity of perspectives, knowledge, and motivation among their classmates. This diversity was sometimes a benefit, when roles were distributed according to the skills and enthusiasm of the students (for example when those who were the most confident speaking publicly were responsible for making telephone calls to adults, or making presentations in other classes, while those who were shy were more responsible for logistic issues). Similarly, those who had technical skills (drawing, editing video) could be given specific roles that were beneficial for the development of the project.

Focus group (students)

- Student 1: I was responsible for speaking, for explaining, because they told me I had like a mum's voice! (laughs).
- Student 2: I don't like to push in front of people, but I was responsible for organisation and I enjoyed it.

But the students' different levels of investment and motivation could sometimes be a source of frustration for their classmates.

Focus group (students)

- Student 1: So we began by voting on groups. But after, half the class just did nothing.
- Student 2: So when we saw that we weren't going anywhere, and that it was nearly the end of the year, we made a little group that really wanted the project to move forward and we shared out the tasks.

The interviews also expressed near-systematic criticism of the less motivated students. Conversely, certain students were accused of monopolising what needed to be done and not leaving room for other classmates:

Focus group (students)

- Student 1: Oh, it was not fair, for me it was not even shared out, I had to do everything!
- Student 2, talking to Student 1: Yeah, well you didn't let anyone else do anything.

- Student 3: X. [student's name], came up with ideas, and you said "no my mum has already done the photocopies"... Yes you did everything... Yes you did everything and you only asked other people afterwards, that is what a shame about it."

The students thus became aware of the difficulty of working together and learning to become organised. In spite of the many criticisms of their classmates, the students were in general quite positive about the collective dynamic produced by the ACT program – and recognised that most of the class participated at a minimum level.

Focus group (students)

But I think that everybody managed to put in some work. And even if they did not participate as much as you, well, I think that... at least, they were respectful, they listened to others. [...] Overall, if we have to sum it up, knowing that the students are known for being... more disruptive than that, I think they were quite respectful.

One of the major effects of participation in the ACT program is the reinforcement of class cohesion. Although this impact was not generally identified by the teachers, it was one of the elements that emerged almost systematically from the interviews with the students:

Focus group (students)

- Student 1: *We came together in the class, we were nicer to each other, more united with each other.*

- Student 2: *We became connected.*

Pursuing actions in which every individual had a role in a dynamic of cooperation within the community of the project reinforced the links between class members.

Focus group (students)

I think it totally brought the class together.

The ACT program seems to have had a positive effect on the students' experiences of their own class, bringing them together around a shared goal. The classes are "connected" through relational links that were stronger because they were charged with shared meaning or general interest.

Focus group (students)

It unified the class, because in the beginning of the year there were groups, we were all working on the same project, we were in little groups, but we were all together on something so theoretically we were together, and after, for that project, like for the organisation, we did that altogether, so, there were less fights, less disputes, and the class was more unified.

Being proud of having completed a project

When the students were questioned at the end of their participation in the ACT project, they were generally very positive. Of course, this depends on whether the project was successfully completed or not, whether the students managed to reach the objectives they had set, the nature of these objectives and the involvement of each member in the project. The feeling that they most

commonly evoke is pride, which is linked to several elements:

- In the first instance, the students are proud of having produced “their own” project. The ACT program is therefore not just one project among others for these students; they feel like it is the first time they have been involved in a “real project”.

Focus group (students)

- *Student 1: It's the first time that we have done a project for other students.*
- *Student 2: And it's us, it is really us who carry it out from A to Z.*

Indeed, the different excursions and activities they are habitually involved in do not give them the feeling that they are genuine actors, as these projects are generally planned, designed, and supervised by adults. With the methodology promoted by the ACT framework the students seem to become aware of experiencing something unprecedented, a project that is really theirs.

Teacher interview – end of project

Well, they have participated in projects, they went on a class trip to Caen in history class, they were interested, but like [a student said] yesterday, “for an excursion to the cinema I just sign a form and I go, that's it.” There is not necessarily any... whereas here... when their project finally, yes when you see that ultimately, it's quite simple what they have done, but they've done it all themselves, so they have understood, and it's really theirs, you see.

Indeed, at the beginning the students sometimes have trouble believing, realising that they will actually bring about their projects:

Class observation – beginning of project

- *Student 1: But will we do it?*
- *Student 2: But, after, will we actually do it?*
- *Teacher: Of course! The point is to really do it.*
- *Student 3: Ah, so it's not pretend.*
- *Student 2, to the teacher: But Miss, are you going to help us?*
- *Student 4: Seriously, we're going to have to write to the town hall, for example?*
- *Student 5: But we're not going to do that for real are we????!!!*

Bringing a project that they have designed themselves to fruition is a particularly valorising experience for the students

Focus group (students)

- *Student: And I, I think that it's the first, really, the first project that I've done and I'm really proud.*
- *Student: It is concrete, we did something concrete.*

The students thus realise that they are able to be organised, conduct concrete actions, and have an impact on the world around them.

Focus group (students)

- Student 1: Now we are more in charge of what we do.
- Student 2: We know that it can actually happen.
- Student 3: We are more, how can I put it, independent.

- The students' pride also stems from the feeling of having put into place a useful project, particularly when the projects are targeted at people outside the school (see II.1c).

Focus group (students)

Talking with the elderly people allowed us to realise that they are sometimes quite lonely, and I think that they enjoy it too, so... That is the most important thing.

Completing a project that benefits others is central to the students' feelings of pride about what they have achieved.

Focus group (students)

- Student 1: It's concrete, we're doing concrete things.
- Student 2: Yes! Also, people said "tonight there is a homeless person who will have something to keep warm" and that is gratifying.

It is the feeling of having produced a project that is useful for others that allows students to identify their action as being "civic".

Focus group (students)

We feel useful [...] we help people, so that's citizenship, helping other people, and doing it of our own free will.

- ACT provides students a range of symbolic rewards. Having completed a project is a success in itself, and is therefore valorizing for the students and a form of reward that is not based on grades.

Teacher interview – end of project

For many it is a personal victory.

The students' pride is thus even stronger when their projects attract admiration from the adults overseeing it, particularly their teachers.

Teacher interview – end of project

It teaches you to let go, I'd say, and that, that's... and well really trust them. And I think that it's maybe that which... affected them most. It's like... "are you proud of us Miss?" And I say, "Yes, I'm proud of you, of course, because you managed it." And really, that is the right feeling, they really managed THEIR project. And themselves. And I trusted them."

The project does not mobilise the same aptitudes as those required in everyday schooling. So, ACT can be particularly valorising for students identified as "struggling at school", by providing them a different path to recognition.

Teacher interview – end of project

They can find another form of expression in this, and another form of recognition, because some find it difficult to have recognition through grades, here, it's a way... The article that they wrote themselves to send to Mr F. who is responsible for the school's network and website, so this article was written and will be published in the local paper, the school principal went to see them saying "your project is excellent, I find it really coherent"... It might not seem like much, but these moments are important for them, to have that recognition.

For classes that have a reputation as being "difficult" or "having problems", it is also the opportunity to act against representations within the school itself:

Teacher interview – end of project

This is a class that suffers from lots of criticism within the school, a class that is seen as difficult. For the students, this has been the opportunity to show another side of themselves to, to contradict the preconceptions people have of them.

Finally, the diploma that is awarded at the end of the ACT project, which is often presented formally in the presence of the families or the school principal, also constitutes a symbolic recompense that is important for certain students.

Teacher interview – end of project

At the end they were given a certificate. They were very happy, they were so proud, and it was funny to see the families taking photos of them with their certificates.

Teacher interview – end of project

I thought, they'll find it so kitch and ridiculous, and in fact no, they loved it, with their bit of paper, I think there were so many logos that it was impressive for the families, and the EU aspect, even if it was not particularly clear for them what was behind it, they still thought "oh it's a big deal" — so much the better!

The students therefore often considered their participation in the ACT program as a success, both on the collective level and the individual level. The program can therefore also help consolidate students' self-esteem and improve their relationship with the school as an institution.

3. Issues and limits of the pedagogical stance behind the ACT project

The ACT project is an "active pedagogy" framework, in other words, it is part of an ensemble of methods that make students actors in their learning by overturning the vertical pedagogical model in which the student passively receives knowledge from the teacher. Among these active pedagogies, the project-based approach has attracted particularly significant attention in recent years, project work being considered as a way to give meaning to learning by putting it into practice.⁷ Although project-based teaching methods are used by many teachers in various forms, the ACT program takes this experimentation even further because teachers, although they are responsible for initiating the program, do not decide on the project itself, contrary to what

⁷ See for example: Bordalo I., Ginestet J.P. (2006), *Pour une pédagogie du projet*, Paris, Hachette.

normally happens. This third section of the report analyses issues and limitations of this pedagogical position: observing the implementation of civic projects demonstrates both the advantages of reversing the traditional pedagogical relationship between teachers and students, as well as all the difficulties and resistance encountered during the experience. The various obstacles identified by the research team show that the program does not manage to avoid the more general difficulties encountered by the school, such as inequalities in success and spatial segregation. The analysis of these difficulties is not intended to shed doubt on the benefit of this kind of project, but should allow help it be adapted to different school contexts and also to envisage it as a tool to help combat these difficulties more generally.

3.1. Is it possible to avoid the vertical teacher-student relationship?

The principle of the ACT program is that the students choose, develop, and implement their own civic project. Breaking away from habitual school practices, they must decide everything – what their project will be, how they will organise it, and so forth. This teaching method is rich in learning opportunities for students. However, it is potentially complicated to implement. There are in fact many obstacles to altering the relationship between students and teachers

From student to citizen

The ACT program encourages students to behave like active citizens, able to act on their environment and manage the project independently. This change in position is potentially very prestigious for the students and contributes to their feeling of pride (see above, II.2.c). Many students also indicate that they feel “responsibilized” by the project and behave very differently in it than they usually do in school.

Focus group (students)

I had the impression that I was an adult in their eyes, which was a little stressful, I behave a bit like a baby here, I like it when I get fussed over, and there [I said to myself] in my head “You’re big, you have to make the leap” . It was very difficult, I felt like a marketing director, I had to speak properly and everything!

Many of the teachers also emphasised changes in the students’ posture, particularly during events associated with the concretisation of the project, when they were in contact with people from outside the school, or they had to put themselves on show.

Teacher interview – end of project

It also gives them a feeling of self-confidence because these are not positions that they are habitually in at school. In other words, we trust them, of course, but not to the degree where they contact several magazines, newspapers, to have journalists come to the school for a half day event... We rarely give them that kind of responsibility. We do give them responsibilities, but often within the class, or within the school, but never, very rarely, the opportunity to express themselves outside the school. And I think that that has given them a lot, in terms of responsibility, autonomy.

Implementing the civic project is also the opportunity for students to experiment different forms of interaction, positions, and roles that project them into the adult world. This change in status, or

position, is not entirely straightforward because students are not all inclined to accept it, but also because the adults with whom they interact tend to remind them of their status as teenagers.

- This status is firstly a legal one; the students are confronted with a certain number of legal constraints that can limit them in the concretisation of certain projects (the need to have authorisations signed for excursions, or image rights authorisations signed by parents; or to have a minimum of two adults accompanying every excursion, and so forth).
- Security is all the more important because the students are minors. Associations working with homeless people, for example, are reluctant to “let minors approach people living on the street” and certain teachers prefer to never leave their students unsupervised.
- Beyond these rules and principles, their status as adolescents above all has an impact on the way the students are perceived and treated by adults, who tend to not consider them reliable. It was therefore almost systematically that external contacts (managers of associations or supermarkets, school principals, retirement home directors, and so forth) did not take them seriously when they were first contacted, or asked to speak to the teacher. The students’ comments are categorical on this point:

Focus group (students)

- Student 1: *We called Super U, the lady was really unpleasant... “Yes well, you have to send an email”. And you could really tell that she thought she was talking to ten-year-old kids who were playing a prank on the phone, or something and she gave us a false address...”*

- Student 2: *They... The adults, they underestimate us like that sometimes, they underestimate our abilities, even though we are able to do things, like the project, do good things.*

During their participation in the project, the students therefore realised the image that adults had of them:

Focus group (students)

The association don’t take us seriously because we’re teenagers and so well, for them, they think it is just a joke, in a way they don’t really take us seriously.

Even the teachers themselves had a tendency to not trust the students and to remind them of their status as minors. Several of them confessed at the beginning of the program that they had doubts about whether it was possible to do these projects with adolescents.

Teacher interview – beginning of project

I don’t believe in total independence in middle school [...] I don’t know if giving them completely free rein, even if you give them rules, it might be a bit too vast a field for students in 4^{ème} and 3^{ème}.

Similarly, once the projects are voted on, the teachers often wondered whether the students were not “too ambitious” and whether they would be able to bring their project to fruition:

Informal discussion (teacher)

I do not know if they are really able to complete it, it could be interesting, but I might have

to be more involved, might have to guide them more.

Finally, during the concrete realisation of the projects, particularly when the students had to go outside the school, the teachers were often quite anxious, concerned that the “students might not behave well.”

Informal discussion (teacher)

What I find a little stressful, is knowing how it will go, whether they are going to behave properly in front of the primary school class, that is my only fear, apart from that, I think it will go very well.

This image that the adults reflect back on the students does not help them change their role. The idea of the adolescent they so frequently receive is that of someone who is neither serious nor independent.⁸ Although there are various obstacles to the students projecting themselves into the role of citizens, the ACT projects helps to change some of these constraints and representations which are associated with the idea of adolescents and the status of students. From this perspective the ACT project is also instructive for the adults – and particularly for the teachers – who realise, sometimes with surprise, that their students are able to act as citizens.

The ambiguity of the teacher’s role

The teacher’s role is described in the protocol for the ACT program: “The role of the teacher is to provide constant and coherent comments, advice, and encouragement [...] The teacher must facilitate class discussions and accompany students in their reflections (for example by asking questions to encourage students to think more deeply, or to dispel confusion). The teacher is not to impose their perspective, nor debate with the students. [...] In conclusion, the teacher is a mediator, a regulator, and an animator”. The teacher is therefore not supposed to intervene in the decisions students make about their civic project, but must assist them, “make comments”, and “give advice”. When this principle is applied in the classroom it proves to be a delicate balancing act, and the degree to which the teachers are to intervene (or not) in decisions relating to the civic project and its implementation remains unclear for many of them. In fact, the teachers pursue the goal of giving the students “free rein” and delegate all the decision-making power to them. They often repeat this frequently to their students during the class sessions dedicated to the ACT project:

Class observation

-Teacher: I have explained this to you. You have to make all the decisions, you are the bosses, the actors, I don’t want to influence you on this.

However, during the different phases of developing and then implementing the different projects, we observed that the teachers often influenced the decisions made by the students in different ways, whether voluntarily or not:

- Firstly, it was generally the teachers who decided on the rhythm of the class sessions, their

⁸ Coquet M., Macherel C. (ed.) (2013), *Enfances. Pratiques, croyances et inventions*, CNRS Éditions.

objectives, and the ways they were organised.

Class observation

-Teacher: Today your objective is very simple, I asked you to do the assessment report yourselves, and we will take a little time at the beginning of class to reformulate things within the group. Write the assessment of the meeting and determine the workshops that need to be set up for the day of action. The idea is to come out of this class with a program for workshops, and to begin thinking about what might be needed for them. [...] So I suggest you get together in groups in the room...

Although they generally tried to develop them with the students, the teachers played a decisive role in outlining and planning the tasks that need to be done – which had an impact on the way in which the projects were implemented.

- Moreover, in animating the discussions, they also directed what the students discussed, and often how the discussions evolved (by emphasising certain ideas, asking certain questions, etc.). It was also the teachers who were most often responsible for initiating votes. As a general rule, the teachers' comments have legitimacy and weight that makes their contributions and advice decisive. Whether they are conscious of it or not, they have a tendency to influence the decisions made by the students.

Class observation

[The students want to make posters and discuss various places where they could be put up] The teacher draws their attention to the fact that posters put up in parks have to not be a source of pollution. She also expresses her reticence about cafes, suggesting that she does not think that would be relevant. The same is true for shops: "I do not know if that is really the subject here". Concerning bus shelters, she says: "Be aware that any unsupervised places can lead to vandalism". She explains that that often happens with posters put up in the school, even though they are laminated. Students suggest the gymnasium, and she supports the idea: "Yes, there are outside associations who could see your work there."

- Finally, the teachers sometimes set limits and constraints for students, and if they were presented as such, it became impossible for students to think of ways around them:

Class observation

-Teacher: Because we don't know if it will be nice weather, will have to do it in the multipurpose room. Will 500 people fit in that room? So, it can be invitation only, but there will have to be a quota.

The teachers therefore always had an influence on the students' projects. Their interventions reflect the tension between the desire to let the students decide, and the feeling that they need to be guided. The extent of the teachers' intervention was quite variable however, particularly in terms of the students' ability to organise themselves independently (see below, 3.2.b) but also depending on the magnitude of the project, the understanding that the teachers had of the protocol, or their prior experience with these teaching methods (see below, 3.3).

In reality, the teachers' interventions were sometimes decisive for the success of the project, when students encountered obstacles or got stuck. Several teachers had to "do some steering" (according to the expression of one teacher) when they were stuck or in the run-up to the completion of the project, when the students were running out of time. This change in position often proved beneficial.

Teacher interview – end of the project

- Teacher: I have to admit that that's what I didn't quite understand, where we were supposed to stop, I understood that they [the students] were the ones supposed to be doing it, and that we had to help them, but up to what point, in fact? And I think that... from the point where we said "I don't give a stuff about the ACT protocol, because [the event] is in two days, and I'll do what I want, I will organise it like I want", that it actually functioned better, in fact!"

Although the ambiguity of the teachers' role allowed a certain freedom of interpretation, and encouraged case-by-case solutions, it also generated a certain discomfort for teachers, many of whom mentioned their uncertainties about their role:

Teacher interview – end of project

-Teacher: I didn't know to what point I had to let them be independent, up to what point I had to intervene, it was also a learning curve for me and that "do I intervene, do I not intervene?", that's not always easy and it can be quite unsettling!

The teachers were therefore led to intervene in the students' decisions for various reasons, relating both to their desire to see the project successfully completed, as well as their difficulty in trusting the students' abilities for self-management.

Informal discussion (teacher)

I have a tendency to be a little worried about the project that might come out of it [...] I have no desire to impose something, that is not the idea at all, but at the same time, I don't want it to be really terrible...

The position that the teachers are asked to fulfil within the ACT framework is indeed unfamiliar for many of them and supposes the ability to create a new learning environment that breaks with the "traditional" school structure.

Breaking with the "traditional" classroom

The ACT project supposes a fundamental change in the relationship between student and teacher. Rather than being vertical, as it is traditionally, where teachers transfer knowledge to students, it becomes horizontal and the students learn "by doing". This learning framework breaks with the traditional educational approach in France. Although the teachers involved in the ACT program often had experience with different teaching methods and had used projects with their students before, none of them had gone quite so far in delegating decision-making and organisational responsibilities. Although the preliminary activities were designed to progressively introduce this new learning environment for the students, its implementation was not straightforward due to the inertia in habitual teacher-student relations.

The teachers, firstly, sometimes had difficulty “letting go” and fully adopting a horizontal relationship. In describing these difficulties, many of them mobilise the notion of “setting boundaries”; admitting that they, for example, “are used to setting more boundaries”, and considering that there was “a need to set more boundaries” than the protocol anticipated:

Informal discussion (teacher)

My feeling, is that I’m struggling. The students ask for more boundaries and need more boundaries, so I would be tempted to do that, but I’m afraid that would be going against the instructions.

Indeed, the students sometimes seem destabilised by this pedagogical approach. It is not unusual that the students ask the teachers to be more interventionist, or that they criticise them for not helping, or not “doing much”, which they may interpret as a sign of disinterest for the project. Concerned with wanting the project to be properly completed, and wanting to be efficient, the students do not always understand why teachers take a step back in decision-making. They also generally call on teachers when they encounter obstacles or need to re-motivate the class:

Student message on the school’s digital platform:

Why doesn’t anyone do anything, the lady is coming next week [one of the members of the research team]. We should have started a long time ago, but I don’t want to do the project by myself. I’ll start it, but I’m not doing everything, everyone has to participate. Ms V. could you tell the others to get on with it please?

Discipline is another difficulty. Reconciling the pedagogy of the project and class management can be a delicate affair. The horizontal, flexible teaching structure in which students are often encouraged to debate as a whole class, or work in small groups, is conducive to a lively, even agitated classroom – the sound level tends to rise, students tend to interrupt to give opinions and altercations can arise between students.

Informal discussion (teacher)

It is quite rock ‘n’ roll, our project, because obviously you work as a group, you let them be quite free, in speaking etc, but you can tell them the rules 500 times, you can have them reread them 500 times, they always get too carried away, it isn’t possible any other way!

For the students to get organised collectively and independently, they need to be able to communicate freely – but in classes with up to thirty students, if the teacher does not intervene, the cacophony rapidly becomes overwhelming. The teachers then reprimand the students, reiterate the rules, even administer punishments, and remove certain students; all of which mean the traditional student-teacher relationships are reinstated within the ACT program.

Teacher interview – end of project

I’ve been very strict (laughs), I haven’t been very nice. It’s a high-energy class and I have the feeling that if I let them go, they will completely run wild and so I have to constantly set boundaries all the time. On the contrary, I have had a more conflictual relationship with this project, I was... not very nice (laughs).

Yet, in the rare cases where sessions were held without teachers, or when the latter refused to use their authority, we did observe students who not only managed to move forward in spite of the disruption, but also who ended up successfully regulating themselves.

Teacher interview – end of project

At times, there was... If you like, because it was controlled by the students, there were students who at times went to see those [who were being disruptive] and said, "that's enough now!". And then, "you do this, you do that", yeah. And so, they finally took on the role of authority. Because I told them, "this is your project, it's you who..." So I took the experiment all the way, in a way.

An alternative teaching environment in which the teacher manages to avoid reminding students of discipline and rules is easier to set up in situations where ordinary social relations are already non-conflictual, where teachers have good relationships with their classes, and there are no behavioural problems. These situations tend to be more frequent in schools with students from privileged social backgrounds. In some particularly "difficult" classes, maintaining order undermines the class session and threatens the implementation of a teaching environment conducive to students becoming independent.

Achieving this independence also supposes that there is a clear divide between the ACT project and the rest of the teaching, because the role that students are asked to fill is significantly different. The activities within the protocol and the specific class sessions dedicated to the ACT project are generally clearly identified as part of the program, which helps the students to identify these "moments". But the barrier between the ACT program and ordinary classes also supposes that the students identify that these "moments" correspond to different teaching methods and that they can quickly adapt – which they do all the more easily if they are used to them in other school activities. This break with the academic routine is facilitated by different contextual elements: students adapt more easily to another role when the sessions dedicated to ACT project take place in a different classroom from normal, or when the spatial organisation of the class is changed. Similarly the break is easier to manage when sessions are conducted by a pair of teachers, or when the project is conducted by a group of students from different classes – in other words, when the context in which the ACT project occurs is noticeably different from ordinary school routines.

Breaking out of the vertical teacher-student relationship is therefore by no means simple due to the persistence of traditional academic culture, which leads to resistance both from students and from teachers.

3.2. Unequal dispositions for autonomy

Students do not all have the same ability to be autonomous

Classroom observations in ten schools allow us to compare the way in which the ACT program was implemented in socially diverse contexts. This conclusion is unambiguous: the conditions for the program's implementation vary significantly depending on the social make-up of the schools, and the project is more difficult to implement in socially disadvantaged areas. Students in these schools are more likely to be struggling and/or identified as "disruptive" – or have a tendency to

be defiant in relation to the school institution and teachers,⁹ which produces a classroom environment that is less favourable to group work, including for the ACT program. Moreover, as research in the sociology of education has shown, students' ability to work autonomously varies significantly according to their social background, which is explained by the acquisition of socially situated dispositions in early childhood.¹⁰ These unequal dispositions for autonomy are also identified as one of the primary factors explaining school inequalities; the success of students is heavily dependent on their ability to organise their learning independently. The ACT program is also significantly affected by this unequal ability of students to operate autonomously – particularly given that it supposes the collective autonomy of the class in relation to the teacher, which requires both an ability to operate independently and to be organised as a group.

The ability of students to conform to these requirements varies significantly between schools. In all the disadvantage schools (REP+) that were observed by the research team, teachers had difficulty getting the students to act autonomously, and they maintained an important role in setting boundaries and guiding students, which were necessary conditions for the success of the project. In these schools, the students were rarely invested in the program outside the sessions dedicated to it and did not take any initiatives on their own.

Teacher interviews – end of project

- *Teacher 1: They were not efficient at all, we were forced to meet with them regularly, they never worked by themselves, they never worked outside of school [...]*

- *Teacher 2: It is true that without giving them specific tasks, during the session they didn't do anything, even when we gave them things to do for the next session, they didn't do it, so several times, honestly, I told them "if next week you don't come with the list that I asked you for [...] I'm stopping" Because, in fact, we had to put in a lot of energy to mobilise them, even though it was their project, they were happy to do it as well, as soon as I said we were going to stop, "oh no, we don't want to stop", so it was... The threat worked (laughter). They came with their lists and everything. It was a class for which it was difficult to get them to do homework, in the second trimester they had terrible notes because they submitted almost no homework for French class, in math, in history. They just do not work at home, everything we ask them to do independently, they don't do it.*

As we can see in the teacher's comments, the fact that the students were not invested outside of class is not specific to the ACT program and should not be interpreted as a sign of their lack of motivation. However, their inability to work without the teachers was a significant hindrance to putting the projects into place.

Inversely, in more socially privileged areas, teachers were able to progressively delegate organisation to the students, and sometimes left them to manage the project in its entirety outside class hours (in this instance, they only had regular 10-minute "check-ins" at the beginning or end of the class to see where the project was up to and possibly guide the students). The students followed their own initiatives, invested their personal time, and organised themselves collectively without intervention from the teacher.

⁹ Duru-Bellat M., Van Zanten A. (2012), *Sociologie de l'école*, Paris, Armand Colin.

¹⁰ Lahire B. (2012 [1995]), *Tableaux de famille ; Heurs et malheurs scolaires en milieux populaires*, Paris, Seuil.

The social divergences in the students' ability to organise themselves independently can be explained by the unequal acquisition of certain dispositions which make this autonomy possible:

- A disposition for planning and rationalising tasks: independence poses the ability to conceptualise all the actions that need to be taken, distinguish them from each other, and translate them into clearly identified tasks. These skills all require predispositions for planning and rationalisation which students do not have in equal measure.¹¹ For example, in a privileged high school, students spontaneously came up with this proposition:

Class observation

- Student: We had the idea to make six sectors: communication/ games/ music/ security/ decoration/ service.

In the disadvantaged high schools, the identification and distribution of tasks often falls to the teachers.

- A disposition for time management: as Muriel Darmon's research has demonstrated,¹² students from socio-economically privileged backgrounds acquire a greater ability to manage their time and anticipate medium or long-term deadlines. This observation was clear during the implementation of the ACT program. Students from disadvantaged schools had difficulty anticipating the deadline.

Teacher view – end of project

In fact, independent time management was complicated. Ordinarily there is a specific deadline for homework, or for learning something by heart. Here, the vagueness was complicated for the students. How should this period be managed? So we talked about how in the school context we are used to time being broken up, by cycle, by lesson, by period, term time between holidays, by trimester. And this was a longer period, more diluted, and less clear.

As a general rule, the students managed to get mobilised and organised when the project deadline approached – but this was all the more true in disadvantaged schools in which the students' attitude often changed radically a few days before the deadline, whereas in more privileged schools their investment in the project was more stable over time.

Teacher interview – end of project

-Teacher 1: We said to ourselves, "we shouldn't do projects that take such a long time, we need shorter deadlines with this kind of student in fact"

- Teacher 2: That's right, in one week we managed to do more work than in six months...

The students also share this impression:

¹¹ Lahire B. (2012 [1995]), *Tableaux de famille ; Heurs et malheurs scolaires en milieux populaires*, Paris, Seuil.

¹² Darmon M. (2013), *Classes préparatoires. La fabrique d'une jeunesse dominante*, Paris, La Découverte.

Focus group (students)

- Student 1: *In fact, the last week we realised that we only had three days to do everything...*
- Student 2: *At the beginning we took it a bit lightly!*

- Formal organisation through writing: the tendency to use writing for organizational purposes (making a shopping list, using a calendar, etc.) was frequent in privileged areas. This is one of the dispositions that was identified by Bernard Lahire as facilitating students' academic success.¹³ During the implementation of the ACT program, the research team observed that the students sometimes spontaneously used the forms of organisation promoted in the school environment:

Focus group (students)

- Student 1: *So, I had fun organising library session, but it was hard because... getting the class together isn't easy (laughs). I tried to have a timeslot, an hour of study hall, which we had in the day, and I got everyone together.*
- Student 2: *Yeah, there was M. [student's name], you have to know that... M. when she talks, you hear her, and then there was A. [student's name] who was writing on the board, everything we said, all the roles we wanted to do...*
- Student 1: *Yeah, and that's where we decided on, umm, secretaries, people who agreed to take notes on what was said, or write screenplays...*

Organising a work session during one hour of study hall, distributing roles using a whiteboard, taking notes about the major decisions made and so forth; here the students were using efficient "ways of doing" that reflect those used in the school environment.

Thus, the social conditions that facilitate the implementation of the ACT program broadly overlap with the social conditions that facilitate academic success at school. This is why the program is easier to implement in schools where there is a greater proximity between the students' own culture and the school culture.

Consequences: adapting supervision to the students' profiles

These inequalities in the conditions of implementing the ACT program do not mean that the project is inappropriate for students from disadvantaged backgrounds – on the contrary it seems that this type of framework may be particularly useful because it allows students to acquire the dispositions for independent work that they lack, and which are important in academic success. The context in which the program is implemented, however, has important consequences for the way in which the students become invested in it, and therefore also for the role that the teachers play within it.

The students' involvement in the ACT program varies according to their academic profile – as a general rule, this program does not overthrow established academic hierarchies. Successful students tend to be more involved than students who are struggling. This correlation is also partly

¹³ Lahire B. (2012 [1995]), *Tableaux de famille: Heurs et malheurs scolaires en milieux populaires*, Paris, Seuil.

explained by dispositions that relate to the “academic goodwill” of the students who are more likely to be involved in activities proposed by the school. But it is also explained by their greater ability for autonomous action, which allows them to more easily understand what is being asked of them in the context of the ACT program, and their place in a teaching method that may be destabilising for students who are less inclined towards autonomy. This difference is clearly visible when a class combines students with contrasting social and academic profiles. In these configurations, the group that the teachers identify as being “at the top of the class” generally dominate in organising and planning activities that are more or less “followed” by the rest of the class. In most cases, some of the students – who are also identified as “struggling”, as “having behavioural problems”, or as “dropping out” – are not involved in the project, or very little. The teachers have a tendency to interpret these different levels of involvement in light of the students’ varying “motivation”.¹⁴ Classroom observations and students’ comments suggest that this unequal “motivation” is partly result of the students’ differing ability to find their own place in the project.

Focus group (students)

- Interviewer: *Did everyone participate in the project?*

- Student: *Mostly the nerds*

- Interviewer: *They were the most motivated?*

- Student: *No, not in that way, more that everything we said they tried to change, in fact the project basically, it was above all them who tried to change things in the project [...]*

- Interviewer: *Because they were more of them?*

- Student: *Yes, and they also know how to speak well, they speak fast, they can make teachers quickly understand what they want and all that, whereas we have other words, you know, different, the way we use them and all that, I don’t really know how to say it, they’re better...*

This differing ability to be heard, to have one’s positions adopted, to be involved in the project, was also noticed by the more active students:

Focus group (students)

I promise you girls, you weren’t there, you were in your own group, you didn’t try to get in with the guys who were... “LESS” involved. And I went with them, who were less involved than me, and I had the impression, it’s true, that, well I had the impression that they did try to propose ideas and do things. There was also quite a bit of silliness, but there was also a basis of willingness. And I think you didn’t see that, because you weren’t... you didn’t try to look any deeper than... your first impression.

Certain students also had a greater ability to propose, formulate, and persuade others to accept their ideas – and they tended to dominate in group discussions. Similarly, although the students from socially privileged backgrounds were more involved outside of the specific sessions dedicated to the project, it would be overly simplistic to consider this involvement as a sign of greater “motivation”. Students from more disadvantaged schools were also ready to dedicate time to the project outside their school hours, as we can see in the fact that they were generally present when

¹⁴ Using the language of motivation and “wanting to succeed” is one of the ways of psychologising social differences. On this subject, see Darmon, Muriel. (2001), “La socialisation, entre famille et école. Observation d’une classe de première année de maternelle”, *Sociétés & Représentations*, 11(1).

the teachers organised optional additional sessions. But when they were asked to work independently without the teacher, these students had more difficulty doing so.

In other words, to become involved in the ACT program, the students needed different levels of supervision by the teachers. Some jumped in from the very start and were able to function independently, whereas others needed to be guided and tested throughout the project.

Teacher interview – end of project

In the reverse schedule, we had listed the different actions, and set up groups who had to organise them. Then, it worked more or less well depending on groups because, yes, there was one group, that was a bit... When I wasn't leaning over them, they were a bit... they went off the rails a bit. So, there was one who every so often would say "yes, well me, I'm here for that, that, that..." [...] so not always working full speed, but ready to make up for it when I began to grumble!

One of the advantages of the ACT program is that students can learn through interaction with their classmates. The "head of the class" can draw other students into his or her momentum, even when they are less disposed to invest in this kind of activity. Moreover, although there is a connection between academic performance and the students' tendency to invest in this civic project, this is not a systematic relationship. Indeed, certain students identified as being in difficulty academically were quite at home in this project. This was particularly the case for atypical students, particularly students with learning difficulties, or new arrivals. These students' academic difficulties were not specifically the result of a lesser disposition for independent work, and they sometimes proved very efficient in the context of the ACT program. This was also sometimes the case for certain students considered "disruptive", who pose difficulties in class when they had to conform to a disciplinary structure, but who threw themselves into the program when they were asked to be active.

Informal discussion (teacher)

[About a student] You've seen what he is like, quite agitated, not very involved academically, but here, for the ACT project he is super enthusiastic. I was really surprised that it was to that extent, you saw, during the visit to the retirement home he was really well behaved with the residents, he was attentive, very different behaviour from how he is in class.

Thus, without presupposing the existence of a causal relationship between the social environment, the academic performance of the students and their ability to invest in the ACT program, being aware of the social and academic conditions that are favourable (or not) to this involvement allows the program to be adjusted and adapted to the different skills of the students. The risk is that the more academically successful students are the most invested in the project, and that it is therefore them who learn the most and are valorised through the completion of the project. In other words, there is a risk that the project reinforces academic inequalities. But it can also be an excellent tool to act against them because it is the opportunity to put certain skills and ways of doing, which are often implicit, into practice. It can help students learn to be organised in their schoolwork because it helps them learn to work independently. This supposes that the teachers are able to adapt to the initial abilities of the students, that they assist some more than others, and that they ensure that the distribution of roles and tasks does not simply reproduce

academic inequalities. The teachers in disadvantaged schools thus implement various techniques to help the students: for example by using a stopwatch so that they can manage their time better for a short activity; by setting deadlines that are shorter and more stimulating than longer ones; or by “rehearsing” with students before they contact adults outside the school. It therefore seems important that those who are responsible for training the teachers in these techniques (during the teacher training for the program) give the teachers the tools, tips, and techniques to redress inequalities between students, but also the tools to read and analyse them.

3.3. A program that trains teachers in active pedagogy

A challenge for teachers

The ACT program constitutes a significant challenge for teachers, particularly when there are not used to implementing this kind of program. Participation may also be quite stressful for them, for different reasons:

- The action research project supposes that the protocol is strictly adhered to – particularly as far as the preliminary activities (in the form of a series of specific class lessons that need to be conducted), are concerned. The respect of the time allotted for each of the different activities may be a challenge for the teachers, particularly in schools with disadvantaged students, where it may take more time to get the students to begin working.

Teacher interview – beginning of project

I am still a bit stressed about the protocol, you have to manage to do the whole activity in an hour.

- More generally, the time dedicated to the ACT program is a source of concern for the teachers. The sessions are generally held during class time dedicated to civic and moral education (EMC), or during homeroom class, the time that they can dedicate to it is limited to around 15 hours. Managing to successfully finish the program is a priority for the teachers, particularly when they have classes in 3^{ème} who also have to prepare for the middle school exams (*brevet des collèges*). Moreover, the ACT program is hampered by the various events, constraints, and deadlines of the school itself: holidays, school excursions, sporadic events, other projects, practice exams, work experience, climate events, and school closures. All these things can disrupt the implantation of the project and force the teachers to take an unwelcome break or reduce the number of hours dedicated to the program. Bringing the students’ projects to fruition without taking up too much class time is a difficulty for some teachers – often those who decide to organise sessions outside class time. Lack of time is the primary factor in the abandonment of projects, or their modification to make them faster to carry out. Although time was a source of concern for the teachers, most of them managed to implement the ACT program within the time constraints, particularly due to the increased investment of students as the project deadline approached.
- Finally, the ACT program encourages teachers to accept a “lack of control”, which can be a source of anxiety for some of them because it is in opposition with their professional habitus in the French context. By making students the decision-makers in the projects’ objectives, the ACT protocol encourages teachers to “let go”, which even the more experienced among them are not used to doing. They have no real visibility about the project’s completion,

whether in the form it will take or in how it is carried out. As one of them said, “political license can be disturbing”. The actors operate within an uncertain world, and teachers must trust the students for the project to be successfully completed.

Teacher interview – beginning of project

I don't know what they will do, I don't know if they will succeed or not, if it will be good or not, and that's worrying, because we're used to controlling everything, so what is new is letting go [...] I'm preparing myself psychologically, telling myself that if it isn't good, it doesn't matter.

And that is the heart of the experimental framework: teachers are not expected to make the project work, but to accompany the construction process.

Teacher interview – end of project

[Normally] when I set up a project, it gets done, and here I have to say “well, let them do it, you're helping, if it doesn't work, it doesn't work, and it's not a big deal”... that was quite painful for me.

Letting the students get things wrong, accepting that the project might not actually take place, not being able to see where the project is headed: this new educational framework, although stressful for some teachers, made them think about their teaching practices, and in particular, to not only think of them in terms of outcomes.

Varying benefits depending on teacher profiles

The teachers participating in the ACT program are generally already experienced and/or open to pedagogic experimentation (see above, I.1). In this respect, the project is preaching to the converted. Yet participation in the ACT program nevertheless provides teachers with a framework that is favourable to testing new teaching methods and positions; a framework that gives them not only concrete tools, but also a legitimacy and a reason to begin, to consolidate, or to go further in testing these alternative teaching methods.

For teachers, the effects of participating in the program vary according to how familiar they already are with this kind of pedagogy. The teachers involved in the project can also be grouped into three “profiles” depending on their relationship to active learning pedagogy.

- *The “experienced teacher” profile:* this group includes the teachers who are the most familiar with alternative and/or active learning. These are teachers who already have a certain number of years of experience in their profession (they are generally in the middle of their career) and have a self-assurance that allows them to break away from the traditional school framework. They are also characterised by an atypical career trajectory, and a proximity to artistic spheres. These teachers are looking for innovation and challenges, and therefore come to the ACT program for additional skills, particularly in working on changing their position in relation to the students, to further their current practices and to bring their ways of regulating the class group into line with those promoted in community education.

For these teachers, the main contribution of the ACT program was the experience of delegating decision-making power to the students – and in particular accepting that the project might fail, remain uncompleted, or be less ambitious than was initially planned. It was these teachers who went the furthest in their lack of intervention, whilst assisting the students with the project and accepting its imperfections.

Teacher interview – end of project

Now, I am really going to be in a position that I want to be in: I accept that [the project] takes the direction that they have decided to follow, I'll help them as much as they can, even if it is not what I would have done, that doesn't matter, I'll help them.

- *The “curious teacher” profile:* this category brings together teachers who are not necessarily used to working with active learning pedagogies, either because the discipline doesn't lend itself to this (science teachers or librarians) or because they haven't had the opportunity to experiment with them (particularly young teachers). They therefore have more substantial expectations of the ACT program, which is a way for them to discover this kind of teaching method.

For these teachers, the main effect of the ACT program was to confirm the idea that active learning has real advantages and that they want to move more in this direction in the future, even though they are aware that the process may be a long one.

These teachers have greater difficulty not intervening and particularly in accepting that the projects are not completed.

Teacher interview – end of project

Me, I am very controlling, with them, I realise... Oh yes, really. In the projects, it is hard, umm, to not... to not mother them, to not direct the things, mmm, So that's.... in that sense, that's what it's taught me.

- *The “project teacher” profile:* this last group are not “experts” in active learning, but have already experienced, more or less intensely, the break away from top-down conventional teaching, particularly via projects that they regularly conduct in the schools. These teachers often conduct several projects in the same year, with one or several classes. They are used to interdisciplinarity and transversality. Their expectations, which impact on the experimentation, are more in terms of the practical project management methods which allow for the students' independence.

This is the group who struggle most to see the benefits of the ACT project. They do not have the feeling that it helped them to renew their teaching methods – in fact, these teachers apply to the ACT project the same teaching methods that they use on other projects, and tend to delegate less decision-making power to the students than their colleagues do.

Teacher interview – beginning of project

It wasn't so different from what we do, because we are used to working in teams

and running things together, we're used to that.

Whatever their profile, all the teachers found positive things to say about participating in the program – particularly because they considered the training that they received useful on several counts.

Training that was appreciated, useful, and accessible

The training provided to the teachers aimed to present the protocol but also to train them in the active teaching methods they would need to assist with the students' projects. As part of this training, the teachers were asked to play the role of the students in the activities that they would later do with their students. This was a kind of role-play that was particularly appreciated by all the teachers, because it was fun but also because it was immersive, concrete, coherent, lively, and stimulating.

Teacher interview – beginning of project

It was well-designed and interesting for what we can do with the students, in other words, the theory or the protocol came in only once everybody was already convinced by the test.

Teacher interview – end of project

The training brought us to understand the protocol, and to experience the activities ourselves, so we can make them engaging as well, and I think that's very good.

Teacher interview – beginning of project

I really enjoyed testing the activities ourselves, which we will use with the students. I think that is really how you can see the obstacles, the tools, and all the possibilities.

This training program set up a framework for the teachers to appropriate the program up until the vote – after which they moved into unknown territory, given that the way the project would unfold was unpredictable and supposed the teacher letting go. Like the students, the teachers had to “learn through doing”: the teacher training (for the teachers), and the preparatory activities (for the students), prepared them for their adaptation to this form of active learning.

Teacher interview – end of project

The training, I think that it was great for preparation, in fact it was essentially preparation, we did all that preparatory part which worked well with the students.

All the teachers found the training accessible, regardless of their disciplinary profile and their relationship to active learning pedagogy. It also functioned as a booster class so that everyone would have a shared starting point. For teachers whose discipline was not history- geography, and who were less used to deconstructing the notion of citizenship, it allowed them to gain some reference points in negotiating the themes of the project.

Teacher interview – beginning of project

Beginning the notion of citizenship with the declaration of the rights of man and citizen, a text that I have never studied as such with the students, I think yeah, that does remind you what is important and “what it means to be a citizen”, those questions, I found them

interesting, but I think they're things that were obvious for the history and geography teachers, but I come from another discipline so I'd never covered it like that.

Teacher interview – beginning of project

The explanation of citizenship, the civic project, was really good. I knew that it was more or less that, but it clarified some things for me, I think it was quite clear, and no, no, it was concrete, it taught me lots of things – particularly that I'm not a history teacher!

There was also space to question personal understandings of citizenship and to propose shared references, beyond individual representations:

Teacher interview – beginning of project

We covered the idea of citizenship, what it is and what it isn't. And you realise that that provokes quite a lot of debate within a single group.

For the history-geography teachers or “experienced” teachers, the training was an opportunity to consolidate their existing skills and provide new tools, new activities to set up alternative teaching practices, particularly in EMC classes.

Teacher interview – end of project

The training gave me lots and lots of things to revolutionise my way of doing EMC and I'm very happy about that.

Teacher interview – end of project

I found the training extraordinary, I got so much out of it for my teaching. It confirmed the idea that this is the way I have to go. It was very constructive, very pedagogical, we were given a lot of teaching aids.

The training proposed as part of the ACT project was based on a format that is unusual compared to the training generally provided within the French national education system. The “role-play” model breaks away from top down pedagogy, which is in keeping with the content of the program, and closer to the tools used in sociocultural activities.¹⁵

Teacher interview – beginning of project

Atypical in the sense that it's never been like that before (laughs) [...] it's rare that we work like that with... people who use techniques like that, it's really rare [...] generally we all sit around the table, and we think, it's never... here we draw, we talk, we move around, there was all of that, you know, it was really good. I think that these are techniques that people don't know, in French education, we aren't taught those techniques so automatically our teacher trainers don't use them, so yeah.

That is why the role of the trainer in the ACT programme is fundamental to the process of deploying these pedagogical tools. The trainer is the vector of this energy and gives meaning to

¹⁵ “Promoting ‘new pedagogies’, [socio-cultural] organisers consider their audience’s resources as important and drive ‘participative’ logics and taking responsibilities” Francis Lebon (2013), “Les animateurs entre précarité, militantisme et gestion politique des quartiers”, *Pensée plurielle*, p. 63.

the activities proposed – the same that will later be adopted by the teachers. We therefore expect the trainer to be competent but also to be engaged, friendly and charismatic, which will help them establish a relationship of trust with the participants and generate group cohesion for the activities – characteristics that are also associated with those working in sociocultural activities.

Teacher interview – beginning of project

The trainer was there, with a great attitude, nice, competent, cool, the manager who came by the first day was also enthusiastic, convinced by the subject, which is always important.

The training program therefore provided an innovative space for the teachers both in terms of tools, and in its overall format. This environment was highly appreciated by the actors, and favourable to learning, providing a solid starting point to begin the project whatever the teachers' previous background may have been.

Long-term effects on teaching practices

The teachers liked the teaching methods proposed by the ACT programme and all envisaged keeping elements from the protocol and incorporating them into their practices. A significant number of them also wished to repeat the experience of the project. However, they would not necessarily reproduce it identically, because in its current form the protocol takes a lot of time and energy which requires significant “effort” from the teachers.

Teacher interview – end of project

So I will force myself to put it in place again.

These teachers keep the bare bones of the program but incorporate adaptations according to their profile and school.

For “curious teachers” (see above, III.2.a), the change in position associated with this energy-consuming protocol required substantial investment on their part, which they found difficult to justify given the perceived results. In spite of this however, they were open to the idea of renewing this kind of project, keeping the “principle” but changing “the form”. In other words, they would consider keeping the idea of delegating decision-making power to students but simplifying and streamlining the protocol. Teachers in disadvantaged schools also envisaged incorporating greater supervision and guidelines to redress the differences in predispositions to autonomy (see section III.2).

Teacher interview – beginning of project

With these students, in any case, I think that there needs to be more supervision, and more demonstration of the processes at work.

The “experienced teachers” would also adapt the format, but on more specific aspects of the protocol. The preliminary activities would be revised to make them shorter and less repetitive, or they would be incorporated in the deployment of the project to add references to more general thematic notions, and thus shed light on the themes covered by the project chosen by students.

Although all the teachers were not prepared to relaunch a project like ACT, many were inspired to

use the teaching methods provided in the training program and/or use activities from the protocol in their standard classes. The “experienced teachers” planned to move towards self-evaluation or peer-evaluation which they had as yet not used much (see above, 1.2). Among teachers in disadvantaged schools, the idea was to encourage group work, particularly by using the “think-pair-share” activity.

Debates, establishing group rules, or voting were all teaching practices that the teachers found interesting overall and which they plan to incorporate into their classes.

Teacher interview – end of project

In maths there isn't much room for debate, but in homeroom class, next year I will have more projects, so probably I will work on debates in homeroom differently from how I worked before. I understand that it has to be well prepared, so that is something that I will reuse.

The teachers all therefore reused certain elements of the protocol in their other activities, or improved aspects of the teaching methods. Whatever the form or intensity of these evolutions, the ACT project made a contribution to the training of these teachers in active learning pedagogy.

Conclusion

The qualitative assessment of the implementation of the ACT program in France is thus very positive overall:

- In the vast majority of classes where it was implemented, the program was successful in the sense that the students designed and conducted a civic project, respecting the general idea of the program.
- Both teachers and students were on a whole very satisfied with the program. As far as teachers were concerned, it provided an opportunity to improve their teaching practices, to “get out of their comfort zone”, to test new possibilities with their classes, and to change the way they saw their students. For the students, the ACT programme was an unprecedented experience that allowed them to break out of the school routine and provided an opportunity to realise and demonstrate that they were capable of independent organisation and action.
- The ACT programme reflects several transversal objectives of the French school curriculum, not only in terms of citizenship education, but also more generally the development of fundamental values (tolerance, respect, solidarity, etc.) and the acquisition of various skills (organisation, communication, etc.). Participating in this program was therefore a rich learning experience for the students.
- Finally, the teacher-training provided as part of the ACT programme was useful in itself because it has contributed to promoting the active learning pedagogy and the teaching methods used in the project, which all teachers considered particularly instructive and rewarding.

The limitations of the program identified do not undermine this overall positive review. Indeed, they are not so much to do with problems in the program itself, but rather with the context in which it was implemented. Firstly, the program came up against a number of obstacles linked to

internal constraints within schools (very busy schedules and the requirement to finish the course content, tensions within the teaching staff, etc.). Moreover, the transition towards active learning was not straightforward and the ACT programme was sometimes in tension with the school relationships that are habitual in the French context – the teachers struggled to trust the students to manage themselves, and the latter expected more guidance from the adults. Concretely, the projects were only very rarely completed entirely independently by the students; the teachers intervened in varying ways and to different extents depending on the classes. Finally, ACT was not exempt from the structural inequalities of the school system and proved more difficult to implement in disadvantaged schools and with “struggling” students, due to their lesser disposition for autonomy.

The ACT programme was therefore confronted with difficulties that are inherent in the everyday school environment. Although it cannot revolutionise these challenges, this program can help to change the status quo because it participates in promoting active learning alternatives, which helps to change student-teacher relations and provide students with other ways of gaining recognition. Moreover, it also concretely works to develop the students’ ability to work autonomously, a skill that has been identified by researchers as a central condition for academic success.