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# C · E · P · S *Journal*

Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal

*Revija Centra za študij edukacijskih strategij*

The CEPS Journal is an open-access, peer-reviewed journal devoted to publishing research papers in different fields of education, including scientific.

## Aims & Scope

The CEPS Journal is an international peer-reviewed journal with an international board. It publishes original empirical and theoretical studies from a wide variety of academic disciplines related to the field of Teacher Education and Educational Sciences; in particular, it will support comparative studies in the field. Regional context is stressed but the journal remains open to researchers and contributors across all European countries and worldwide. There are four issues per year. Issues are focused on specific areas but there is also space for non-focused articles and book reviews.

## About the Publisher

The University of Ljubljana is one of the largest universities in the region (see [www.uni-lj.si](http://www.uni-lj.si)) and its Faculty of Education (see [www.pef.uni-lj.si](http://www.pef.uni-lj.si)), established in 1947, has the leading role in teacher education and education sciences in Slovenia. It is well positioned in regional and European cooperation programmes in teaching and research. A publishing unit oversees the dissemination of research results and informs the interested public about new trends in the broad area of teacher education and education sciences; to date, numerous monographs and publications have been published, not just in Slovenian but also in English.

In 2001, the Centre for Educational Policy Studies (CEPS; see <http://ceps.pef.uni-lj.si>) was established within the Faculty of Education to build upon experience acquired in the broad reform of the

national educational system during the period of social transition in the 1990s, to upgrade expertise and to strengthen international cooperation. CEPS has established a number of fruitful contacts, both in the region – particularly with similar institutions in the countries of the Western Balkans – and with interested partners in EU member states and worldwide.



Revija Centra za študij edukacijskih strategij je mednarodno recenzirana revija z mednarodnim uredniškim odborom in s prostim dostopom. Namenjena je objavljanju člankov s področja izobraževanja učiteljev in edukacijskih ved.

## Cilji in namen

Revija je namenjena obravnavanju naslednjih področij: poučevanje, učenje, vzgoja in izobraževanje, socialna pedagogika, specialna in rehabilitacijska pedagogika, predšolska pedagogika, edukacijske politike, supervizija, poučevanje slovenskega jezika in književnosti, poučevanje matematike, računalništva, naravoslovja in tehnike, poučevanje družboslovja in humanistike, poučevanje na področju umetnosti, visokošolsko izobraževanje in izobraževanje odraslih. Poseben poudarek bo namenjen izobraževanju učiteljev in spodbujanju njihovega profesionalnega razvoja.

V reviji so objavljeni znanstveni prispevki, in sicer teoretični prispevki in prispevki, v katerih so predstavljeni rezultati kvantitativnih in kvalitativnih empiričnih raziskav. Še posebej poudarjen je pomen komparativnih raziskav.

Revija izide štirikrat letno. Številke so tematsko opredeljene, v njih pa je prostor tudi za netematske prispevke in predstavitev ter recenzije novih publikacij.

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## Editorial

### The Role of Social Pedagogy in Addressing Contemporary and Emerging Challenges of Youth Transitions

This focus issue concentrates on some specific challenges of contemporary society, especially from the point of view of youth transitions. In recent years, many changes connected with different types of crises and their social consequences have arisen. Challenges that existed even earlier became clearer, and inequities between those with sufficient resources to cope with the complexities and consequences of multiple social crises and those who lack such resources became even more polarised. In addition, the importance of social background and the limited possibilities of certain social groups to support their children in their transitions to adulthood needs to be reconsidered. In this focus issue, we discuss those topics from several perspectives. Through different focuses, a primary line of thought will also be developed: what is the role of social pedagogy regarding newly emerging social challenges?

The opening article of the issue, by Ana Bešter Zupančič, sets the conceptual framework within which the rest of the contributions can be read. Reconfiguring youth transitions through the lens of digital sociality, the theoretical paper *Reconfiguring Youth Transitions: Digital Spaces, Social Connections and the Role of Social Pedagogy* argues that transitions are no longer linear pathways from education to work and independence, but fragmented, hybrid trajectories shaped as much by digital environments as by offline institutions. The author's *Multidimensional Rhizomatic Transitions Framework*, which brings together rhizomatic pathways, hybrid spatiality, relational-ethical orientation and critical digital agency, offers social pedagogy a vocabulary for addressing agency, equity and belonging in transitions that are increasingly non-linear and digitally mediated.

The second contribution moves from the conceptual to the institutional. Nataša Mojskerc and Darja Zorc-Maver, in *Manifestations and Effects of Everyday Resistance in Student Dormitories*, examine how young people in Slovenian residential institutions respond to disciplinary control through everyday acts of resistance. Drawing on interviews with dormitory counsellors and on a critical-emancipatory social-pedagogical framework, the authors show that such resistance can function ambivalently – at times reproducing institutional norms, at other times reshaping them – and argue that these micro-practices constitute genuine pedagogical opportunities for reflexive negotiation of institutional life amid intersectional inequalities.

From Austria, Martin Auferbauer, Arno Heimgartner and Thomas Lederer-Hutsteiner contribute *The Participatory Development of the Styrian Youth Strategy With an Action Plan*, a paper that shifts the focus from the individual and institutional to the level of regional policy. Combining interviews, a professional survey and participatory workshops with adolescents, professionals and administrators, the authors trace how a strategic framework for improving young people's living conditions in Styria was co-produced and subsequently anchored in provincial legislation. The article demonstrates how participatory governance and data-informed planning can translate the critique of existing conditions into constructive institutional change – an important reminder that responses to youth transitions are not only pedagogical but also political and administrative.

Returning to the school as a site of protection and risk, Nina Amon Podobnikar and Jana Rapuš Pavel investigate *Teachers' and Counsellors' Views on School Protective Factors for Children With Complex Needs*. Based on interviews with teachers and school counsellors, the article identifies trusting relationships, collaboration with parents and external institutions, and systematically integrated preventive activities as key protective factors, while also naming the obstacles – including the (mis)use of formal disciplinary measures – that undermine timely support. The findings translate directly into recommendations for teacher education, supervision and coordinated support networks.

Kristina Debenjak's contribution, *Psychosocial Distress and Community Support: Students' Perspectives and the Role of Social Pedagogy*, brings the perspective of young people themselves – in this case, social pedagogy students – to the fore through an arts-based, photovoice methodology. The images and narratives collected reveal the emotional, social and structural dimensions of psychosocial distress during the transition to adulthood, and the author argues for a social pedagogy informed by the pedagogy of liberation: one that resists the individualisation of distress in favour of collective, community-based responses.

The focus section closes with a contribution from Spain. Laura Farré-Riera, Núria Carrete-Marín, Mar Beneyto-Seoane and Esther Fatsini-Matheu, in *Pedagogical Renewal and the Role of Teachers in Secondary Schools: Insights From Five Case Studies in Spain*, examine how secondary schools move beyond short-lived innovation toward transformative teaching practices. Based on observations, focus groups, document analysis and in-depth interviews across five schools, the study highlights educational leadership, personalised learning, community engagement and the reorganisation of resources, spaces and time as the pillars of pedagogical renewal that fosters inclusion, belonging and meaningful learning.

Taken together, the six contributions approach youth transitions from complementary vantage points – theoretical reconceptualisation, institutional everyday life, regional policy-making, school-based protective factors, students' lived experience of distress, and whole-school pedagogical renewal – while converging on a shared conclusion: that social pedagogy's relational, participatory and justice-oriented orientation offers a necessary counterweight to the fragmentation, individualisation and inequality that increasingly characterise the transition to adulthood.

The varia section brings together four further contributions. In his submission, *Primary School Teachers' Attitudes, Perceptions and Self-Efficacy Regarding Students With Special Educational Needs: A Comparative Study of the Education Systems in Slovenia and Kosovo*, Arben Keka offers a comparative study of primary school teachers' attitudes, perceptions and self-efficacy regarding students with special educational needs in Slovenia and Kosovo, revealing that in both countries negative sentiments toward inclusive education coexist with comparatively high self-efficacy.

Yuna Puteri Kadarisman, Moh. Rifqi Rahman, Suyanto, Cepi Safrudin Abd Jabar and Ahmad Umar propose a *School Improvement Framework for Indonesia*, derived from a systematic literature review and organised around teaching and learning, leadership and management, assessment, and community and culture.

Christian Ameseder, Iztok Devetak and Darija Skubic investigate incidental learning from science journalism, showing that narrative writing styles improve Austrian non-experts' comprehension of and situational interest in health-science topics, compared with the traditional inverted-pyramid structure, in their submission, titled *Incidental Learning From Science Journalism: The Effects of a Narrative Writing Style on the Comprehension and Situational Interest of Austrian Non-Experts in Health Sciences*.

Finally, in the article titled *Croatian Teachers' Perceptions of Available Support and Barriers to Preschool Inclusion of SEN Children*, authors Sanja Skočić Mihić, Matea Butković and Snježana Sekušak-Galešev examine Croatian preschool teachers' perceptions of the support available for, and barriers to, the inclusion of children with special educational needs, linking perceived support to teachers' attitudes and competencies for inclusive teaching.

The issue concludes with a book review by Bojan Dekleva of Sami Timimi's *V iskanju normalnosti: Nov pristop k razumevanju duševnega zdravja, stiske in nevroznolikosti* [*Searching for Normal: A New Approach to Understanding Mental Health, Distress and Neurodiversity*] (Chiara, 2025). The review connects directly to the issue's focus theme: Timimi's critique of the individualising and

pathologising tendencies in contemporary approaches to mental health and neurodiversity resonates with the volume's recurring argument – voiced across institutional, policy and community contexts alike – that the difficulties young people face in their transitions to adulthood cannot be adequately understood, let alone addressed, in isolation from the social and structural conditions that produce them.

Read as a whole, this issue makes the case that youth transitions can no longer be understood as an individual passage to be managed by the young person alone, but must be read as a social process, shaped and constrained by digital environments, institutional regimes, policy frameworks, schools and communities. Across theoretical reflection, empirical research and policy analysis, social pedagogy emerges as the connecting thread running through the contributions: a discipline that insists on the relational and participatory quality of support, that reads distress and resistance as socially produced rather than as individual deficits, and that seeks to strengthen, rather than replace, the everyday relationships and communities within which young people grow up. In this sense, the issue is not only a survey of contemporary challenges, but also an argument for what social pedagogy has to offer in response to them: a consistently relational, justice-oriented and context-sensitive practice capable of holding together structural critique and everyday support in the accompaniment of young people through increasingly uncertain transitions to adulthood.

ŠPELA RAZPOTNIK AND DARJA ŽORC MAVER

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## Reconfiguring Youth Transitions: Digital Spaces, Social Connections and the Role of Social Pedagogy

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ANA BEŠTER ZUPANČIČ<sup>1</sup>

∞ Youth transitions, once understood as linear progressions from education to work, independence and family life, are increasingly fragmented, prolonged and uncertain. Globalisation, individualisation, precarious labour markets and digitalisation have transformed the conditions of growing up, embedding transitions within hybrid social worlds in which online and offline experiences are deeply entangled. Digital spaces are not neutral tools but socio-technical environments that mediate identity, belonging and opportunity, while introducing new risks and inequalities. This theoretical article reconceptualises youth transitions through the combined lens of digital sociality and social pedagogy. It traces the shift from structured pathways to non-linear trajectories that may, in some contexts, take rhizomatic forms. It also examines the embodied, affective and networked nature of digital participation and considers how social pedagogy's relational, participatory and justice-oriented ethos can address the complexities of hybrid transitions. The proposed *Multidimensional Rhizomatic Transitions Framework* integrates four analytically distinct but dynamically connected dimensions: (1) rhizomatic pathways, (2) hybrid spatiality and sociomaterial entanglement, (3) relational-ethical orientation and (4) critical digital agency, including digi-grasping. Rather than simply placing these dimensions alongside one another, the framework explains how structural and platform conditions shape lived opportunities and constraints, how relational support influences their interpretation, and how digital agency may redirect subsequent pathways. The framework offers conceptual propositions for research, practice and policy. By situating social pedagogy within digitally mediated life courses, the article offers a future-facing approach to fostering agency, equity and belonging in contemporary youth transitions.

**Keywords:** digital spaces, hybrid social worlds, rhizomatic pathways, social connections, youth transitions

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1 Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia; Ana.Bester@pef.uni-lj.si.

## Preoblikovanje prehodov mladih: digitalni prostori, družbene vezi in vloga socialne pedagogike

ANA BEŠTER ZUPANČIČ

Prehodi mladih, ki so bili nekoč razumljeni kot linearno napredovanje od izobraževanja k zaposlitvi, osamosvojitvi in k ustvarjanju družine, postajajo vse bolj razdrobljeni, podaljšani in negotovi. Globalizacija, individualizacija, prekarnost trga dela in digitalizacija so temeljito spremenile okoliščine odraščanja. Prehodi danes potekajo v hibridnih družbenih svetovih, v katerih se spletne izkušnje in izkušnje v živo neločljivo prepletajo. Digitalni prostori pri tem niso samo nevtralna orodja, ampak sociotehnična okolja, ki sooblikujejo identiteto, pripadnost in dostop do priložnosti, hkrati pa prinašajo nova tveganja in poglobljajo neenakosti. V teoretičnem članku prehode mladih na novo konceptualiziramo z vidika družbenih odnosov v digitaliziranem vsakdanu in socialne pedagogike. Osvetlimo premik od vnaprej začrtanih poti k nelinearnim življenjskim potekom, ki lahko v določenih okoliščinah privzamejo rizomatsko obliko. Digitalno participacijo obravnavamo kot utelešeno in afektivno prakso, vpeto v omrežja, ob tem pa preučujemo, kako se lahko socialna pedagogika s svojo usmerjenostjo v odnose, participacijo in v družbeno pravičnost odziva na kompleksnost hibridnih prehodov. Predlagani *večdimenzionalni okvir rizomatskih prehodov* povezuje štiri analitično ločene, vendar dinamično prepletene vidike: 1) rizomatske poti; 2) hibridno prostorskost in sociomaterialno prepletenost; 3) odnosno in etično usmerjenost; 4) kritično zmožnost delovanja v digitalnih okoljih, vključno s t. i. digigraspingom. Okvir teh vidikov ne obravnava samo vzporedno, ampak pojasnjuje, kako strukturni pogoji in značilnosti platform oblikujejo možnosti in omejitve v vsakdanjem življenju, kako odnosna podpora vpliva na njihovo razumevanje in kako lahko zmožnost delovanja v digitalnih okoljih preusmeri nadaljnje poti. Okvir ponuja konceptualna izhodišča za raziskovanje, strokovno delo in za oblikovanje politik. Z umeščanjem socialne pedagogike v življenjske poteke, ki jih vse bolj sooblikujejo digitalni mediji, članek razvija v prihodnost usmerjen pristop h krepitvi zmožnosti mladih za delovanje ter k spodbujanju pravičnosti in pripadnosti v sodobnih procesih prehajanja.

**Ključne besede:** digitalni prostori, hibridni družbeni svetovi, rizomatske poti, družbene vezi, prehodi mladih

## Introduction

Youth transitions describe the processes through which young people move from childhood to adulthood, encompassing shifts in education, work, living arrangements and relationships. Once understood as linear and predictable, moving steadily from school to employment, financial independence and family life, these pathways have become increasingly fragmented, prolonged and uncertain (du Bois-Reymond, 1998; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Harris et al., 2021; Woodman & Wyn, 2015). Precarious labour markets, digitalisation, individualisation and globalisation have reshaped the conditions of growing up (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Kalleberg, 2009; Ule, 2014), making the study of youth transitions timely and socially significant (Chesters, 2024).

In late-modern societies, this reconfiguration is inseparable from the transformations in digital communication and connectivity. A defining feature of contemporary transitions is their deep entanglement with digital spaces, which are often framed in policy discourse as universally beneficial solutions that obscure social and pedagogical complexities (Vivitsou, 2019). In today's digital society, a social formation in which everyday practices are organised through networked technologies, platforms and data flows (Castells, 1996; Orlikowski, 2007; Poell et al., 2019), the online and offline worlds are inseparably linked. Digital spaces mediate identity, belonging and opportunity (Boyd, 2014; Livingstone, 2011; Wängqvist & Frisé, 2016), offering new forms of connection and self-expression while introducing risks, inequalities and pressures to perform (Mesch, 2009; Oblak Črnič et al., 2023; Turkle, 2011; Twenge et al., 2019). They are not neutral tools but socio-technical environments that shape how transitions are experienced and navigated (Andreassen et al., 2017; Pink et al., 2022).

Social pedagogy offers a valuable lens for engaging with these dynamics. Grounded in the principles of relational care, participation and social justice (Eriksson, 2014; Hämmäläinen, 2015; Storø, 2013), it views transitions as situated, relational processes shaped by structural conditions and everyday interactions (Dewey, 1986; Goffman, 2009). Its emphasis on dialogue, recognition and holistic learning is well suited to address the hybrid realities of young people's lives, bridging digital and physical contexts (Todorović et al., 2025; Winman, 2020).

Although youth transitions, digital sociality and social pedagogy have been extensively studied, they are rarely integrated into a coherent model of hybrid, digitally mediated transitions. Existing approaches tend to privilege either macro-structural conditions or micro-level identity practices, obscuring how sociomaterial entanglements and relational-ethical support shape young people's fragmented, rhizomatic pathways across online and offline settings. This

gap constitutes the article's central research problem.

To address this, the article synthesises relevant scholarship through a theoretical-conceptual approach combining an integrative narrative review with critical conceptual analysis. It identifies theoretical developments and tensions and proposes an interdisciplinary framework that reconceptualises youth transitions through digital sociality and social pedagogy. The framework is provisional: its concepts and proposed relationships are intended to guide empirical research and remain open to refinement or rejection.

The article first reviews key shifts in theories of youth transitions, then examines how digital spaces shape interaction, identity and belonging, before considering social pedagogy and presenting a multidimensional framework for contemporary digitally mediated transitions.

## Conceptualising Youth Transitions

### *From Structured Pathways to Fragmented Trajectories*

The concept of youth transitions has long been grounded in structuralist paradigms that conceptualise adolescence and early adulthood as a linear progression through clearly defined stages: education, employment, independent living and family formation, often referred to as a “normal biography” (du Bois-Reymond, 1998, p. 64). These models, including Tinto's (1988) theory of student integration, assumed normative, institutionalised routes to adulthood and success. Transitions were viewed as predictable and sequential, anchored in stable social institutions and economic structures.

However, by the beginning of the 21st century, this model began to lose its relevance. Scholars have increasingly questioned whether such frameworks can still account for the lived realities of young people navigating shifting social and economic landscapes (Chesters, 2024; Harris et al., 2021; Woodman & Wyn, 2015; Wyn et al., 2012). Traditional linear models are ill-equipped to capture the complexity and variability of contemporary youth experiences.

### *Disruption, Precarity and the Prolongation of Youth*

The critique of classical transition theories gained momentum in the context of broader social transformations. In the 1990s, Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) introduced the concept of a risk society, highlighting how individuals increasingly bear responsibility for managing life transitions that were once overseen by social institutions. This shift is deeply intertwined with the processes of individualisation and globalisation, which not only expand individual choices but also create new forms of insecurity and disconnection (Bauman, 2000).

Individualisation, while offering new freedoms, places the burden of psychosocial integration on young people, often without adequate institutional support (Ule, 2014). Globalisation further erodes traditional social bonds and generates uncertainty, transforming perceived opportunities into sources of anxiety and risk. As Ule (2019) observes, the market often offers substitutes such as extended education, consumer goods and digital escapism, which may prolong adolescence and reinforce dependence rather than facilitate adult independence.

The traditional milestones of adulthood, completing education, entering stable employment, achieving financial independence and forming families, are increasingly delayed or disrupted (Eurostat, 2015; Furlong, 2016; Ule, 2019). Youth transitions have become increasingly complex, non-linear and prolonged. Concepts such as yo-yo transitions (Biggart & Walther, 2006; du Bois-Reymond & Blasco, 2003) capture the reversibility of contemporary pathways, while returning to the parental home illustrates how changes in education, employment and intimate relationships can reverse apparently completed transitions (Stone et al., 2014).

The labour market plays a key role in this shift. Stable, long-term employment has been replaced by precarious, flexible and often insecure work (Chesters, 2023; Kalleberg, 2009; Mortimer & Moen, 2016). Simultaneously, technological developments are eliminating traditional jobs while raising the skill threshold for new employment (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014; Furlong, 2016; Lavrič & Deželan, 2021). These economic shifts delay financial independence and contribute to psychological stress, particularly among those lacking family support networks (Alberti et al., 2018; Eckersley, 2011).

### *Contemporary Approaches: From Individualisation to Rhizomatic Thinking*

Contemporary scholarship has moved towards a more nuanced understanding of youth transitions. The linear model has been challenged by frameworks that highlight the individualised, fragmented and non-linear nature of modern life courses (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Wyn & Woodman, 2006). In this context, researchers have called for holistic and situated approaches that acknowledge the diversity of young people's trajectories (Bennett, 2015).

One key development is the recognition of digital technologies as not merely contexts but constitutive and mediating elements in youth transitions. Digital platforms now mediate identity formation, social interactions and future aspirations (Livingstone, 2011; Theodoridis et al., 2019). However, they also introduce new vulnerabilities, such as online harassment and persistent digital

footprints, which complicate identity stability (Livingstone & Bober, 2006). Lupton's (2016) concept of a digital risk society captures how digital environments both enable and endanger young people's self-projects.

Building on Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991), recent theories explore how youth engage in reflexive biography-making amid uncertain, risk-saturated conditions. Leccardi (2005) notes that young biographies are increasingly shaped by an understanding of the unpredictability of the future and the constant flexibility that it requires.

This shift has prompted a turn towards rhizomatic and assemblage theories (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Semetsky, 2011), which conceptualise transitions as entangled, emergent and relational rather than as movement along a pre-determined sequence. The term *rhizomatic* is used here more specifically than *non-linear*. Non-linearity describes a pathway that includes delays, reversals or unexpected turns; a rhizomatic perspective seeks to explain how those turns are generated through changing connections among institutions, relationships, material resources and digital platforms. Gravett (2021) critiques dominant metaphors of bridges and gaps and proposes rhizomatic transitions as movements with multiple entry points, exits and possible directions across social, institutional and digital terrains. The concept is therefore analytically useful when a change in one domain creates possibilities or constraints in another. It does not imply that transitions are random or free from structural inequality, and where this relational mechanism is not evident, the more established language of fragmented or non-linear transitions may be sufficient.

One of the most profound influences on these contemporary non-linear trajectories is the integration of digital spaces into young people's everyday lives. Digital environments connect areas of life that were previously more clearly separated, and both expand and constrain opportunities for interaction, belonging and learning, a theme explored in depth in the following section.

## Digital Spaces and Social Interactions

### *Embodied and Experiential Dimensions of Digital Life*

Digital spaces are embodied and affective environments through which young people interact, form identities and make meaning. Dufva and Dufva (2019, p. 20) introduce *digi-grasping* as active sense making at the interface between digital and physical worlds, encompassing embodied, ethical and aesthetic dimensions of engagement with digitalisation. Although it overlaps with embodied and embedded cognition through its focus on tacit, situated knowledge, it specifically connects experience with creativity, ethical judgement and

participation in shaping digital environments. This article therefore treats digital-grasping as one component of critical digital agency, not as a replacement for established cognition theories or a label for all digital participation.

Theodoridis and Miles (2024) further explore the experiential dimension of digital life, conceptualising *the experiential realm* as a sensory and emotional space intensified through digital media. Visuals, interactivity and real-time feedback amplify this realm, while temporal and spatial boundaries are blurred by the continuous and remixable nature of digital content. Youth engagement in this hybrid, digital-physical space is therefore deeply affective and immersive, shaped by the affordances of the technologies they use and the cultural meanings they create in the process. Robards (2012) argues that online and offline lives are increasingly intertwined. The description of an *always-on* culture refers to this continuous availability and overlap: personal, social and educational demands may remain present across times and places rather than ending when a young person leaves a particular physical setting. This does not make digital and face-to-face interaction identical; bodily, spatial and contextual cues may be altered or reduced online, even when digitally mediated interaction remains meaningful.

This transformation reflects the broader restructuring of social life. Castells's (1996) theory of the *network society* describes how power, identity and cultural participation are reconfigured through global digital networks. In this context, digital access remains an important axis of inclusion and exclusion, but inequality also concerns the quality of access, autonomy, support and visibility. As Mesch (2009) notes, it is particularly youth with greater financial resources who are often better positioned to engage with new technologies, which are at the forefront of digital transformations, raising concerns about widening inequalities. The platformisation of daily life (Poell et al., 2019) adds a further layer of complexity, as algorithmic systems now mediate visibility, participation and value. In this article, *sociomaterial entanglement* refers to this mutual shaping of social practices and technological arrangements: relationships and opportunities are jointly influenced by people, material resources, devices, interfaces and platform rules. Such framings reflect what Vivitsou (2019) describes as the myth-making around digitalisation, where technological change is naturalised while its socio-political implications remain obscured.

### *Social Interactions, Identity Performance and Networked Publics*

Digital spaces have reshaped social interactions among young people, mediating presence, accessibility and intimacy. Although Berger and Luckmann (1966) have positioned face-to-face interaction as the most authentic

form of communication, there is no consensus on whether digital interaction enhances or diminishes social life. Some argue that it weakens relational depth and fosters loneliness (Pittman & Reich, 2016; Turkle, 2011; Twenge et al., 2019), while others highlight its capacity to complement offline relationships, promote connectedness and empower those with fewer social skills (Ahn & Shin, 2013; Hampton et al., 2011; Oblak Črnič et al., 2023). For adolescents limited by suburbanisation, restrictive schedules or a lack of physical gathering spaces, social media supports friendships and belonging (Boyd, 2014).

However, digital connection is not synonymous with relational depth. Turkle's (2011) *tethered self* describes individuals who are constantly connected yet increasingly isolated. Adolescent interaction often centres on control, image management and performative presence rather than authentic dialogue or vulnerability, creating connection without closeness that can exacerbate loneliness and relational fragility.

Within these contexts, young people navigate multiple audiences. Boyd's (2014) notion of *networked publics* and *context collapse* illustrates how youth perform identity across converging peer, family and institutional contexts. These performances are vital acts of self-construction shaped by platform affordances such as visibility, persistence and scalability. Gabriel (2014) emphasises the intentionality, noting that youth constantly negotiate visibility and projected identity. The pressure to curate a coherent and acceptable online self can produce anxiety when visibility is linked to social status or inclusion. Theodoridis et al. (2019) suggest that self-presentation can offer agency and control while helping to manage anxiety and assert stability amid everyday uncertainty.

### *Freedom, Surveillance, Belonging and Learning*

The tension between freedom and surveillance is central to many youth experiences in digital space. Platforms can serve as *parent-free zones* (Lincoln, 2012), allowing experimentation, content sharing and exploration of taboo subjects without adult supervision. Yet, platform structures also reinforce exclusionary rules of visibility and belonging (Lincoln, 2014; Theodoridis & Miles, 2024), marginalising those who lack the resources or skills to navigate them. Boyd (2014) highlights how digital inequality extends beyond access and involves disparities in support, autonomy and social capital. Platform preferences are often racialised, reflecting broader segregation and cultural stratification.

These dynamics shape identity formation, belonging and learning. Youth engage in what Bennett (2018) calls a *do-it-yourself identity*, using digital media to assert independence and self-expression, but public identity construction also brings vulnerability to social feedback. Hällgren and Björk (2023) argue

that digital technologies collapse the boundaries between school and leisure, private and public, and analogue and digital, thereby producing complex, fluid identity practices often misunderstood by adults. Building on existential and relational theories (Bauman, 2000), they understand digital identity not merely as representation through profile images or selfies, but as lived experience shaped by peer validation, algorithmic visibility and emotional investment.

This is particularly true for marginalised or minority youth. Digital spaces can provide belonging for those exploring gender and sexuality (Pattaro, 2015) and enable authenticity where offline constraints limit it (Wängqvist & Frisé, 2016). Yet, harassment, surveillance and exclusion threaten those already vulnerable (Boyd, 2014). Livingstone (2011) captures the tension between opportunity and risk: the Internet offers both connection, creativity and civic participation as well as harmful content, privacy violations and emotional strain.

Digital practices are increasingly intertwined with learning and development. Young people use the internet to socialise, produce content, seek information and engage with political or cultural issues (Livingstone, 2011). These learning processes are not limited to formal education but span in- and out-of-school contexts. Research on remote craft education during the COVID-19 pandemic shows how digitally mediated learning is shaped by students' material and relational home conditions, revealing creative possibilities and inequalities in access to tools, materials and meaningful interaction (Kouhia et al., 2021). However, research often isolates technology use from the broader youth experience. Hällgren and Björk (2023) call for holistic, youth-centred methodologies that recognise how identity, learning and digital participation are fundamentally entangled.

## **Social Pedagogy and the Role of Educators**

### ***Responding to Hybrid Youth Transitions***

Structural transformations, digital-interactional dynamics and the shift from structured, linear pathways toward fragmented, prolonged and non-linear trajectories create conditions in which social pedagogy becomes particularly relevant. As young people navigate life courses marked by precarity (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992), individualisation and globalisation (Giddens, 1991; Ule, 2014), pathways to adulthood have become more complex, hybrid and uncertain. With its emphasis on relational care, participation and social justice, social pedagogy responds to transitions as situated, relational and mediated processes rather than fixed developmental stages, addressing structural inequalities and the affective, embodied realities of digital life.

Digital spaces have become central arenas for identity formation, belonging and learning. Boyd's (2014) notion of networked publics captures how young people express autonomy, seek recognition and perform identity through affordances such as visibility, persistence and scalability. These affordances can empower or constrain, reproducing inequalities in digital literacy, autonomy and social capital along lines of class, race and geography. Social pedagogy's commitment to inclusion and recognition (Honneth, 1996) supports equitable participation online and offline. Boyd's (2014) example of racialised platform migration from MySpace to Facebook further reflects broader patterns of segregation, underscoring the need for culturally responsive pedagogies that view digital participation as both a social practice and a political terrain.

### *Theoretical and Practical Orientations for Hybrid Transitions*

The theoretical orientations of social pedagogy offer flexible responses to these challenges. Eriksson's (2014) typology of adaptive, mobilising and democratic models provides tools for engaging with rhizomatic, non-linear transitions (Gravett, 2021). The adaptive model supports integration into existing structures but is limited under disruption and uncertainty. The mobilising model emphasises structural critique and empowerment, resonating with digital activism and marginalised voices, while the democratic model centres on dialogue and mutual recognition within trust-based relationships (Storø, 2013). Together, these orientations address transitions as emergent, context-bound processes shaped by offline structures and online practices.

Integrating digital theory into social pedagogy is essential. Winman (2020) argues that digitalisation restructures participation, identity and community, requiring social pedagogy's theoretical foundations to be reconfigured. Drawing on Dewey's (1986) experiential learning, Goffman's (2009) interactionism and Hämäläinen's (2015) understanding of social pedagogy as a response to societal transformation, Winman addresses both infrastructural and relational dimensions. A *sociomaterial* perspective recognises that participation is jointly shaped by relationships, physical settings, devices, interfaces and platforms, while *digital intimacy* refers to trust and vulnerability cultivated online (Andreassen et al., 2017; Pink et al., 2022). These concepts are useful when they clarify concrete relational processes. Similarly, Perla et al. (2025) emphasise relational, reflective and context-attuned practice, positioning educators as co-constructors of supportive, ethically grounded learning environments.

Livingstone's (2011) critique of instrumental ICT integration in formal education, detached from young people's lived realities and participatory practices, parallels the limitations of traditional transition models. In contrast,

peer-based practices such as blogging, fan communities and collaborative projects allow identity, collaboration and learning to intersect. Todorović et al. (2025) examine how youth work relationships can be extended into digital spaces through platform-based interactions such as reactions, short messages and shared media. Although easily dismissed, these micro-interactions sustain social bonds and affirm identity amid precarity and change. Digital spaces are therefore not separate from real life but vital terrains where young people navigate transitions, belonging and becoming.

Todorović et al. (2025) provide concrete examples of this approach. Hybrid participation models that combine face-to-face engagement with online presence have emerged, in which educators act as digital companions rather than solely as monitors. This can extend relational presence through reactions, short messages and shared media and may allow support to develop gradually within the rhythms of young people's digital lives. However, digital companionship should not be endorsed uncritically. Digitally mediated contact may offer less access to tacit, embodied and contextual cues than face-to-face interaction and raises questions concerning privacy, safeguarding, professional boundaries and unequal expectations of availability. It should therefore be understood as a context-dependent complement to, rather than a replacement for, face-to-face engagement, and its usefulness should be assessed from the perspectives of both young people and practitioners.

### *From Digital Literacy to Digi-Grasping*

The move from functional digital literacy towards what Dufva and Dufva (2019) call digi-grasping offers one useful extension of established approaches. It frames digital engagement as an embodied, ethical and aesthetic practice, moving beyond safe use towards critical, creative and participatory involvement. This aligns closely with the holistic and reflective ethos of social pedagogy, which supports young people not only to navigate digital spaces but also, where possible, to question and reshape them. Within the proposed framework, digi-grasping is located under the broader dimension of critical digital agency. It therefore functions as a sensitising concept for examining how technical skills, feelings, creativity and ethical reflection interact, rather than as a claim that all forms of digital agency must take this form.

Janer and Úcar's (2017) eight dimensions of social pedagogy provide a comprehensive framework for extending these practices into digital contexts. These dimensions are as follows: contextual, historical, epistemological, functional, professional, methodological, normative and ethical-political. Their model accommodates the vulnerabilities introduced by blurred public-private

boundaries, constant connectivity and shifting support structures while keeping participation, social justice and relational engagement at the core. By applying this framework to hybrid transitions, educators can address both traditional forms of exclusion and the new inequalities generated by digital mediation.

In summary, social pedagogy connects structural transformations with affective and sociomaterial dynamics, providing a relational, critically aware and future-oriented approach. By fostering trust in digital intimacies, enabling collective agency and cultivating the skills to navigate and shape digital environments, it equips young people not merely to adapt to changing conditions, but to actively participate in reimagining the pathways into adulthood.

## **Reconfiguring Transitions: Towards a New Theoretical Framework**

### *Synthesis of Key Insights*

The preceding analysis shows how youth transitions have shifted from structured, linear life-course models to fragmented, prolonged and rhizomatic processes shaped by precarious labour markets, digitalisation, individualisation and globalisation. They are negotiated in hybrid physical–digital spaces, where belonging, identity and learning are mediated by platforms, algorithms and socio-technical norms. Social pedagogy offers a relational, justice-oriented lens for ethical, dialogical and participatory support. Although these strands remain divided across macro-structural and micro-level frameworks, the framework connects them by explaining how structural inequality and platform governance shape everyday visibility, recognition and opportunity, while relational support and critical agency may reproduce, buffer or redirect these effects.

### *Rationale for a New Framework*

A reconfigured model must encompass structural inequality and the lived, affective realities of digital sociality. Youth transitions are digitally stratified through unequal social capital, algorithmic visibility and supportive adult engagement (Boyd, 2014). As digital spaces combine opportunity and risk (Livingstone, 2011), young people are neither inherently competent digital natives nor passive victims, but situated actors whose agency is enabled and constrained by platforms, infrastructures and social inequalities.

Turkle's (2011) concept of the *tethered self* captures the paradox of constant connection alongside difficulties with solitude, vulnerability and sustained relational presence. Digital interactions enable visibility, belonging and self-expression, but may reduce affective depth to performative exchanges.

Social pedagogy therefore requires relational responsibility and ethics of care that foster critical reflection, participatory agency and dialogic presence across online and offline contexts.

Winman's (2020) integration of digitalisation into social pedagogy supports a multi-layered, relational and digitally inclusive model. Drawing on Goffman's (2009) and Orlikowski's (2007) concept of sociomaterial entanglement, it locates participation within platforms, networks and algorithmic systems. Poell et al. (2019) further show how platform infrastructures, markets and governance shape visibility, identity, peer networks and community access, connecting macro-level structures with lived experience.

Finally, Dufva and Dufva's (2019) concept of *digi-grasping frames* digital engagement as embodied, ethical and aesthetic rather than merely instrumental. By emphasising doing, feeling and making, it complements rhizomatic models and conceptualises digital competence as relational, situated and transformative.

### *The Multidimensional Rhizomatic Transitions Framework*

Bringing these strands together, this article proposes the *Multidimensional Rhizomatic Transitions Framework*, a model that conceptualises youth transitions as *digitally mediated becomings*: non-linear, affective and co-constructed processes shaped by the interplay of structural forces, sociomaterial contexts and relational support. The framework is multidimensional because no single level adequately explains transitions, and it is rhizomatic where changing connections create new entry points, exits or directions. Its dimensions are not intended as parallel categories but as parts of a recursive process through which conditions are experienced, interpreted and acted upon.

The framework comprises four interlinked dimensions:

- **Rhizomatic Pathways**  
Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) metaphor of the rhizome and Gravett's (2021) re-theorisation, pathways are potentially networked and emergent, with multiple entry and exit points. They evolve through interactions among institutions, relationships, material conditions and digital environments. A pathway is rhizomatic when shifting connections generate its direction, not merely when a conventional sequence is delayed or reversed.
- **Hybrid Spatiality and Sociomaterial Entanglement**  
Informed by Orlikowski (2007) and Winman (2020), transitions unfold across connected physical and digital settings. Platform rules, devices, resources and institutional environments shape access, visibility,

belonging and exclusion. This dimension links structural conditions to lived experience by showing how broader arrangements create everyday opportunities and constraints.

- **Relational-Ethical Orientation**  
Rooted in social pedagogy (Hämäläinen, 2015; Storø, 2013), this dimension emphasises dialogue, mutual recognition and ethics of care in navigating uncertainty. Although relational support cannot remove structural inequality, it shapes perceptions of opportunities and risks, experiences of recognition and trust, and access to resources and connections. Therefore, it mediates between hybrid conditions, subsequent agency and pathways.
- **Critical Digital Agency and Digi-Grasping**  
Building on Poell et al. (2019) and Dufva and Dufva (2019), this dimension frames digital agency as the capacity to navigate, question and, under some conditions, influence platform structures. Digi-grasping captures the embodied, creative, ethical and collective practices through which such agency may develop. Agency is neither assumed nor unlimited but depends on resources, recognition and platform conditions. When exercised, it can open, close or redirect pathways, feeding back into the first dimension.

### *How the Dimensions Interact*

The framework follows a recursive sequence: macro-structural conditions and platform governance shape hybrid opportunity environments experienced through visibility, participation, belonging and exclusion. Relational-ethical support influences interpretation and access to resources, while critical digital agency shapes responses that may preserve, interrupt or redirect pathways. Collective participation can reshape relationships, organisations and, less often, platforms or policies.

For example, precarious employment may increase reliance on platform-mediated work, where ranking systems affect visibility and opportunity. Support from educators or peers may help young people interpret conditions, access alternatives or contest unfairness, creating new pathways without implying that support or agency alone can overcome structural constraints.

### *Implications for Research, Practice and Policy*

The framework links macro-structural analysis with lived experience. Research should examine infrastructures, everyday practices and their relationships; practice may extend support into digital settings only with explicit

ethical boundaries and safeguarding; and policy must recognise that platform governance shapes visibility, participation and resources. Empirical studies can trace rhizomatic branching across life domains; examine access, devices, platform rules and exclusion within hybrid spatiality; explore recognition, trust and boundaries within relational-ethical support; and study navigation, production, refusal and collective action as critical digital agency. Class, gender, ethnicity, geography and disability should be treated as intersecting conditions that shape access, risk, support and agency.

Moving beyond deficit-based or purely linear models, *the Multidimensional Rhizomatic Transitions Framework* positions youth not merely as adapting to changing conditions, but as active co-creators of their futures, navigating, shaping and at times resisting the sociomaterial landscapes through which their transitions unfold.

### *Assessing the Framework's Validity and Usefulness*

The framework is most useful when transitions span life domains and digital relations shape access, support or opportunity; it is less applicable to stable institutional sequences or incidental digital conditions. Applications should specify the population, domain, platform, timeframe and relevant inequalities.

It proposes that platform and institutional conditions shape pathways through visibility, belonging and networks; relational-ethical support determines whether digital conditions become resources or constraints; critical digital agency depends on access, recognition and participation; and changes in one domain may open pathways in another. These propositions can be tested through longitudinal, comparative, ethnographic and participatory research.

The framework has limited value if its dimensions lack identifiable relationships, simpler concepts explain the evidence equally well or its key factors do not differentiate pathways. Research must also consider whether digital companionship weakens relational depth, structural precarity outweighs support or rhizomatic patterns are context-specific. These alternatives position the framework as a contestable research programme rather than a normative manifesto.

## **Conclusion**

Building on the Multidimensional Rhizomatic Transitions Framework, this article conceptualises youth transitions not as linear, standardised sequences but as fragmented and prolonged, digitally mediated becomings across entangled digital and offline spaces. Integrating rhizomatic transitions, digital sociality and social pedagogy, it shows how sociomaterial entanglements shape

identity, belonging, learning and agency, as well as encounters with opportunity, risk and structural constraints. It positions social pedagogy as a relational, participatory and justice-oriented response to structural inequality and the affective and embodied realities of digital life.

The framework remains conceptual and limited by its scope, abstraction and untested relationships. Its dimensions may vary in relevance, while rhizomatic language may add little where delayed, reversible or non-linear trajectories provide sufficient explanation. Digital connection cannot be assumed to create relational depth, nor can social-pedagogical support compensate for structural insecurity, discrimination or unequal platform power. Its usefulness must therefore be assessed in relation to class, gender, ethnicity, geography and disability.

Future longitudinal, participatory, comparative and multimodal research should test the framework's relationships, its value beyond existing non-linear models and the implications of educators acting as *digital companions*. It should also examine disconfirming cases in which relationships, agency or platforms do not have the proposed effects.

In practice, support should combine relational presence, digital awareness and critical digital agency while remaining context-sensitive, ethically bounded and responsive to young people's preferences and unequal access. Equitable transitions require structural change, relational support and individual and collective agency, recognising that these operate at different levels and cannot substitute for one another.

## **Ethical Statement**

The research did not involve human and animal subjects. The reviews on which it was based aggregated studies that had already received ethical approval. Consequently, no additional ethical approval was necessary.

## **Data Availability Statement**

Since the present study is a literature review, it does not involve the collection or analysis of primary empirical data.

## **Disclosure Statement**

The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

When preparing this article, the author used ChatGPT (GPT-5.6 Sol in August 2026; earlier model versions were not retained), Paperpal, and Jenni

AI (web applications; versions not recorded) in July, August, November and December 2025, and January, July and August 2026. As the exact historical prompts were not retained, the following reconstructed prompt summarises their use: “Edit the supplied text for clarity, coherence, accessibility, concision and academic style, while preserving the author’s arguments, terminology and citations. Do not introduce new evidence, references, claims, interpretations or conclusions.”

The tools were used solely for language editing and revisions, not to generate or analyse data, create references or make scholarly judgements. The author reviewed and edited all outputs and accepts full responsibility for the publication’s content and integrity.

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## **Biographical note**

**ANA BEŠTER ZUPANČIČ** is a teaching assistant in social pedagogy at the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, and a PhD candidate. Her main research focuses on how young people experience and navigate social interactions across physical and digital environments, with particular attention to changing patterns of connection, belonging and everyday relational life.

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## Manifestations and Effects of Everyday Resistance in Student Dormitories

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NATAŠA MOJŠKERC<sup>\*1</sup> AND DARJA ZORC MAVER<sup>2</sup>

Student dormitories in Slovenia are educational residential institutions, primarily intended for upper secondary school students whose place of study is geographically distant from their family home. Their aim is to support students' academic success and personal development through structured living, educational guidance, and psychosocial support. However, the institutional social control and disciplinary acts incite resistance that can function to reproduce or shift dormitory norms and structures, with ambiguous effect for the empowerment of the students. Leaning on the ideas of critical-emancipatory social pedagogy, the article explores dormitory counsellors' perceptions of everyday resistance and asks two research questions. Firstly, how does everyday resistance manifest itself in shifting student dormitory norms and structures and with what effects? Secondly, how does everyday resistance manifest itself in reproducing dormitory norms and structures and with what effects? Five semi-structured interviews with dormitory counsellors were conducted, focusing on examples of everyday resistance. The analysis is grounded in theoretical conceptualisations of power, resistance and critical-emancipatory social pedagogy. Findings suggest that everyday resistance in student dormitories is a pedagogical opportunity for reflexive negotiation of institutional life and regulation of oppressive and productive practices related to intersectional inequalities.

**Keywords:** youth in residential institutions, everyday resistance, agency, intersectional inequalities, student dormitories

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1 <sup>\*</sup>Corresponding Author. Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia; [Natasa.Mojškerc@pef.uni-lj.si](mailto:Natasa.Mojškerc@pef.uni-lj.si).

2 Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia.

## Pojavne oblike in učinki vsakdanjega odpora v dijaških domovih

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NATAŠA MOJŠKERC IN DARJA ZORC MAVER

☞ Dijaški domovi v Sloveniji so vzgojno-izobraževalne nastanitvene ustanove, namenjene predvsem dijakom in dijakinjam, katerih kraj šolanja je zemljepisno oddaljen od njihovega doma. Namen dijaških domov je s strukturiranim prebivanjem, z vzgojnim delovanjem in s psihosocialno podporo prispevati k učnemu uspehu ter osebnostnemu razvoju dijakov in dijakinj. Institucionalni nadzor in disciplinski ukrepi pa vzbujajo odpor, ki lahko prispeva k reprodukciji ali pa spreminjanju domskih norm in struktur, pri čemer so učinki na opolnomočenje dijakinj in dijakov lahko večpomenski. Na ozadju idej kritično-emancipatorne socialne pedagogike članek raziskuje, kako domski svetovalni delavci in delavke vidijo vsakdanji odpor, ter zastavlja dve raziskovalni vprašanji: 1) kako se vsakdanji odpor kaže pri spreminjanju domskih norm in struktur ter kakšne učinke ima; 2) kako se vsakdanji odpor kaže pri reprodukciji domskih norm in struktur ter kakšne učinke ima. Izvedenih je bilo pet polstrukturiranih intervjujev s svetovalnimi delavci in delavkami dijaških domov. Analiza temelji na teoretskih konceptualizacijah moči, odpora in kritično-emancipatorne socialne pedagogike. Ugotovitve kažejo, da vsakdanji odpor v dijaških domovih predstavlja pedagoško priložnost za refleksivno soustvarjanje domskega vsakdanjika ter uravnavanje opresivnih in produktivnih praks, povezanih z intersekcijskimi neenakostmi.

**Ključne besede:** mladi v dijaških domovih, vsakdanji odpor, zmožnost delovanja, intersekcijske neenakosti

## Introduction

Student dormitories in Slovenia are educational residential institutions, primarily intended for upper secondary school for students whose place of study is geographically distant from their family home. Currently there are 36 student dormitories in Slovenia. They are an integral part of the public education system of the country. These institutions contribute to the quality of upper secondary education by functioning not only as accommodation facilities but also as settings which offer educational guidance and support (Marc, 2023).

The normative framework of dormitory life is governed by aims and objectives defined by the *Educational Program for Student Dormitories* (*Vzgojni program za dijaške domove*, 2011) and grounded in the *General Upper Secondary School Act* (*Zakon o gimnazijah*, 1996), *Organization and Financing of Education Act* (*Zakon o organizaciji in financiranju vzgoje in izobraževanja*, 1996) and *Act on Vocational and Professional Education* (*Zakon o poklicnem in strokovnem izobraževanju*, 2006). The focus is on creating a cultural environment that supports basic human rights, values and widely accepted social norms as outlined in the *White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia* (*Bela knjiga o vzgoji in izobraževanju v Republiki Sloveniji*, 2011).

Student dormitories also address students' specific needs, with daily routines closely tied to schooling. Rules prescribe study time, meals, curfew, silence at night and room hygiene. The document *Rules on Accommodation in Student Dormitories* (*Pravilnik o bivanju v dijaških domovih*, 2018) also prohibits substance abuse and violence and mandates participation in dormitory activities.

With their structured schedules, power hierarchies between staff and students, and classification practices of grouping students into residential groups (*vzgojna skupina*) with an assigned mentor/educator (*matični vzgojitelj*), dormitories resemble Goffman's (1991) total institutions, characterised by social control and disciplinary practices regulating dormitories every day.

Institutional power in student dormitories can be viewed both as repressive and enabling. Using the concept of productive power within the apparatus of security (Foucault, 1978, 1980, 2007) rules and practices can be seen as both regulatory and supportive, aiming to empower students. Such an understanding of institutional power allows for addressing social control in dormitories not merely as punitive surveillance but also as enabling regulation of the living environment. Dormitory regulations guide students towards meeting schooling demands and developing competences for personal growth, autonomy, and equitable inclusion in society (Marc, 2023).

Counsellors (*svetovalni delavci*) play a key role in structuring a wide range of relations between students, family, dormitory and school, overseeing intake, group formation, and psychosocial and educational support (Marc, 2023). The hierarchical power relation allows for disciplinary acts which can be interpreted as symbolic violence, legitimised by hegemonic power relations (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000; Foucault, 1991). Research indicates that symbolic violence entails pre-chosen meanings and methods of pedagogical act that tend to regulate the behaviour of agents in accordance with normative expectations of the society and the institution (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000). All pedagogic action is “symbolic violence insofar as it is imposition of cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000, p. 6). This statement should not be understood as a moral judgement on the hierarchical structure of staff-student relationships in dormitories, but as an invitation to examine the consequences of that hierarchy.

While symbolic violence relates to cultural and social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000), some scholars criticise it as too deterministic, limiting agency and resistance (Malpas et al., 2016; McNay, 1999; Morgan & Björkert, 2006; Mottier, 2002; Witz, 2004). However, Bourdieu and Passeron (2000) emphasise the relative autonomy of agents exercising symbolic violence. These agents can act reflectively, adapting the methods and content of their work with students in dormitories. In this they are autonomous and preconditioned, because their work “entails the impossibility (...) of freely defining the mode of imposition, the content imposed and the public on which it imposes it” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000, p. 27). As Yeatman insightfully suggests: “Domination can be used to control others in order to serve interests of the powerful, or domination can work democratically to extend or even constitute the powers of subjects” (1997, p. 45).

Institutional power also incites resistance (Kallio & Honkatukia, 2022), which can provide opportunities to practice critical agency and structure alternative practices. Interactions between enforcing and resisting agents can become a fruitful playground for critical pedagogical action (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994) by gaining critical insights into oppressive elements of reality. These oppressive elements relate to the structures of social inequality based on differences in social-economic background, race and ethnicity, gender, and more. Theories of intersectionality consider multiple interconnections between socially constructed positions (Crenshaw, 1991; Nash, 2008) based on categories such as race, gender, etc. While they are “too simplistic to capture the complexity of lived experience” (McCall, 2005, p. 1776), they nevertheless reflect the inequality among social groups (McCall, 2005).

Staff practicing critical-emancipatory social pedagogy in dormitories not only support students in adapting to society, but also in critically questioning social inequalities and oppressive structures (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009; Hämäläinen, 2012). Empowerment is achieved by developing critical consciousness and agency, enabling change in oppressive conditions (Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2011; Freire, 2000; Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009). Counsellors support students in producing and reproducing tools for social adaptation and transformation. Transformative social pedagogy is in constant need of reinvention and adjustment according to the context of their application (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010; Freire, 2000). As an engaged pedagogy aiming to transgress the existing social inequalities, critical-emancipatory social pedagogy addresses personal struggles as political and thus politicises the individual struggles in what hooks (1994) frames as education as the practice of freedom.

Dormitories are structured and structuring institutional environments that in relation to the wider social context have relative autonomy (Bourdieu, 2018; Wacquant, 1992). Staff negotiate between enabling the transformation or preservation of the field (Wacquant, 1992). Power struggles involving opposition and action can be interpreted as resistance (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). Various researchers have identified action and opposition as core elements of resistance and developed typologies based on whether the resistance is intended by the actor and recognised by target or observer. Overt resistance is intended and recognised by both while covert resistance is intended by actor but only recognised by observer (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). This typology provides an analytical tool for analysing everyday resistance in institutions. However, some argue that such a typology contradicts the aim to conceptualise “resistance as a complex and ongoing process of social construction” (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2014, p. 418) and claim that the acts of resistance should be considered “within ongoing processes of negotiation between different agents of resistance” (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2014, p. 418), such as resisters, the targets and the observers. Johansson & Vinthagen (2014) propose four analytical dimensions of everyday resistance that need to be considered in their intersections, as follows: 1) repertoires of everyday resistance, 2) relations between actors, 3) spatialisation and 4) temporalisation of resistance.

Moreover, Johansson and Vinthagen (2014) stress that everyday resistance is a practice, historically entangled with power rather than defined by consciousness, intent, or outcome. It is intersectional, heterogeneous, and context-dependent, with the potential to undermine or reinforce power relations (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2014, p. 418). Resistance within the institutional hierarchies cannot be assumed to be empowering or disempowering; its effects on

individuals, groups and institutions must be analysed. In this paper, we emphasise making a distinction between resistance that undermines or strengthens agency in the process of evaluating the effects of everyday resistance in student dormitories.

In summary, while student dormitories in Slovenia aim to support academic success and personal development through structured living, guidance, and psychosocial support, the institutional power relations, social control and disciplinary acts can function both as enabling and oppressive. Using the framework of critical-emancipatory social pedagogy, this paper conceptualises everyday resistance and demonstrates opportunities for encounters beyond disciplinary and punitive measures: how institutional power and resistance can both be recognised as opportunities for empowerment and social learning, rather than just as coercive control.

In this article we theorise and conceptualise the everyday resistance in student dormitories as practices of (re)production of institutional norms and also their negotiations and shifts. We address the agency of institutional actors such as counsellors and students in chosen examples of everyday resistance and discuss the empowering/disempowering effects of both reproduction and shifts of institutional norms and structures. We explore counsellors' perceptions of everyday resistance and its effects in the context of student dormitories. In the present article we address the following research questions:

How does everyday resistance manifest itself in shifting student dormitory norms and structures and with what effects?

How does everyday resistance manifest itself in reproducing student dormitory norms and structures and with what effects?

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The paper is grounded in a small-scale pilot study aiming to identify the key problems that arise in relation to the research problem of manifestation and effects of everyday resistance in student dormitories. The sample consisted of five counsellors employed in upper-secondary student dormitories in Slovenia. By purposive sampling we aimed to include dormitories that represented a variety regarding the size (from approximately 72 to 390 student places), location (two in bigger cities, two in towns, one in the countryside), and type of dormitory (three independent dormitories and two integrated in school centres). We interviewed one counsellor from each of the chosen dormitories. The counsellors were selected because of their comprehensive insight into institutional

processes and their positioning at the crossroads of interests, conflict resolving and supporting fruitful cooperation between students, educators, school, family and other relevant experts, institutions and organisations.

### *Instruments*

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview questions were developed in advance, informed by the theoretical framework on institutional power, control, and resistance. The guiding questions were focused on rules of conduct in dormitories, student behaviour and resistance practices, institutional responses to resistance and shifts and continuities in dormitory norms and structures. One example of a guiding question is as follows: What forms of oppositional behaviour do you encounter most frequently, and how do you respond to them? The information on the research and the preliminary interview questions were sent to the counsellors prior to the interview. Participation was voluntary. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' consent.

### *Research Design*

The study employed a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed using open coding procedures derived from grounded theory, and were then organised around central ideas of the text and grouped into categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Richards & Morse, 2013). The analytical process proceeded in several stages: initial open coding of interview transcripts, identification of central ideas emerging from the data, grouping codes into broader conceptual categories, and refinement of categories within the theoretical framework of institutional power, control and resistance.

Through the process of open coding, 68 codes were produced, which were structured into four main categories: rules of conduct, intersectional differences, reproduction of dormitory norms and structures, and shifts in dormitory norms and structures. While all four categories were relevant for analysis, the categories "reproduction of dormitory norms and structures" and "shifts in dormitory norms and structures" most closely address the research questions of the study and the purpose of the present article. Thus, this article focuses on presenting the analysis of selected data excerpts that most strongly contributed to understanding the manifestations and effects of everyday resistance in student dormitories and the ways such resistance may reproduce or transform existing institutional norms and structures.

## Results and Discussion

### Shifts in Dormitory Norms and Structures

The following analysis addresses the manifestation of everyday resistance in shifting student dormitory norms and structures and evaluates the effects of these shifts. To explore the resistance, the change and their effect, we focus on two issues that arose during our interviews with the counsellors: the phenomena of night-time studying and the problem of overdue bills for the dormitory accommodation. Thus, our analysis of the data focuses on examples of how institutional agents such as counsellors and students practiced their agency in ongoing processes of negotiation (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2014), which resulted in a partial shifting of institutional practices. First, we analyse the resistance of students against the institutional rule of no night-time studying and explore the process of power negotiations in shifting the institutional rules. Secondly, we analyse the resistance of the counsellor who contributed to the shift in disempowering institutional structure in order to protect the students from oppressive experiences due to their socio-economic status.

#### *Night-Time Studying – in the Classrooms or Under the Shower With a Headlamp?*

Student dormitories support upper-secondary students in completing their educational programmes and achieving socially accepted signs of successful transition to adulthood and have a definitive role in creating opportunities for empowering agency. In accordance with power as productive (Foucault, 1978, 1980), the dormitory rules regarding curfew, night-time silence and order and regime of afternoon studying hours are made in order to support the structuring of the environment that is beneficial for the residents. However, students may resist these structures by returning late, skipping studying hours, studying at night or by socialising and listening to music during the night. These acts can be interpreted as acts of resistance according to Hollander and Einwohner (2004); they are clearly acts of opposition to the norm. Agents are more or less conscious of the intent of breaking the rules, the targets of the oppositional behaviour are institutional staff imposing the norms and the acts are also recognised as resistance by the educators or counsellors.

During the exam period, students often resist the no night-time studying rule by choosing to study late in classrooms or their rooms. Dormitory staff hold institutional authority to enforce the rule (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000) and demand the students to stop studying and go to sleep. In this case the

power struggle between staff as agents of social control and students as agents of overt resistance (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004) takes place; the students practice their agency in intentionally opposing the rule and targeting staff with demanding to stay awake late and study.

Strictly enforcing the rule has unpredictable effects: it can either empower students by supporting study efforts or disempower them through exhaustion. Figueiredo (2024) showed that chronotype and sleep habits influence young people's behaviour and while late chronotype individuals prefer late tasks, the lack of sleep causes irritability and other behavioural problems. When rules are strictly enforced, the resistance shifts its mode. Previously overt resistance turns to covert resistance (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004); students intentionally break the rule, but they do this so that the agent of institutional control does not recognise it. In light of the inflexible institutional rule, the students invent alternative practices to resist. The following interview excerpt demonstrates the dormitory counsellor's reflection on how students continued with night-time studying, but they did it in such a way that the educators or night-guards could or should not notice them – in their bathrooms, even in bathrooms under the shower, using the headlamps:

When we tried to limit it, we realised it is almost impossible. We cannot just tell students at midnight that they are no longer allowed to study. If someone has been studying for a long time, it is very difficult to stop them – then they go and study in the bathroom, under the shower, right? I mean, can we really forbid them to study? I honestly don't know how parents would understand that. This year, for example, we have seen a lot of this night-time studying – it is becoming more and more frequent. We have a lot of problems with it, yes, because then they are exhausted and it is very hard to manage. It becomes a vicious cycle. But when you are in the situation – what is the night guard supposed to do, tell them they must stop studying? So then they go into the bathrooms, under the showers, with headlamps, hiding. And you start thinking, aren't we ridiculous? If someone wants to study, surely, we should allow them to do so. (Counsellor 1)

Thus, the resistance itself cannot be interpreted as a priori empowering or disempowering for the agency of the student, nor do we a priori know whether the resistance to the rule of no night-time studying is in fact in accordance with the broader normative framework of the dormitory or not. For example, while studying during night-time is forbidden and the student studying during the night breaks the rules of conduct, the intent of the student's resistance is

aligned with the normative aim of the institution, namely successful schooling. Though the resistance is intended, the aim of the resistance is aligned with the norms both the student and the counsellor agree on. This opens up a possibility for negotiation; both agents encountering each other in the act of resistance enter the ongoing process of negotiation (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2014), in which different repertoires of resistance must be addressed according to the dimensions of spatiality, temporality and relationality (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2014). For example, the institution can show flexibility and allow night-time studying during intensive exam periods. Some dormitories enable these students to study late in the classrooms:

When there is a particularly intense period, with many tests, there may indeed be more late-night studying, simply because they cannot manage to get everything done during the day – they have trainings, all sorts of activities... We allow them to study late in classrooms, but it is important that they actually study. If they are in the study room chatting and making noise, then the night security guard sends them back to their rooms. What matters is that they still get their studying done. (Counsellor 3)

The counsellors and educators use their autonomy to bend the rules and even support the resistance of the students, to provide them with a legitimate opportunity to engage in night-time studying in a supportive environment (classroom instead of bathroom). Such flexibility can be empowering; the student as the agent of resistance can experience that his/her needs have been recognised and he/she is being supported. The sensitivity in institutional response can even make the rules seem more legitimate afterwards, when they are imposed again (after the end of the exam period).

On occasions when staff are flexible in their imposition of the rules, the institutional relations of authority remain untouched; according to Johansson & Vinthagen (2014), the spatiality and temporality in the episode must be considered. The flexibility of the rules around night-time studying is exercised at this particular time (during intensive exam periods) and can also be conditioned by whether the student has been also attending afternoon study hours or not. For example, if the student skips the studying hours in the afternoon and then studies instead in the night, his resistance is not met with flexibility of the staff – which cannot be simplistically defined as oppressive. For example, counsellors explained that the students would like to be outside during the afternoons, would like to skip study hours, but then they study during the night and are exhausted the next day in school – and soon fall into a vicious cycle of switching night and day; this obviously has disempowering effects on their wellbeing and achievements:

The educators pay close attention to such things. It's important that they monitor students throughout the day – if a student spends the whole afternoon lying in bed, unwilling to do anything, or is out all day having fun and then wants to study at night, that becomes a topic for discussion. After all, this pattern cannot go on indefinitely – they end up tired, sleep-deprived, they swap day for night, and so on. So we have conversations about how important sleep is, and then we gradually help them to re-establish a different rhythm. (Counsellor 2)

It seems that everyday resistance is indeed “heterogenous and contingent due to changing contexts and situations” (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2014, p. 418); while shifting the institutional rule of no night-time studying seems to be predominantly temporary (i.e. during exam periods) the counsellors exposed a group of students that need a permanent adjustment in institutional practice. These are the students who attend high-achieving grammar schools; the timetable of these students might be full of both study-related obligations including grammar school in the morning, and other extra-curricular activities that are recognised as highly academically appreciated, such as music and ballet school in the evening. As the interview excerpt below suggests, the counsellor recognised this group of students as those with special needs and expresses support for a more permanent shifting of the institutional rule for them:

We have a special group of students from high achieving grammar schools. They are housed in a separate section of the dormitory. Since we have been accommodating these students, we have realised that they represent a special category, primarily because their main focus is school, grades, and achievement [...] they need silence, they often study late at night, and a great deal of adjustments must be made for them. (Counsellor 4)

It seems that when institutional rules regarding night rest and learning hours get into contradiction with the institutional aim of supporting students in successful schooling, the symbolic and cultural capital of students from high-achieving general upper-secondary schools seems to bring them more power for the resistance. Permanent shifts in institutional rules are spatially limited (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2014); adjustments are deliberate and reserved for a particular group of students. More temporary shifts occur for other students, whose need for such adjustment is not recognised as permanent.

Our analysis so far focused on everyday resistance in which the students acted as agents of resistance in negotiation on the no night-time studying rule

with the pedagogical staff assigned to impose this rule. However, resistance can be enacted also by the institutional staff. We address this next.

### *Concealing the Socio-Economic Position of Students*

The agents of everyday resistance in student dormitories are not only students but also the staff, such as counsellors and educators. Counsellors and students are situated in the field of forces and struggles (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000), meaning that their everyday practices take place in the tension between the possibilities for change (struggles) and the probabilities of predetermined practice (forces). According to Bourdieu and Passeron (2000), they are agents delegated with legitimate authority to enact practices aligned with institutional aims of equality, successful schooling, etc. However, these agents also have relative autonomy (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000). This means that their practices are not totally prescribed but can be invented and changed to better suit the aim of institutional empowerment. One of these aims is also preventing discrimination on the basis of circumstances, such as socio-economic background.

A counsellor aware of intersectional inequalities (Crenshaw, 1991; Nash, 2008) and who recognises the disempowering effects of certain institutional practices for students in general and for those with lower social-economic status, can use their authority and autonomy to shift norms and practices with the aim to empower students in their struggles for more productive norms regulating student dormitory practices. For example, institutional bureaucratic practices regarding late dormitory fee payments had previously been addressed by confronting the student directly. The counsellor changed this practice so that the accounting office contacts parents instead, preventing educators from confronting the student and protecting them from potential stigma. The following example illustrates the counsellor's perception of how this change in institutional practice took place through successful struggle:

We began to look at the issue of socio-economic status in a more sensitive way. Previously, it often happened that, after three months of unpaid bills, educators would ask the students directly: "Why haven't your parents paid?" This was simply the system at the time. I personally wanted to change this system for a long time, given how many students I knew were distressed by having to face educators about this issue. It took us many years to convince the principal to transfer all communication regarding financial matters to the accounting department. The accounting department now communicates directly with parents, with educators having little or no knowledge of these exchanges. The idea was to conceal, as much as possible, the socio-economic position of students

- where they stand on the stratification ladder compared to their peers
- so that this information would not be so publicly visible, as it could be extremely stressful for students. (Counsellor 5)

According to Hollander and Einwohner (2004) the counsellor engaged in oppositional action, trying to convince the institution to change the practice regarding unpaid accommodation bills. The process involved ongoing negotiation (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2014), and after a few years, the change became permanent, with reminders now sent directly to parents. This new structure is the result of resistance and is integrated into the institutional practice which is from now on enforcing itself automatically; the accounting department sends the reminders directly to parents and so the students are not exposed in front of the educators, counsellors or other students. This illustrates counsellors' relative autonomy in creating practices that not only reproduce but also transform institutional structures, addressing socio-economic inequalities. This is at the core of critical social pedagogic action, which presupposes an engaged pedagogue who recognises the illegitimate effects of the institutional symbolic violence and exercises autonomous agency (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000) to transgress existing inequalities (hooks, 1994).

This becomes an example of how resistance shifts the institutional practice by changing the structures of organisation. The effects are empowering for the students, since they are protected from the negative effects of discrimination and/or stigmatisation based on vulnerable socio-economic status. This is a telling example of power as productive (Foucault, 1978), and the use of domination to constitute the powers of the subjects (Yeatman, 1997). The analysis of the resistance shifting dormitory norms and structures demonstrates the complexity of residential institutions' everyday power relations and shows how staff can lean on the productive use of power (Foucault, 1978, 2007) to regulate a supportive environment which meets the needs of students.

### **Reproduction of Dormitory Norms and Structures**

The following analysis addresses the manifestation of everyday resistance in reproducing student dormitory norms and structures and evaluates the effects of strengthening the domination. To explore the resistance, the reproduction of power relations and their effect, we focus on the institutional process of classifying students into roommate groups. Our analysis of data focuses on examples of counsellors' use of their institutional authority to regulate relations between students so that they would prevent oppressive experiences of students

in vulnerable subject positions based on their sexual orientation. As Messerschmidt (2017) demonstrated, subordinated boys try to comply with dominant hegemonic masculinity and so contribute to reproducing gender inequality. The analysis shows how critical social pedagogical acts produce a covert resistance to such reproduction (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004) and demonstrates how critical engagement with the milieu of the students can prevent discrimination and disempowerment (Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2011). Counsellors' careful selection of roommates, particularly in cases where students' sexual orientation is known, is intended to shape the student's environment so that it supports their well-being and helps develop supportive relationships.

### *Roommate Groups Are Not Just Put Together Randomly*

Student dormitories expressing some characteristics of total institutions according to Goffman (1961) have strict rules governing everyday activities, clear power hierarchy and classification processes of grouping students into roommate groups and residential groups with an assigned educator as their mentor. However, the exercise of social control and classification practices in dormitories is not necessarily repressive. In our study we found examples of how productive power (Foucault, 2007) can affect the structuring of supportive relations between the students.

Counsellors are delegated legitimate power to shape the environment of the dormitory so that it contributes to equal and equitable inclusion (Marc, 2023), which is supported by the educational curriculum for student dormitories (*Educational Program for Student Dormitories*, 2011) and legislation (*Rules on Accommodation in Student Dormitories*, 2018). Counsellors thus legitimately enact power that reproduces the institutionalised norms and discourses on equality, human rights and non-discrimination. According to the theory of symbolic violence, such acts can be defined as such because they entail the imposition of arbitrary content on arbitrary methods (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000) to achieve legitimate, authorised objectives. Supporting equality and non-discrimination in the student dormitory is such an objective.

In order to contribute to shaping supportive relations between the students, counsellors pay a great deal of attention to how they form the student groups. At the beginning of the new school year and before the intake of new students, the dormitory counsellors and educators interview the students, after which they deliberate on group formation. They do consider the wishes of the students, but nevertheless they do have the final say and responsibility in deciding the composition of roommate groups:

When they enrol, ideally, we like them to tell who they would like to

share a room with, if they already know someone. If they do, that makes things much easier. (Counsellor 2)

Already at the time of enrolment, we take some extra time to talk to the students, and you can already get a sense of someone during that first conversation. Roommate groups are not just put together randomly – it takes a lot of time and careful consideration, looking at who might fit well with whom: okay, these two could go together, that one has different values, and so on. We are experienced, and we devote quite a bit of time to this process. (Counsellor 3)

The interviews with dormitory counsellors show that they understand and recognise that the encounters between students in dormitories every day can also have disempowering effects for students in intersectionally vulnerable positions. While the institutional norm is equality no matter the sexual orientation, the counsellor recognises that inequalities based on sexual orientation do play out in the dormitory every day and can have disempowering effects on the students. Thus, the counsellor acts strategically to prevent this from happening, and this demonstrates the importance of reflexive practice in dormitories, such as forming groups of students that share the rooms. Counsellors show sensitivity in ensuring student well-being, preventing stigmatisation, bullying or conflicts due to difference in sexual orientation:

When there is a boy who is gay, or whom we think might be gay... For these boys, it is very difficult to find a roommate. I have to somehow approach the students and ask if they would be okay sharing a room... I mean I don't say he is gay. I have to phrase it differently, but I think it would be wrong not to address it. Otherwise we run into serious problems, especially at the beginning when the parents arrive and the student arrives, and on the first day there are tears and complaints: "Who put me in this room? He's gay!" [...] So you need to find a boy who does not have as many issues with this, and that is essential. (Counsellor 5)

As Bartulović and Kušević (2024) demonstrated in relation to the school curriculum, there is an absence of systematic sexual minority inclusive approach in student dormitories. However, in line with critical-emancipatory social pedagogy that questions the social inequalities and oppressive structures (Grunwald & Tiersch, 2009; Härmäläinen, 2012), the counsellors use their institutional authority (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000) in pedagogical action that reproduces the institutional normativities of human rights, equality and non-discrimination of students. Moreover, the counsellors reflect on possible discrimination

of the non-heterosexual student and act to prevent this from occurring. This suggests the counsellors can and should be reflexive agents critically perceiving personal struggles of the students as political (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994) and use their productive power within the institution to contribute to safety and security (Foucault, 1978; 2007) or to a respectful social environment that can lead to a more successful everyday experience (Grunwald & Tiersch, 2009). According to Bourdieu and Passeron (2000) counsellors use legitimate symbolic violence (imposition of pre-chosen content such as human rights and non-discrimination with pre-chosen methods, such as careful consideration of grouping students in rooms) to contribute to the prevention of homophobic conflicts. These counsellors have symbolic and institutionally assigned authority to prevent the homosexual student from experiencing discrimination, thereby contributing to the constitution of the power of the subject (Yeatman, 1997).

The data suggest that the counsellors exercise relative autonomy of their agency (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000) and so adapt their working methods and content to respond more sensitively to the students. The counsellors enact resistance towards illegitimate effects of intersectional inequalities; they recognise the sexual orientation of the student being a potentially vulnerable subject position and act before the student is subjected to homophobic violence. Thus, the act of resistance is put in place by the counsellor but not necessarily recognised by the students classified by the counsellor as possibly having issues with homophobia. As such the resistance can be defined as covert resistance according to Hollander and Einwohner (2004). Moreover, the targets of such resistance are potential manifestations of social inequalities.

However, a more useful analytical point of view is to conceptualise the counsellors' reflexive action as a critical pedagogic practice, involving a complex and ongoing process of carefully considering who is placed in which room (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2014). This is an example of how critical social-pedagogical acts can contribute to the construction of productive social situations. Social-pedagogical engagement with the milieu of the students aiming to influence directly or indirectly the development of empowering student relations and interactions is an important task (Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2011).

We have had students who identify as gay or lesbian – we still do – but there have been no issues. [...] Of course, we do pay attention to who is placed in which room. If we already know beforehand that a student identifies as gay or lesbian, we consider who they might get along with, who might be tolerant, and who might, for example, be homophobic. We would certainly not put them in a room with someone who is homophobic, as that could be very difficult for them. We are careful about this. (Counsellor 2)

Intersectionally sensitive roommate grouping can be interpreted as a practice of resistance against oppressive elements of social inequalities that could get reproduced in dormitories every day. Resistance to such illegitimate effects of pedagogical action is at the core of critical-emancipatory social pedagogy. As stated by Eichsteller and Holthoff, social pedagogues are and should be confident in “the process they can initiate together with individuals and groups to enhance their well-being, provide learning opportunities, develop relationships and enable them to empower themselves” (2011, p. 49). This resistance can be successful because counsellors use their institutional power responsibly and reflexively with the aim to restrict potential homophobia. This is also an example of how resistance to illegitimate and discriminative effects of social inequalities within the institution is reproducing legitimate power relations and dominance (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2014), in order to enhance the possibility of positive experiences and nurturing conditions for students.

## Conclusions

This article examined everyday resistance in student dormitories in Slovenia by addressing two questions; how everyday resistance manifests in shifting student dormitory norms and structures and with what effects, and how it manifests in reproducing those norms and structures, and with what effects.

Everyday resistance in shifting student dormitory norms and structures is manifested through both students' and counsellors' actions that challenge and renegotiate institutional norms. For example, students resist the prohibition of night-time studying overtly (demanding rule flexibility) and covertly (studying secretly). Counsellors shift the dormitory rules temporarily, enabling late studying during exam periods but also supporting the students in re-establishing their sleeping routine. Both can have empowering effects for students. Moreover, counsellors resist disempowering dormitory practices and advocate for change, for example, by arranging that the overdue bill notification is sent by the accounting office directly to the parents instead of the student. This has an effect of reducing stigma and protecting students' dignity. Everyday resistance in reproducing student dormitory norms and structures is manifested through counsellors' reflexive and strategic use of institutional authority to shape supportive environments. For example, counsellors covertly resist oppressive social inequalities related to students' sexual orientation and form roommate groups with the aim of preventing discrimination and homophobic conflict. These practices strengthen the dormitory's normative framework and institutional norms of equality, human rights, and non-discrimination.

These findings suggest that everyday resistance in student dormitories constitutes a site of relatively autonomous agency for institutional actors, including counsellors and students. When resistance is interpreted as pedagogical opportunity rather than deviance, it can contribute to critical social-pedagogical action (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994) by enabling the reflexive negotiation of institutional life and power relations within the dormitory setting.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. As a pilot study based on a limited and targeted sample of student dormitories, the findings cannot be generalised across all dormitory contexts. Moreover, the analysis reflects only counsellors' perspectives, rather than including other stakeholders to help shape our understanding of the phenomenon. Nevertheless, the study provides preliminary insights that help map key themes and tensions in everyday dormitory life.

Future research should therefore extend this work by systematically including students' own perspectives on everyday resistance and how class, gender, and other social positions or circumstances shape resistance practices and their effects. For example, future research could address how opportunities for resistance are shaped for different students, also in relation to ever more present excessive use of information technology (e.g. smartphones), and so meaningfully complement existing programmes<sup>3</sup> for supporting professionals to help shape healthy behaviours and the well-being of all students.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight everyday resistance as a meaningful component of pedagogical work in student dormitories. Therefore, it seems sensible to support counsellors in their pedagogical approaches that support flexibility, reflexivity, and the ethical use of institutional authority to shape supportive and inclusive dormitory environments for all students.

## **Ethical Statement**

The research was carried out following ethical standards for pedagogical research; it was approved by the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana Ethics Commission.

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3 One such programme is the Ministry of Health co-funded programme "Networking and Professional Support for Programs Aimed at Addressing Addiction and Substance Abuse" (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Slovenia, 2026).

## Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to providing for anonymity of research participants but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

## Disclosure Statement

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

When preparing this article, the authors did not use AI-assisted technologies. The authors accept full responsibility for the content and integrity of the publication.

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### **Biographical note**

**NATAŠA MOJŠKERC**, PhD, is a teaching assistant in the field of social pedagogy at the Faculty of Education at University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. Her research interests relate to critical-emancipatory social pedagogy, with special attention to phenomenon of domestic violence, intersectional inequalities, and empowerment in the demanding contexts of social exclusion and marginalization.

**DARJA ZORC MAVER**, PhD, is a full professor in the field of social pedagogy at the Faculty of Education at University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. Her research interests include theory of social pedagogy, children and young with integrations troubles, women and gender studies.

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## The Participatory Development of the Styrian Youth Strategy With an Action Plan

MARTIN AUFERBAUER<sup>1</sup>, HEIMGARTNER ARNO<sup>\*2</sup> AND THOMAS  
LEDERER-HUTSTEINER<sup>3</sup>

~ The Styrian Youth Strategy was developed through a participatory and evidence-based process to provide a strategic framework for improving the living conditions of young people in Styria, Austria. Recognising youth as a cross-cutting policy area, and in alignment with the Austrian Youth Strategy and the European Youth Goals, the project combined qualitative and quantitative methods between 2022 and 2023. These methods included semi-structured interviews with adolescents ( $n = 15$ ) and youth sector professionals ( $n = 16$ ), an online survey of professionals ( $n = 60$ ) and five workshops involving professionals, young people and administrative leaders. Aims for ten thematic fields were formulated, accompanied by an action plan. Of the ten areas identified, seven are described briefly while three are explored in depth: participation and political education (embedding youth voice, co-decision, and civic engagement); health promotion and prevention (integrating behavioural and structural determinants, with a focus on mental health, risk-informed behaviour, and coordinated services); and diverse education and information (promoting equity across formal, non-formal, and informal learning; encouraging multi-professional cooperation; and providing guidance for educational and career pathways). The strategy was accepted by the Styrian Provincial Parliament and incorporated into the Styrian Youth Act, influencing funding cultures and administrative practice. Limitations include the challenge of adequately representing a heterogeneous youth population within finite resources. Ongoing evaluation, inclusive participation formats and international exchange are recommended. This process shows how participatory governance, intersectoral coordination and data-informed planning can transform criticism into constructive institutional development and consensus-based implementation.

**Keywords:** youth strategy, intersectoral governance, youth health and well-being, political education and participation

1 University College of Teacher Education Styria, Graz, Austria, and University of Graz, Austria.

2 \*Corresponding Author. University of Graz, Austria; [arno.heimgartner@uni-graz.at](mailto:arno.heimgartner@uni-graz.at).

3 x-sample (Social Research Company), Graz, Austria.

## Participatorna priprava strategije za mlade z akcijskim načrtom avstrijske Štajerske

MARTIN AUFERBAUER, ARNO HEIMGARTNER IN THOMAS  
LEDERER-HUTSTEINER

~ Strategija za mlade avstrijske Štajerske je bila pripravljena v okviru participativnega in na dokazih utemeljenega procesa, da bi zagotovila strateški okvir za izboljšanje življenjskih pogojev mladih na Štajerskem v Avstriji. Ob priznavanju mladine kot medsektorskega področja politike ter skladno z avstrijsko strategijo za mlade in evropskimi cilji za mlade je projekt v obdobju med letoma 2022 in 2023 združil kvalitativne in kvantitativne metode. Te metode so vključevale polstrukturirane intervjuje z najstniki ( $n = 15$ ) in s strokovnjaki s področja mladih ( $n = 16$ ), spletno anketo med strokovnjaki ( $n = 60$ ) in pet delavnic, v katerih so sodelovali strokovnjaki, mladi in vodilni strokovni sodelavci. Oblikovani so bili cilji za deset tematskih področij, ki jih spremlja akcijski načrt. Od desetih opredeljenih področij je sedem opisanih na kratko, tri pa so podrobneje obravnavana: sodelovanje in politično izobraževanje (vključevanje glasu mladih, soodločanje in državljanska udeležba); spodbujanje zdravja in preprečevanje (vključevanje vedenjskih in strukturnih determinant s poudarkom na duševnem zdravju, vedenju, ki upošteva tveganja, in na usklajenih storitvah); raznoliko izobraževanje in obveščanje (spodbujanje enakopravnosti v formalnem, neformalnem in v informalnem učenju; spodbujanje medpoklicnega sodelovanja; zagotavljanje usmerjanja za izobraževalne in poklicne poti). Strategijo je sprejel Deželni zbor avstrijske Štajerske in jo vključil v Zakon o mladih avstrijske Štajerske, kar je vplivalo na kulturo financiranja in upravno prakso. Med omejitve sodi izziv ustreznega zastopanja raznolike mladinske populacije v okviru omejenih virov. Priporočajo se: stalno ocenjevanje, vključujoče oblike sodelovanja in mednarodna izmenjava. Ta proces kaže, kako lahko participativno upravljanje, medsektorsko usklajevanje in načrtovanje na podlagi podatkov kritiko spremenijo v konstruktiven institucionalni razvoj in izvajanje, ki temelji na soglasju.

**Ključne besede:** strategija za mlade, medsektorsko upravljanje, zdravje in dobro počutje mladih, politično izobraževanje in sodelovanje

## Introduction

### Youth – Between Challenges and Opportunities

Youth is an exciting and challenging phase of life, during which many decisions are made that will shape the future. This applies not only to the personal life path of each young person, but also to society as a whole. The direction in which our society moves depends largely on how young people grow up, the experiences they have and how they develop today. Therefore, creating the best possible living conditions for young people is a socio-political obligation. This is highly relevant in the present day, but will also have an impact beyond that.

In this sense, youth can be understood as a phase involving a series of developmental tasks and crises (Havighurst, 1953; Quenzel & Hurrelmann, 2022). These must be experienced and completed against the backdrop of individual resources and circumstances in order to finally leave the phase of youth behind and ideally be equipped with everything necessary for full participation in society.

Alongside these ideas about the socialisation of young people, there are also notions of viewing young people of a certain age group as a homogeneous entity. According to Mannheim (1964), generations are defined as groups born into specific structural conditions (e.g. economic, political, educational and technological) that shape the opportunities available during their upbringing. Following on from this, Fend (1988) posits that this results in the cultural expression of a generation, comprising the patterns of thought, values, worldviews and lifestyles that people of a similar age use to shape their lives (Albert et al., 2019).

Social changes and the associated changes in the conditions of growing up therefore result in new demands on young people, reflected in specific behavioural patterns. The numerous crises, as well as the undeniable improvements in certain areas, thus shape the challenges and lifestyles of adolescents and young adults belonging to Generations Z and Alpha. To support all young people in this context, adaptive structures are needed, with additional support for those unable to develop appropriate opportunities for participation independently or within their immediate environment.

### Youth Strategies – Research Problem and Questions

The Austrian government is pursuing a youth strategy. This strategy is dynamic and updated regularly. Since 2020, more than 30 youth goals have been developed (Bundeskanzleramt, 2024). In Europe, the European Youth Goals are prominent (EU, 2018).

Based on these strategies, our research addressed the need to develop a future-oriented, evidence-based and participatory youth strategy for Styria (as a federal state of Austria), which is scientifically grounded and can be implemented across sectors. As youth is a cross-cutting policy domain, isolated departmental action is insufficient. The challenge was to integrate the perspectives of various stakeholders, including young people, youth workers, educators, health and social services, administrators and politicians, into a strategic document and action plan that would improve living conditions and participation opportunities while remaining realistic within legal, organisational and budgetary constraints.

Based on this problem, the study pursued the following research questions:

1. How do adolescents and youth-sector professionals in Styria prioritise the most relevant thematic areas for a youth strategy, and what justifications underpin these priorities?
2. What objectives, target groups, measures, principles of action and implementation conditions are proposed by these stakeholders across the identified fields?
3. How can these diverse contributions be synthesised into a coherent set of action areas that are aligned with national and European frameworks and command cross-party and cross-departmental support?

## **Method**

It is important to emphasise that the empirical data form the basis for developing the strategy through communication group processes.

### **Participants**

The study targeted three primary stakeholder groups in Styria (Austria): Adolescents and young adults aged 15–22 were recruited to reflect diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and life situations. They were recruited through organisations that deal with youth work. Youth-sector and youth-related professionals who worked in areas such as participation, open and organised youth work, youth culture, street work, child and youth welfare, education, careers guidance, media education, health, research and youth policy were also recruited. Administrative staff from several Styrian departments also participated in a validation workshop. All of the professionals were recruited by the Styrian provincial government.

## Instruments for Data Collection

Three instruments were used to collect data for the present study. These include semi-structured interview guides, online questionnaires, and validation workshops.

Semi-structured interview guides were designed to be administered to both adolescents and professionals. Part 1 elicited open reflections on the content, structure and organisation of the strategy. Part 2 introduced pre-identified topic areas, and participants were asked to justify three priority topics, as well as to articulate the associated objectives, target groups, necessary measures, principles of action, and implementation conditions. Interviews lasted about 60 minutes and were conducted with the participants' consent in accordance with data protection guidelines.

Online questionnaires were designed to be administered to professionals. These mirrored the content of the interviews, collecting information on prioritised topics and objectives. The consultation yielded 104 distinct objectives, each with a justification and description.

Five externally moderated validation workshops (three with professionals, one with young people and one with cross-departmental administrators) used structured discussion guides to review draft texts and capture suggestions for amendments.

## Research Design and Procedure

Work on this youth strategy began in April 2022 with a constitutional meeting of a steering group to discuss and agree on an implementation concept that had been developed previously. This was followed by an investigation of national and international youth strategies and relevant literature to establish compatibility with the thematic structure of previously published youth strategies.

The research was conducted as a sequential, mixed-methods, participatory process from April 2022 to June 2023.

Phase 1 (April–August 2022): A steering group was constituted and the implementation concept was agreed; desk research mapped national and international strategies and literature to frame topics.

Phase 2 (September–October 2022): Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with adolescents ( $n = 15$ ) and professionals ( $n = 16$ ). In parallel, an online sectoral survey was conducted in October 2022 (invitees  $n = 214$ ; respondents  $n = 60$ ), which broadened input and triangulated priorities.

Phase 3 (November 2022–January 2023): the analysis synthesised the outputs of the interviews and the survey into a classified set of objectives across the relevant fields of action for the strategy. The steering group reached a consensus on the thematic architecture in January 2023.

Phase 4 (February–April 2023): draft strategy texts and an initial action plan were produced and iteratively validated across five workshops, with feedback systematically integrated.

Phase 5 (from June 2023): Finalisation by the steering group in close collaboration with the Youth Department of Unit 6 “Education and Society” of the Provincial Government of Styria.

## **Results**

### **Vision**

As an essential starting point for work on the youth strategy, a vision was developed to provide guidance and direction throughout the entire process. This vision establishes the framework for all subsequent considerations and defines the horizon towards which the individual goals and measures are directed. It describes the desired future for young people in Styria as follows:

“All young people in Styria find living conditions in which they feel comfortable and which they can actively influence. They are given spaces, places and opportunities to grow into independent, self-confident young adults. They can develop their personalities in an open society according to their interests and inclinations, and they are recognised as individuals with all their diversity. They are strengthened in their development and supported across the board with high-quality individual and structural-level services in line with their needs and requirements.”

### **Topics**

From the multitude of possible topics, ten subject areas were identified that were given particular focus. For each of these areas, four elements were initially formulated: a vision of the future; key terms; the initial situation; and strategic goals. These were accompanied by a brief commentary. Additionally, an action plan for the period from 2024 to 2026 was published, outlining the goals and planned activities of each subject area. When naming the topics, it was important for the core intention to be communicated in the name itself. We also wanted to make the presence of young people particularly visible, which is

why we included individual quotes from them. To provide an insight into the subject areas, seven topics will first be presented briefly, followed by a more detailed introduction to three of them.

### ***Being Protected – Violence Protection and Youth Protection***

Young people are exposed to numerous dangers, including accidents and drugs (Sande et al., 2025). The aim is to empower young people to recognise and avoid dangers, while also designing structures that minimise risks. Violence poses a real danger to young people and can have serious consequences. The effective protection of young people requires prevention, safe living environments, qualified personnel and clear framework conditions. Protecting young people means more than just prohibitions; it also involves empowering them, educating them, and enabling them to deal with risks responsibly.

### ***Being Unique – Personality and Identity***

For young people, developing their identity means shaping their uniqueness in confrontation with norms, role models and expectations. To achieve this, they need freedom and opportunities to experiment, as well as support on their journey towards independence and developing their own sense of self. A social atmosphere that tolerates individual life stories is part of peaceful coexistence.

### ***Living Together – Coexistence and Community***

As social beings, people need respect, support and a sense of mutual responsibility in order to live together harmoniously. Family, peer groups, intergenerational exchange and intimate relationships have a particularly strong influence on young people. Participation, equal opportunities and freedom form the basis of an open society that is founded on solidarity, tolerance and collective action.

### ***Expressing Oneself Culturally – Youth Culture and Leisure***

Young people need access to culture and creative outlets to promote identity, belonging, and recognition. Youth culture is changeable and dependent on the generation in question, and is often a source of innovation. Leisure activities can include analogue and digital socialising, art, sports, engagement, celebrations, and relaxation. However, not all young people have equal access to free time and opportunities.

### *Growing Up Hybrid – Digitalisation and Media Literacy*

Digital transformation is shaping all areas of life, especially for young people who live in a hybrid world of analogue and digital. Digital media facilitate social contact, creative expression, political participation and access to knowledge and skills. However, risks such as social isolation, cyberbullying, radicalisation, data misuse and commercial exploitation also arise. A key challenge is distinguishing between reliable and manipulated information. Young people need media and information literacy, as well as self-confidence, to be able to critically evaluate content.

### *Feeling at Home in the Region – Regions and Municipalities*

As of 2018, Styria consists of seven regions which are managed regionally, with the intention of ensuring a high quality of life for individuals. Young people play a central role in this, as they represent the future, the workforce, families and innovation. In order to prevent migration, regions must create attractive opportunities in terms of education, work, housing and leisure, as well as strengthening social infrastructure. Clubs, meeting places, and public transport are particularly important. Regional Youth Management (RJM) ensures that youth issues are addressed, coordinated, and implemented with concrete measures in all regions.

### *Sustainable Design – Sustainability and Climate Protection*

Young people are growing up in a world marked by crises such as climate change, species loss and the over-use of resources. While many are actively involved, not all have equal access to participation, which can lead to feelings of powerlessness. Education should promote environmental awareness, highlight constructive ways to take action, and provide opportunities for young people to contribute to solutions without making them feel responsible for previous generations' failures.

Three of the ten topics will now be selected and discussed in more detail, based on the Styrian Youth Strategy.

## **Getting Involved – Participation and Political Education**

The picture of the future is of young people in Styria who view democracy as an essential social attitude. They possess the interpersonal skills necessary for exchanging ideas with others regarding the development and implementation of plans, as well as communicating with one another. They actively shape their living environments and contribute to the management and

transformation of organisations. Their views are heard and their intentions are taken into account.

The initial situation refers to participation rights, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Austrian Committee for Children's Rights, 2026), and highlights the democratic goal of people participating in social development and life. It is expected that the effects of a culture of participation in all areas of life and organisations will include greater identification and improved quality. This should encourage young people to take responsibility for themselves and the common good. Participation begins in the family and continues in school, clubs and the workplace. Programmes in youth centres (Gspurning & Heimgartner, 2016), life in the youth welfare system (Heimgartner & Reichner, 2023) and subjects and teachers in schools (Bugram et al., 2014) should be co-determined by young people. Many areas of daily life, such as interior design, programme development, media design or house rules, can be developed in a participatory manner. Participation is not the responsibility of one person alone, but rather involves equitable dialogue and constructive cooperation. Professionals must recognise young people's expertise in relation to their living environments, listen to them and take them seriously. Grassroots democratic action, socio-political engagement, and active voting behaviour are important for political development.

The goals to be achieved through participation are diverse and relate to both the young people themselves and the content being worked on. A primary goal is to improve services by enabling young people to represent themselves. Additionally, young people should be prepared for life as active and responsible members of society. Participation is intended to promote identification with social life, compliance with rules, respect for the environment and, ultimately, the well-being of all. The complexity of society and coexistence, particularly in diverse European societies, requires active participation to ensure continued innovation and unity.

At its core, participation involves information, having a say, joint decision-making and involvement. Options are discussed and selected together. Action steps are designed together. Young people are actively involved in all phases of a project wherever possible, and experience the effects of their participation first-hand. Problems arise when young people are marginalised, disappointed, or discouraged from participating. It is particularly important for young people that their contributions are taken seriously. Clear communication of the framework conditions and objectives is essential for participation processes. Conversely, young people need to learn that not all of their concerns can be realised in a democracy and that a great deal of negotiation is necessary

to reach joint agreements that take into account the needs of everyone involved. The goals and areas of action are listed below:

Goal 1: Young people are recognised as individuals; their opinions are heard and they are treated as equals.

The key to integrating young people's concerns into social processes in a sustainable way is to anchor their participation in institutions and organisations that work with young people on a structural level. At the same time, it is crucial to empower young people to freely develop and express their own opinions. To this end, suitable spaces and platforms must be created to enable open and respectful dialogue.

Goal 2: Young people have a say in their living environments; they participate and make decisions. In doing so, they experience participation in all areas of society and at all levels of political action.

It is vital that young people are actively involved in social and political life. Participation projects designed specifically for young people enable them to contribute their ideas and perspectives. Taking part in local council meetings enables young people to influence municipal decisions and engage with relevant issues. There, young people can express their views on important social issues in a structured setting and learn about political decision-making processes. Such initiatives empower young people, encouraging them to play an active role in shaping their living environment and developing an understanding of democratic processes.

Goal 3: Young people have the opportunity to engage with civil society, thereby contributing to social life and well-being.

It is essential to recognise and value young people's voluntary work as part of youth development. Targeted programmes and recognition motivate and strengthen young volunteers. It is also important to actively support young people in implementing their own projects. This provides them with the necessary technical and organisational support, as well as the opportunity to develop ideas independently, express their creativity (Sušić & Brebrić, 2025), and gain valuable experience in practical implementation.

Goal 4: Young people receive the information and acquire the skills they need for democratic coexistence.

Promoting political education is crucial for encouraging young people to participate actively in social processes. It is also important to raise young people's awareness of their role within Europe and the global community. This enables them to better grasp global challenges and contexts, and recognise their place in an interconnected world.

Promoting international mobility among young people is particularly valuable. Through cultural exchanges, such as stays abroad, projects or international youth encounters, they can broaden their horizons, develop intercultural skills and contribute to cross-border dialogue. This combination of political education, global awareness, language skills (Rozmanič et al., 2025) and international mobility empowers young people to actively shape the future as responsible, cosmopolitan citizens.

### **Growing Up Healthy – Health Promotion and Prevention**

A desirable prospective future was defined as providing healthy living conditions for Styrian adolescents that would help them to maintain and restore their physical and mental health. Furthermore, adolescents' personal resources should be strengthened so that they learn to appreciate themselves, recognise their strengths and weaknesses, act with self-efficacy, and face adversity and crises with resilience.

According to the *Ottawa Charter* of the World Health Organization, "health is created by people within the settings of their everyday life; where they learn, work, play and love" (WHO, 1986, p. 7). While individual lifestyles such as eating, exercise and consumption habits influence health, they are also heavily influenced by the extent of social integration (e.g. family, peers, school and workplace), which in turn is influenced by living conditions (e.g. mobility, access to leisure opportunities and school situation) and ultimately, at a macro level, by socio-economic, cultural and environmental factors. The interplay between individuals and their environments has been described in models such as Dahlgren and Whitehead's (1991) health determinants (also known as the rainbow model) and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2000).

In summary, health largely emerges from everyday social interactions in the places where young people live, go to school or work, learn, and spend their free time. These environments directly and indirectly impact young people's lifestyles and health prospects.

However, health promotion and prevention are sometimes restricted to interventions that aim to change individual lifestyles or strengthen health literacy. Such interventions undoubtedly play a vital role in enhancing adolescents' sense of self-efficacy. However, it is evident that individual health behaviours always emerge from living conditions that largely lie beyond adolescents' control. For instance, initiatives that promote physical activity will be ineffective if young people do not have access to appealing spaces in which they can be active.

Therefore, it is essential that the planning and implementation of health objectives and interventions for young people address all relevant health determinants, ensuring the well-coordinated integration of behavioural and environmental structural policies and measures. Therefore, adolescent health-related quality of life is an issue that cuts across multiple policy domains. Political decisions and outcomes substantially influence young people's health. Creating health-promoting living conditions for adolescents can be significantly enhanced through intersectoral collaboration between sectors such as health, education, social services, the economy and labour markets, as well as with the active engagement of stakeholders in the youth sector.

Furthermore, enhancing adolescents' personal resources and competencies is crucial for fostering their well-being and enabling them to actively promote their physical and mental health. The latter is particularly salient during adolescence, with recent years witnessing a notable increase in mental distress and burden among young people. Evidence from international (Keyes & Platt, 2023; Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Schlack et al., 2022), national (Felder-Puig et al., 2023) and regional (Auferbauer & Straßegger-Einfalt, 2021; Lederer-Hutsteiner et al., 2024; x-sample, 2023) studies indicates a high prevalence of compromised quality of life and psychological distress, including anxiety, sleep disturbances, depressive moods etc. There is also evidence of engagement in conflict-prone behaviours such as the problematic use of digital applications and devices (x-sample, 2023). Across these studies, female adolescents consistently report substantially higher levels of psychological distress. Accordingly, interventions within the healthcare system, such as expanding psychotherapeutic services for children and adolescents, as well as systematically promoting life and health competencies among young people, are essential.

Adolescence is associated with numerous developmental and orientation tasks that require individual skills for successful navigation, in addition to favourable living conditions. Life and health competencies can enhance self-efficacy and resilience, and help to compensate for adverse living conditions, particularly in times of crisis. Furthermore, they protect against the negative impact on self-esteem of content encountered on social media. According to Radulović and Stančić (2017), interventions aimed at enhancing life competencies can make a wide range of individual resources visible. Consequently, such interventions also have a strong universal preventive effect against addictive behaviours and contribute to promoting overall health. Based on this initial situation, the following youth health-related objectives and measures were formulated:

Goal 1: Adolescents and their families are engaged, irrespective of their socioeconomic background, through the provision of tailored information,

counselling and health services.

The health of young people is a key issue requiring comprehensive information and support. One important approach is to improve communication and information provision regarding youth health for caregivers. Parents and other caregivers play a vital part in raising awareness of health issues among young people and supporting them (Loch, 2016). It is also important to promote health-related information and counselling services for young people, thereby empowering them to take responsibility for their own health. Such services should be easily accessible and tailored to their needs. Another important aspect is providing information about free preventive and vaccination services and ensuring continued access to them. These measures support preventive healthcare, ensuring that young people can take the necessary protective measures.

Goal 2: Enhancing adolescents' mental health through strengthening internal resources and empowerment activities.

Promoting the mental health of young people is becoming increasingly important and requires comprehensive, tailored measures. A key approach is to develop and expand programmes dedicated to strengthening mental health. As well as having a preventive effect, these programmes should offer targeted support to help young people cope with mental health challenges. Additionally, preventive initiatives within extracurricular youth programmes are highly significant. Taking place in the spaces where young people spend their free time, these initiatives provide opportunities for the early detection of mental health issues and raise awareness of mental health issues, while also providing immediate support.

Goal 3: Adolescents develop the skills to engage with substances and health-risk behaviours in a risk-informed and responsible manner.

Promoting the health and social development of young people, particularly with regard to sensitive issues such as problematic internet use and substance abuse, requires a joint, interdisciplinary approach. A key step towards this is the active involvement of all relevant institutions and stakeholders in extracurricular youth work in implementing the *Styrian Action Plan for Addressing Problematic Internet Use*, commissioned by the Styrian Health Fund (Lederer-Hutsteiner & Koberg, 2024). The aim is to raise awareness of problematic internet use and provide timely support to young people and their caregivers through a coordinated approach. At the same time, great importance is attached to strengthening preventive, counselling and support services relating to substance use.

These services are designed to help young people develop a conscious and responsible approach to addictive substances, and to recognise and cope with risks at an early stage. To further increase the effectiveness of these measures, the establishment of a competence group for youth-related substance use is being promoted.

Goal 4: To reinforce awareness of adolescent health issues among policymakers and administrative decision-makers through targeted advocacy, while actively strengthening networking and collaborative efforts.

In order to promote the sustainable health of young people in Styria, a strategic and well-coordinated approach is required. A key step in this regard is the establishment of a dedicated coordination office for youth health. This office will serve as a central point of contact, bringing together various health promotion measures and stakeholders in a targeted manner, and ensuring the effective implementation of projects. This coordination structure will exploit synergies between different stakeholders and enable the health needs of children and young people to be targeted more specifically. Another important part of this process is the regular collection and reporting of data on the health of children and young people in Styria. This systematic data collection will provide valuable insights into the health status of young people and the key challenges they face.

Goal 5: Promoting adolescents' health encompasses all levels of health determinants, with a particular focus on fostering health-supportive living conditions.

Promoting health and raising awareness of preventive measures are key components of holistic youth development. An important approach in this area is to provide youth workers with ongoing training opportunities to enhance their health promotion and prevention skills. These courses enable professionals to respond specifically to the needs of young people and implement effective programmes. Furthermore, collaboration and knowledge exchange between health experts, youth workers, child and youth services, and educational institutions is essential. Another focus is on programmes tailored to specific target groups that aim to improve young people's health literacy in all areas of education.

### **Diverse Education – Education and Information**

The vision for education and information of young people is that all young people in Styria acquire the information, skills and qualifications needed

to lead good, self-determined lives, regardless of their background. Educational opportunities should provide spaces for experimentation while balancing openness and guidance in navigating social change (Sardoč, 2021).

Education is a central social resource and encompasses formal, non-formal and informal learning. Learning takes place in families and peer groups, youth work, schools and other institutions, with informal learning being particularly important as many skills are acquired outside formal curricula. Education therefore extends beyond school and should provide young people with opportunities for learning, experimentation and educational and career development. Lifelong learning is both a labour-market requirement and an opportunity for personal growth and reorientation.

In a rapidly changing society, skills such as communication, organisation, negotiation and compromise are particularly developed in real-life settings such as clubs, youth centres and peer groups. At the same time, school remains crucial, as qualifications strongly influence access to further education, employment and long-term financial independence (Meusburger et al., 2021). Greater educational equity is needed, as social background continues to influence school careers. Psychosocial support, school social work and cooperation with specialist agencies are therefore important (Koschmieder & Unterköfler-Klatzer, 2025; Schmich & Itzlinger-Bruneforth, 2018).

Closer cooperation between formal education and youth work, supported by structured exchange and joint professional training, is particularly relevant with the expansion of all-day schools. Early access to education and positive attitudes towards learning can help prevent dropouts and stereotypical educational pathways based on gender, class, ethnicity or ability. Supportive structures can compensate for disadvantages and help unlock the potential of all young people. The following objectives and measures were derived from this initial situation.

Goal 1: Young people should be able to discover and develop their individual interests and talents.

It is essential to promote creativity and individual talents in order to support the personal and social development of young people. A key starting point is creating and expanding spaces where young people can experiment and enjoy freedom. In such environments, young people can explore their interests and discover their potential, growing as individuals in the process. These protected spaces give young people the freedom to develop new ideas, unleash their creativity and gain valuable experience. Additionally, targeted programmes promote the development of talents and gifts. These initiatives particularly support gifted

young people, helping them to reach their full potential by building on their strengths. Comprehensive non-formal educational opportunities also play a central role in structured forms of extracurricular youth work.

Goal 2: Young people are well-informed about the educational and career opportunities available to them.

Strengthening and targeting the expansion of educational and career guidance services is a key measure for providing young people with diverse and forward-looking opportunities at an early stage. As part of the Styrian strategy for educational and career guidance (BBO-LG 2017), these services are continuously being developed and adapted to meet the evolving demands of the modern working world. A particular focus is placed on providing young people with comprehensive information and supporting them in making their own decisions. Another important aspect is engaging companies and institutions in educational and career guidance. Working with businesses gives young people the chance to learn about different job sectors, gain practical experience, and make direct connections with potential employers.

Goal 3: Young people experience school as a place of education, development, cooperation and support.

Supporting young people in educational institutions is essential for creating an environment that fosters their development and considers their individual needs, enabling them to fulfil their potential. One important approach is to provide targeted support for specific groups, empowering children and young people and fostering their independence and skills. These measures support pupils in their personal lives and accompany them on their journey. Additionally, the focus is on designing schools as environments that promote the health and well-being of young people. Schools should be places that educate and promote the physical, mental, and social well-being of pupils. This can be achieved through health promotion programmes, exercise opportunities, a positive school atmosphere and psychological support. Another key point is to intensify multi-professional cooperation in schools. Close collaboration between professionals such as teachers, school social workers, psychologists, and special educational needs teachers enables problems to be identified early and targeted support measures to be implemented.

Goal 4: Young people receive the information and acquire the skills they need to lead a self-determined life.

Promoting education and prevention is central to supporting young

people in their development and helping them to overcome today's challenges. A key approach is strengthening extracurricular youth work facilities and schools as important venues for prevention and information. Another focus is expanding projects that promote young people's financial and economic skills. As handling money and economic relationships consciously is becoming increasingly important for their future, it is crucial that young people learn to make economic decisions and deal responsibly with topics such as budget management, consumer behaviour and savings opportunities.

## Conclusion

The project demonstrates the willingness of young people, professionals and government employees to shape the future. Since the Styrian Youth Strategy was unanimously approved by all parties in the Styrian Provincial Parliament, it demonstrates that a consensus can be found with the appropriate effort and commitment.

It is also important to note that the atmosphere during the implementation of this project was very positive. There was a palpable sense of optimism. Providing people with the opportunity to participate in the development of structures enables them to overcome passivity or anger. They are confronted with the task of bringing about realistic change and can engage with their own ideas in a concrete way. Shifting from criticism to constructive development is an important element of the strategic approach.

The tremendous support from colleagues in the relevant department was crucial to the project's success. They played a key role in organising and coordinating stakeholders. The action plan's concrete details and the dissemination of information to communities were largely based on these colleagues' experience. Part of this support involved trusting social science and evidence-based approaches.

It is also clear that putting this into action requires a lot of human effort. In light of the warning that the strategy might not produce any tangible achievements and that things might simply continue as before, great importance is now being placed on implementing the strategy. The goals and measures derived from the strategy can only be implemented through the cooperation of all those involved.

The Styrian strategy has now been incorporated into the Styrian Youth Act and influences the funding culture. The idea of including young people in all areas of politics is an attempt to recognise the important role they play in the development of society and the future of a country.

## **Limitations**

When a strategy is developed through a participatory process, it becomes evident that its quality improves significantly when a broad range of stakeholders are adequately involved and actively participate. However, when it comes to integrating the concerns of young people into policymaking across all areas, it is important to recognise that young people are not a homogeneous group. They represent a highly diverse demographic, encompassing individuals with different life situations, access to resources, and legal and socio-economic circumstances. Limited resources, time constraints and logistical challenges make it difficult to adequately engage and represent every segment of such a varied group. Thus, while the participatory approach is recognised as essential for high-quality strategies, it also brings with it the responsibility to continuously strive for greater inclusivity. This involves actively seeking ways to overcome barriers to participation and ensuring that the unique voices of all young people are considered to the greatest extent possible.

## **Further Research**

The development and implementation of youth strategies is a dynamic process that requires continuous adaptation to new social, economic, and technological conditions. Specific measures, programmes and principles should be evaluated to better understand which approaches achieve the desired goals and where optimisation is needed. Future research should also focus intensively on the realities of life and the needs of different target groups. Additionally, there is a need to focus more strongly on youth participation in research. Innovative forms of participation could be explored, such as the use of digital tools or creative dialogue formats, to strengthen democratic participation and empower young people. Finally, research could contribute to deepening the international perspective on youth strategies further. Exchanging successful models and best practices from other regions or countries provides valuable inspiration and enables reflection on own approaches. The ultimate goal is to provide young people with the optimal conditions for their personal and social development, even in the face of the changing conditions of the 21st century.

## **Ethical Statement**

The Research Management Office and the university administration at the University of Graz reviewed the research project to ensure its appropriateness

in terms of content, ethics, and costs. Consent forms for participation were obtained for the interviews. All interviews and workshops were conducted with the utmost care and respect. The workshops were externally moderated. The University of Graz's data protection guidelines were observed.

## Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study, as well as the instruments used, are not publicly available due to government restrictions. However, they are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Disclosure Statement

This study was conducted in collaboration with the University of Graz, the University College of Teacher Education Styria and the research organisation x-sample. The empirical implementation of the study was commissioned and financed by the Province of Styria. The authors declare that they have no other personal commitments, economic interests or conflicts of interest that could compromise the independence of this publication.

When preparing this article, the authors used the recent browser-based version of DeepL for the purpose of proofreading. The authors subsequently reviewed and edited the output as necessary and accept full responsibility for the content and integrity of the publication.

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## Biographical note

**MARTIN AUFERBAUER**, PhD, is Professor of Sociology of Education at the University College of Teacher Education Styria and a lecturer and research project member at the Department of Educational Science (specialist area: Social Pedagogy) at the University of Graz. His research interests include youth studies, multi-professional collaboration in educational institutions and teachers' working conditions.

**ARNO HEIMGARTNER**, PhD, is the head of the area of Social Pedagogy as well as the Master's program in Social Pedagogy at the University of Graz. The [sozialeforschung.at](https://sozialeforschung.at) portal provides insight into his work and the theses he has supervised. [SocialLecture.at](https://sociallecture.at) offers his lecture content in the form of flash-cards. His research focuses on empirical studies of youth work, child and youth welfare, and volunteer engagement.

**THOMAS LEDERER-HUTSTEINER**, PhD, is a Doctor of Medical Science and clinical and health psychologist. He is working at x-sample Social Research, a non-university research company in Graz, Austria. His research interests include the relation of digital media engagement and health outcomes, especially among children and adolescents, and evaluation studies of several health-related programmes and policies. He is an external lecturer at several universities.

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## Teachers' and Counsellors' Views on School Protective Factors for Children With Complex Needs

NINA AMON PODOBNIKAR\*<sup>1</sup> AND JANA RAPUŠ PAVEL<sup>2</sup>

Primary school is an important environment that can serve as a protective factor in children's lives, which is especially important for those facing complex and vulnerable circumstances. International and domestic studies highlight the importance of strengthening protective factors in schools, creating a supportive environment, and providing timely and diverse support mechanisms. The objective of the present study was to examine the protective factors identified by teachers and school counsellors to address the complex needs of children in school, as well as the limitations and obstacles to their implementation. A proposal for necessary changes to ensure timely support and reduce risks is also highlighted. Ten semi-structured interviews with teachers and counsellors were conducted, followed by thematic analysis to gather the perspectives of the respondents on supporting children with complex needs. The analysis revealed the important role of establishing trusting relationships with children in complex life situations. At the relational level, the importance of collaborative relationships with parents and external institutions was identified. The necessity of systematically integrated preventive activities within schools to strengthen protective factors was recognised. The question of formal disciplinary warnings and existing support of assistants for children with emotional and behavioural disorders in schools were critically discussed. The analysis revealed recommendations to overcome these obstacles, including appropriate education programmes for teachers and school counsellors, supervision, developing a culture of cooperation with parents, and establishing coordinated and harmonised support networks.

**Keywords:** children with complex needs, primary school, protective factors, teachers and school counsellors

1 \*Corresponding Author. Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia; [nina.amon@pef.uni-lj.si](mailto:nina.amon@pef.uni-lj.si).

2 Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia.

## Perspektive učiteljev in šolskih svetovalnih delavcev o varovalnih dejavnikih v šoli pri delu z otroki s kompleksnimi potrebami

NINA AMON PODOBNIKAR IN JANA RAPUŠ PAVEL

~ Osnovna šola predstavlja pomembno okolje, ki lahko deluje kot varovalni dejavnik v življenju otrok, kar je še posebej pomembno za tiste, ki se spoprijemajo s kompleksnimi potrebami in z ranljivimi življenjskimi okoliščinami. Mednarodne in domače raziskave poudarjajo pomen krepitve varovalnih dejavnikov v šolskem okolju, ustvarjanja podpornega in vključujočega okolja ter zagotavljanja pravočasnih in raznolikih oblik podpore. Namen študije je bil preučiti varovalne dejavnike, ki jih učitelji in šolski svetovalni delavci pri svojem delu prepoznavajo kot ključne pri podpori otrokom s kompleksnimi potrebami, ter raziskati omejitve in ovire pri njihovem uresničevanju. Posebna pozornost je bila namenjena tudi predlogom za spremembe, ki bi omogočile pravočasnejšo podporo in učinkovitejše zmanjševanje dejavnikov tveganja. Izvedenih je bilo deset polstrukturiranih intervjujev z učitelji in s šolskimi svetovalnimi delavci, podatki pa so bili analizirani z metodo tematske analize. Rezultati so pokazali, da ima vzpostavljanje zaupanja vrednih odnosov z otroki v kompleksnih življenjskih situacijah osrednjo vlogo pri zagotavljanju učinkovite podpore. Na ravni sodelovanja je bil poudarjen pomen partnerskih odnosov s starši in strokovnjaki iz zunanjih ustanov. Udeleženci so z namenom krepitve varovalnih dejavnikov poudarili tudi potrebo po sistematičnem vključevanju preventivnih dejavnosti v šolsko delo. Kritično so se opredelili do uporabe vzgojnih opominov in do obstoječe oblike podpore spremljevalcev, posebej za učence s čustvenimi in vedenjskimi motnjami. Analiza je oblikovala več priporočil za preseganje ugotovljenih ovir, med katerimi izstopajo: razvoj ustreznih programov strokovnega izpopolnjevanja za učitelje in šolske svetovalne delavce, zagotavljanje supervizije, krepitev kulture sodelovanja s starši ter vzpostavitev bolj usklajenih in povezanih podpornih mrež.

**Ključne besede:** otroci s kompleksnimi potrebami, osnovna šola, varovalni dejavniki, učitelji, šolski svetovalni delavci

## Introduction

Education systems emphasise inclusivity, equity, cooperation and safe learning environments for all students (UNESCO, 2021; Vogrinc et al., 2024). However, schools continue to face challenges related to performance pressure, inequalities and increasing segregation (Razpotnik & Leskošek, 2024). Slovenia is among the European countries developing inclusive education that integrates mainstream and special education, based on additional professional support. However, challenges remain in implementing a comprehensive approach (Vršnik Perše et al., 2016).

Primary schools are environments for diverse groups of children, including children with complex needs who experience difficulties in various areas of life, often combining psychosocial wellbeing and mental health problems, learning difficulties, family problems, issues arising from their socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, and other aspects of vulnerability. This group of children requires a holistic, interdisciplinary and integrated approach (Razpotnik et al., 2024; Van den Steene et al., 2019). Slovenian and international studies report an increase in psychosocial distress and mental health problems among young people, as well as long waiting lists for specialised treatments (e.g., Jeriček Klanšček et al., 2023; Valentine et al., 2024). As access to specialised treatments is limited, primary schools, which include all children, play a key role in identifying distress and providing timely support. Appropriate support can prevent the development of mental disorders in adulthood (Mikuš Kos, 2024).

In recent decades, there has been a growing awareness of the importance of protective factors that strengthen children's resilience when exposed to risk factors and reduce the risk of adverse outcomes (Mikuš Kos, 2017; Ungar, 2016). Ungar (2016) notes that the decisive factor for children with complex needs who are exposed to greater risks is the support system in the young person's environment rather than individual characteristics.

A study by Razpotnik and Rapuš Pavel (2023) found that young people experiencing psychosocial distress frequently emphasised the strong personal involvement of school professionals as a source of support. Similar findings have been reported in international studies (Gallagher et al., 2019; Bussemakers & Denessen, 2024), confirming that supportive relationships between teachers and students help mitigate negative behavioural outcomes. The school counselling service, which in the Slovenian context is an autonomous professional service within schools, plays a crucial role in the timely identification of needs and the rapid provision of assistance to individual children in cooperation with teachers, parents and external institutions. In addition, it provides professional support

at the class level and participates in educational and preventive activities at the school level (Rupar et al., 2024). Social pedagogues, as part of the school counselling service, focus on addressing social distress and preventing social exclusion, which is particularly valuable for students at risk of marginalisation (Anderberg, 2020). Teachers play an important role in this regard, as they are often the first to recognise children's problems through their daily interactions at school (O'Farrell et al., 2023).

When schools fail to recognise distress and respond to children's needs, the school environment can become an additional stressor or even the sole risk factor in the child's life (Mikuš Kos, 2017). Research indicates that less than a quarter of adolescents in Slovenia like school (Jeriček Klanšček et al., 2023), and that almost a fifth of Slovenian sixth and eighth graders experience severe stress at, or related to, school (Rupnik Vec & Slivar, 2019).

Review and empirical studies report various limitations of protective strategies for children with complex needs. Regarding internal school factors, the key issues identified include a lack of professional competence among teachers, unclear teacher roles when working with children with complex needs, and the perception that these needs exceed teachers' professional responsibilities (Dekleva et al., 2018; O'Farrell et al., 2023). Schmidt and Čagran (2011) highlight teachers' experiences of stress when working with students with behavioural difficulties, based on findings from a study conducted with teachers. Razpotnik and Rapuš Pavel (2023) present the perspective of young people, who observe the limited interest of some educators in addressing children's distress, a prevailing focus on academic achievement, and a school culture that does not prioritise or allocate time to mental health. In relation to parents, studies (Dekleva et al., 2018; O'Farrell et al., 2023; Poredoš et al., 2024) identify obstacles related to parents' willingness to cooperate and the quality of teachers' collaboration with parents. At the systemic level, issues such as staff shortages in schools, limited access to external institutions, and a lack of connection and coordination between institutions are highlighted (Dekleva et al., 2018; O'Farrell et al., 2023).

### *Perspective on Future Changes*

UNESCO (2021) emphasises the need for changes in school culture towards greater cooperation, solidarity, respect for diversity and the inclusion of all children, with particular emphasis on the most vulnerable. As an interdisciplinary science, social pedagogy can strengthen a perspective focused on the individual's world within the school context and create opportunities to implement inclusive principles. The importance of this issue is further demonstrated by a research project of the Slovenian Ministry of Education (Razpotnik, 2024),

which aims to identify the complex needs of children and young people, and to develop guidelines for more modern forms of support. The present article presents some results of this project.

Teachers and school counsellors are often the first, and sometimes the only, professionals able to offer support to children in complex life situations. Therefore, the aim of the present research is to examine the protective factors identified by teachers and school counsellors, as well as the limitations in addressing the complex needs of children in school. We are also interested in recommendations for overcoming the identified limitations and improving support for these children. In line with this objective, the following research questions were posed:

1. Which protective factors and limitations in the school environment are identified when supporting children with complex needs?
  - the perspective of teachers
  - the perspective of school counsellors
2. What measures do teachers and school counsellors suggest for overcoming obstacles and limitations in supporting children with complex needs?

## **Method**

The present study uses a qualitative approach in order to explore the perspectives and understand the experiences, views and behaviours of teachers and counsellors who work with children with complex needs in schools.

### *Participants*

A non-random convenience sample was used. Schools from the central Slovenian region with which we had previously collaborated in educational research were invited to participate. This enabled us to gain access to teachers and counsellors to conduct data collection. Ten teachers and school counsellors from five Slovenian primary schools took part in the study, all of whom were working with children with complex needs. Nine of them were female and one was male. Five of the participants worked for school counselling services (C1, C2, C3, C4, C5) and five were teachers (T1, T2, T3, T4, T5). In the subgroup of teachers, there were three classroom and two subject teachers. In the subgroup of school counsellors there were two psychologists, one social pedagogue, one social worker and one pedagogue. The participants' average work experience was 13.8 years.

### *Data Collection*

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This enabled us to focus on the research questions while remaining sufficiently open to gain

an in-depth understanding of the participants' individual experiences and subjective views. By describing specific practical examples, the participants shared their experiences of working with children they assessed as being in vulnerable life situations. The interviews addressed the following topics: identification of the current situation of children with complex needs in primary school; unaddressed needs and circumstances that hinder adequate support; experiences of cooperation between different professions; presentation of practices; and perceived support and cooperation. The interviews were conducted by the authors between April and June 2025.

### *Data Analysis*

Verbatim transcripts of the ten interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), employing a combined inductive-deductive coding approach. The inductive approach enabled us to identify the themes that emerged from the empirical data, while the deductive approach allowed us to structure the analysis according to the research questions.

## **Results**

### **Protective Factors and Limitations in Working With Children With Complex Needs From the Perspective of Teachers and School Counsellors**

Based on the interviews conducted with the participating teachers and school counsellors, the main themes were identified through thematic analysis. Codes relating to protective factors and limitations were initially identified separately then grouped into overarching themes to provide a comprehensive understanding of the teachers' and school counsellors' experiences. The findings are illustrated with selected quotations that reflect authentic participant perspectives.

### **The Perspective of Teachers**

Based on the five interviews conducted with primary school teachers, four main themes were identified: (1) teachers' personal commitment and the creation of a safe relationship; (2) a supportive school environment; (3) cooperation with parents; and (4) the role of the school counselling service and external institutions.

### *Teacher's Personal Commitment and the Creation of a Safe Relationship*

One of the main protective strategies in the first thematic category is personal commitment and viewing one's profession as a mission (T1, T2, T3, T4). The teachers link their mission to creating a safe space and secure relationships, which they state are essential for students to develop social and learning skills. Several teachers (T1, T3, T5) repeatedly highlight the importance of their own wellbeing as crucial for managing behavioural and emotional distress. Two teachers (T2, T4) report from experience that children may express distress through disruptive behaviour and by frequently testing boundaries. Most of the teachers (T1, T2, T3, T5) identify emotional warmth and relationships with the teacher as an important protective factor. One teacher (T5) has established a ritual at the end of the day whereby the children can choose how to say goodbye, which has become a symbol of trust in the relationship. All of the teachers highlight the fact that lack of time and overload prevent them from continuously supporting each child. At the same time, some of the teachers (T3, T4, T5) report feelings of exhaustion when working with children with complex needs. Some (T1, T3, T5) also note that creating a safe environment for children in distress is sometimes more challenging due to differing views and uncoordinated approaches among teachers at the school. The following statement illustrates the importance of building a secure relationship between the teacher and the children in the classroom:

*"But I think that, as a class teacher, I want all of my students to feel safe here, so that if they have a problem they come to me and we solve it together. I say the same thing to the student [with complex needs]: we always look for solutions, we talk and that's how I build a secure relationship with him."* (T4)

### *Supportive School Environment*

All of the surveyed teachers mention adapted teaching plans that take into account the specific needs and life situations of the child. When adapting to the child, they follow the principle of gradual progress; even if the child initially shows low motivation or behavioural problems, they seek ways to help them progress. All of the teachers state that individualised approaches leading to good learning outcomes require the active participation of parents and other school staff. They provide various examples of how they have adapted flexible teaching methods to the children by considering their abilities, potential and current difficult life circumstances. Some teachers (T1, T4, T5) report that flexible and individualised teaching methods conflict with the school's performance-oriented approach, which limits the activities from which the children benefit, such as more conversation and cooperation in everyday school activities. Some (T1, T2, T4)

highlight the importance of good coordination and cooperation among those involved in the child's support network as a protective factor. In this context, several teachers (T2, T4, T5) identify various obstacles to the child's cooperation with assistants for children with emotional and behavioural disorders. In order to strengthen the safe learning environment, two teachers (T2, T4) emphasise the importance of preventive activities. At the same time, some teachers (T1, T2, T5) also note the risk of inconsistency among teachers when implementing these activities in school. Only one teacher (T4) mentions taking part in training on preventive programmes, which helped her in working with the class. The following statement provides an example of a child's interaction with an assistant for children with emotional and behavioural disorders:

*"The child doesn't want a personal assistant and doesn't accept him ... he can't stand him ... Other parents ask where the assistant was at that time [when there are problems in class]. However, the school leadership decided that the assistant must be present at all times to withstand pressure from other parents."* (T4)

### ***Cooperation With Parents***

Most of the surveyed teachers (T1, T2, T4, T5) emphasise the importance of building relationships with parents through sensitivity and a personal approach. Some (T1, T2, T5) note that when parents consistently follow instructions and agreements, positive results are observed, even in children with greater difficulties. All of the teachers acknowledge the challenges posed by vulnerable family circumstances (e.g., absence of parents, domestic violence, replacing personal closeness with material goods), which make cooperation and the protection of the children's interests more difficult. Some teachers report that cooperation is particularly challenging with parents who have a lower level of education (T1, T5) or where there are differences in views between the parents and the school (T4). The following statement illustrates one teacher's personal approach and efforts to partnership with parents:

*"If you share your own experience, or if you call them without waiting for them to call you, you tell them what we're going to do together. In this way, I think it's much easier to cooperate."* (T2)

### ***The Role of the School Counselling Service and External Institutions***

The school counselling service was presented to all of the participating teachers as an important source of support for both students and staff. In complex cases (e.g., domestic violence), all of the teachers underline the importance of effective cooperation with the counselling service and liaising with external

institutions, but note that they encounter greater difficulties with the latter. Some teachers (T1, T3, T5) report that the complex bureaucratic procedures required to activate support consume too much of their time. Bureaucratic procedures can even prevent certain support interventions involving external services from being initiated (T5). Several teachers (T1, T2, T5) state that they receive little or no feedback from external professional services. The support provided to children and families at home by the mobile preventive social-pedagogical service is highlighted as a positive experience (T2, T5). Two teachers (T1, T2) consider involving children in social programmes run by volunteers from various organisations and institutions as a protective strategy. However, limitations to networking arise when children lack transportation to these organisations (T1). Some teachers (T1, T2, T5) recognise limitations in the support available within the school, as the counselling service cannot provide children with more continuous assistance. All of the teachers report a lack of coordination between the school and external institutions, so the effects of support at school can be negated in the long term. The following statement illustrates the inconsistency between the interventions of the school and external institutions:

*“Unfortunately, I haven’t had the best experience here ... it took two months for the Centre for Social Work to come and conduct interviews after I reported violence against a child in the family ... A huge amount of bureaucratic work for such a miserable result.” (T5)*

### **The Perspective of School Counsellors**

Based on the five interviews conducted with school counsellors in primary schools, five themes were identified through thematic analysis. These reveal protective factors and highlight their limitations when working with children with complex needs: (1) a trusting relationship; (2) professional practice, competence and experience; (3) parental support and cooperation; (4) preventive and support programmes at school; and (5) interdisciplinary work and cooperation with external institutions. Below we present quotes that illustrate the authentic experiences of the counsellors.

#### ***A Trusting Relationship***

All of the school counsellors emphasise that when providing support, it is essential to establish a trusting relationship with the child. Some (C1, C2, C5) recognise the role of caring class or subject teachers who have built a good relationship and trust with the child, while some (C1, C2, C3) stress the importance of continuity in meetings with the child to maintain a trusting relationship but

report being hindered by a lack of time. The statement below illustrates the importance of regular meetings with the child to maintain a trusting relationship:

*"... I met with her once a week ... so she could calm down a bit, so she had someone to talk to, so she could get her worries off her chest ... she can come to me ... we try to change these people [who support her in school] as little as possible, because we already have an established relationship, and she knows us and feels relaxed around us." (C2)*

### ***Professional Practice, Competence and Experience***

All of the surveyed school counsellors report diverse professional approaches to working with children in difficulty, drawing on each child's strengths and potential. In their counselling work, they use environmental adaptations and various aids. In the most difficult cases, two of them (C1, C4) report choosing to act in the best interests of the child rather than following the rigid bureaucratic framework of formal disciplinary warnings. The same counsellors (C1, C4) note that some teachers lack knowledge of child development and the specific expertise required to address the complex needs of children, which hinders the effective implementation of individualised adaptation. Some counsellors (C3, C4, C5) observe a lack of motivation for further training among some teachers. They (C3, C4, C5) also highlight the problem of inconsistent approaches and expectations among some teachers, which sometimes limits positive outcomes for the child. The statement below illustrates one school counsellor's view on inconsistency in the teacher's approach to the child:

*"In my opinion, sometimes the teacher causes disruptive behaviour in the student. Sometimes they also expect children to be 'statues' in the classroom, all sitting quietly and peacefully." (C4)*

### ***Cooperation and Support for Parents***

All of the participating school counsellors state that good cooperation with parents enables a faster response to behavioural or emotional problems in children. Some (C2, C3, C5) maintain contact with parents by reporting on the child's progress. All of the counsellors support parents by providing them with information and encouraging their participation in preventive activities as well as therapeutic or counselling programmes. One school counsellor (C2) finds the support to be most effective when the child is also involved in the parent-teacher meetings. Problems with cooperation arise in some single-parent families or families with a low socioeconomic status (C1) due to the parents' lack of educational competence (C3, C5) and differing views and values regarding education (C1, C3, C4, C5). The following statement illustrates the discrepancy in how the

child is seen between the parents and the counsellor:

*“The parents don’t notice; they claim that everything is fine at home. I’ve experienced that parents are very hostile towards the school, even though their child is violent. For them, the school is to blame for everything.” (C3)*

### ***Preventive and Supportive Programmes at School***

All of the surveyed school counsellors state that they recognise the potential of school prevention, which can address problems at an early stage. Schools implement a wide range of preventive activities and programmes to develop emotional and social skills. However, limitations may arise regarding children’s motivation, as two school counsellors (C1, C3) note that the responsiveness to such activities varies. Several counsellors (C3, C4, C5) also point out the overload suffered by some teachers and their lack of motivation to carry out preventive activities in class. All of the school counsellors take action themselves by participating in training courses and organising workshops for students and lectures for parents, although some (C3, C4, C5) note low interest and participation among parents. In one case (C1), a school prevention project is highlighted, which encourages volunteering and peer assistance in learning (older students help younger ones). Most of the counsellors (C1, C3, C4, C5) emphasise the importance of school leadership in supporting preventive programmes. The following statement illustrates the recognition of the potential of school prevention:

*“Children shouldn’t have to wait two years to see a clinical psychologist when they are already developing panic attacks and anxiety disorders. We could have taken preventive action much earlier. We are fortunate that all of the children are here.” (C1)*

### ***Interdisciplinary Work and Cooperation With External Institutions***

Some school counsellors (C1, C2, C5) report the importance of coordination between themselves and teachers so that the children’s problems can be identified early and addressed promptly. However, most of them (C1, C2, C3, C5) highlight limitations in support due to a lack of professional staff in various fields. The effective implementation of protective strategies is hampered by the unwillingness of some teachers to cooperate in adapting to the child (C3, C4, C5). Two counsellors (C2, C3) also perceive obstacles in the support provided by assistants for children with emotional and behavioural disorders, as schools assign them responsibilities that they cannot fulfil due to a lack of knowledge. All of the counsellors point to long waiting times and limited access to free external services, which slows the protective effects of school interventions. They all report that cooperation with external institutions (e.g., Centre for Social Work, health

professionals) is often ineffective, stating unresponsiveness (C1, C2, C3, C4) or differences in the views of school staff and external institutions (C2, C5). One counsellor (C1) notes frequent changes of professionals at the Centre for Social Work, which causes cases to stall. The following statement highlights differing opinions on the seriousness of the child's situation:

*"The Centre for Social Work said it's not that bad. They won't even call a team meeting. The child psychiatrist says we are to blame for everything, that the child must progress to the next grade because he's very capable, but now it looks like he'll have to repeat the grade because he can't cope and doesn't work. The mobile service [Mobile Preventive Socio-Pedagogical Service] also sent a report to the Centre for Social Work stating that the child isn't being properly cared for at home, but the Centre insists that he's not at risk."* (C5)

### **Recommendations for Overcoming Obstacles and Changes in Working With Children With Complex Needs From the Perspective of Teachers and School Counsellors**

In this section, a thematic analysis of the recommendations made by both the teachers and school counsellors is presented together due to the smaller number of recommendations from teachers, while ensuring that both perspectives remain clearly visible. Three main themes were identified: (1) system resources and organisational conditions in school; (2) cooperation with parents; and (3) cooperation with external institutions. The findings are illustrated with selected quotations that reflect authentic participant perspectives.

#### ***System Resources and Organisational Conditions in School***

The proposals from some school counsellors (C2, C4, C5) include calls for greater autonomy and motivation for teachers in their educational work at school. Most of the school counsellors (C2, C3, C4, C5) emphasise the need for regular supervision for school counsellors, as the workload and expectations placed on counsellors are very high, especially in complex cases. Some teachers (T1, T2, T5) also suggest the introduction of regular professional reflection among teachers. Two school counsellors (C1, C4) submitted a proposal for teacher education, particularly in order to deepen teachers' knowledge of developmental psychology and neuropsychology. Two teachers (T1, T2) also propose selected additional education and training for working with children with complex needs. Several school counsellors (C1, C4, C5) recommend the systematic integration of school prevention, as the availability of these activities would reduce the need for

external treatment. The statement below illustrates one counsellor's suggestion regarding the need for regular supervision:

*"We are not familiar with supervision at this level [for counsellors], but it is absolutely necessary for such difficult cases because, as a counsellor, you encounter the most challenging cases in education."* (C4)

As part of the organisational changes, two school counsellors (C2, C3) propose reducing the number of students in classes. Some school counsellors (C1, C2, C3) propose hiring additional professionals to strengthen interdisciplinary and comprehensive support for children with complex needs at the school. All of the teachers suggest reducing administrative tasks. The statement below illustrates one counsellor's suggestion regarding hiring an additional school counsellor:

*"... we would need at least two counsellors, one alone ... you know that someone is in distress, but you can't [provide support] like that."* (C3)

### **Cooperation With Parents**

Two of the surveyed school counsellors (C1, C4) propose the systematic integration of preventive programmes for parents to prevent the development of complex life stresses in children at an early stage. One school counsellor (C4) highlights the need to develop a culture of cooperation with parents to encourage their active participation. Some teachers (T1, T2, T5) also propose more parental involvement that could encourage partnership and cooperation. The statement below illustrates one school counsellor's proposal for the systematic integration of preventive work with parents:

*"... Financial arrangements must be made at the national level to ensure that parents whose children are already identified as having problems in kindergarten are included in the support process about parenting ... Prevention would avoid many health problems in children. ... we would have to encourage parents to participate. ... if a child has problems, we should first work with the parents."* (C1)

### **Cooperation With External Institutions**

All of the participating teachers and school counsellors propose strengthening networking and establishing quickly accessible, flexible multidisciplinary team interventions. Most emphasise the need for a comprehensive work plan (T1, C1, C4, C5), counselling for parents (T1, T5, C1, C4) and support for teachers (T1, T2, T3, T5, C3), which would prevent the escalation and complexity of children's life situations. The following statement by one teacher highlights the importance

of networked and decentralised support:

*“Networking is absolutely important. I even think that social work centres should have their own premises in the field, be mobile, present in schools and nursing homes, etc. They should be where the problem is; you take the child and go there and sit down, call the parents and don’t wait in line.” (T1)*

## Discussion

The present article examines teachers’ and school counsellors’ perceptions of protective factors and their limitations when working with children with complex needs. The participants were also asked for suggestions on changes that could strengthen the school’s supportive role for this vulnerable group of children. The results show that both teachers and counsellors emphasise building trusting relationships with children with complex needs and forming strong partnerships with parents. Both teachers and counsellors advocate an individualised and continuous approach. Related studies (Almqvist & Lassinantti, 2018; Demol et al., 2020) confirm that supportive relationships are crucial for positive outcomes in children with complex needs. Supportive relationships at school are often the only stable protective relationships for these children. With regard to protective factors, both groups of research participants emphasise the importance of using diverse teaching and educational approaches, highlighting the need for coordination within the school support network and with external institutions. They identify preventive work as an important protective factor when working with children with complex needs. Teachers highlight collaboration with the counselling service as an important source of support for both the children and themselves, as noted in research by Šteh et al. (2023).

Among the challenges of working with children with complex needs, teachers cite a lack of coordination among staff. School counsellors also highlight inconsistent approaches, which can limit positive outcomes for the child. When collaborating with parents, teachers often encounter communication barriers related to socioeconomic status, while counsellors identify discrepancies in parenting approaches as a significant challenge.

Teachers and school counsellors note the limitations of the support provided by assistants for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties, particularly when addressing complex needs. The participants report that, in addition to the physical support defined in the Regulation on Supplementary Professional and Physical Support for Children with Special Needs (*Pravilnik o dodatni strokovni in fizični pomoči za otroke s posebnimi potrebami*, 2023), assistants often provide emotional, social and behavioural support, for which they

lack appropriate professional training. This expansion of their role can result in inappropriate forms of support and further exacerbate the distress of this group of children. This area is underexplored and requires further study.

At the interinstitutional level, teachers and school counsellors identify numerous obstacles, including long waiting times, insufficient information sharing and a lack of consistent, coordinated collaboration among institutions. As a result, interdisciplinary support measures are less effective. These limitations are particularly problematic when supporting children with complex needs, as they can exacerbate difficulties and contribute to long-term distress. These results are consistent with other studies (Klemenčič Mirazchiyski, 2018; Dekleva et al., 2021).

Both teachers and counsellors focus their recommendations for overcoming these obstacles on strengthening their own professional development through supervision and additional training in order to acquire the necessary competencies for working with children with complex needs. Counsellors propose changes to teacher training, suggesting it should include raising teachers' awareness of their beliefs and approaches towards children with complex needs, and equipping them with interpersonal skills, communication skills and professional knowledge so that they can better understand children's development and respond appropriately to their distress (e.g., Bogdan Zupančič & Krajncan, 2018; Danby & Hamilton, 2016; Poredoš, 2024; Schmidt & Čagran, 2011).

Proposals to enhance school support from both teachers and counsellors also emphasise the need for rapid multidisciplinary assessment of children, including both an evaluation of the situation and a support plan for the child, parents and school. Flexible and responsive support in schools is required, based on identifying children's needs without lengthy categorisation procedures by external institutions. In order to ensure effective support, the responsibilities of individual services must be clearly defined and a case coordinator appointed (e.g., Klemenčič Mirazchiyski, 2018). This would lead to more coordinated support for the child at various levels and prevent depending solely on individual, highly committed professionals (Razpotnik et al., 2024).

In line with a more comprehensive and flexible approach, some school counsellors in our study emphasise the need for caution when issuing formal disciplinary warnings to children with complex needs, in order to ensure that these measures take into account the child's overall situation and best interests. Official disciplinary warnings can lead to transfer to another school, thus disrupting the child's established support network, increasing their distress and jeopardising their future life path. This issue is particularly relevant in light of the amendment to the Primary School Act (*Zakon o osnovni šoli*, 2025), which extends the validity of formal disciplinary warnings in Slovenia to twelve months (previously, they

were valid only for the current school year). We agree with Jeznik et al. (2020) and argue that a restorative approach must be developed in schools, gradually moving beyond retributive measures. This can be achieved through adequate support and training for teaching staff and by transforming the entire school culture.

The participants in the present study, especially the school counsellors, emphasised the need for the systematic and continuous implementation of preventive activities and programmes in the school environment. Dekleva et al. (2021) also highlight the importance of a comprehensive preventive approach in their recommendations for further developing a support network for young people in psychosocial distress. However, our participants placed less emphasis on peer relationships and peer support, which both national and international studies identify as important protective factors for children with complex needs and as forms of prevention (e.g., Dekleva et al., 2021; Demol et al., 2020; Korki-ämäki, 2016).

## Conclusion

This article presents protective factors within schools, barriers to their implementation and recommendations for changes in working with children with complex needs from the perspectives of teachers and school counsellors. The findings highlight that supportive and trusting relationships with children, strong partnerships with parents, and individualised, continuous support through coordinated collaboration between schools and external institutions are key protective factors in school settings.

The analysis identifies several barriers to effective support for children with complex needs, including insufficient coordination among school staff, inconsistent professional approaches, and challenges in relationships and communication, particularly in cooperation with parents. Additional obstacles were found at the interinstitutional level, such as long waiting times, lack of information exchange and inadequate coordinated collaboration, which may reduce the effectiveness of support. Importantly, the findings also highlight the participants' critical perspectives on school disciplinary measures when addressing the difficulties of children with complex needs in the school context, an issue not identified in previous Slovenian research. Such measures may, in some cases, further worsen the situations of children with complex needs.

The findings underscore the importance of rapid multidisciplinary assessment, as well as coordinated and continuous support for children with complex needs in school practice. Effective collaboration with parents and flexible,

empathetic approaches are essential. Targeted professional development for teachers is recommended in order to strengthen understanding of complex needs.

The limitations of the study include the small sample size and the inclusion of only teachers' and school counsellors' perspectives. Further research should adopt a multi-perspective approach, incorporating the views of parents, children and professionals from external institutions. It should also focus on developing effective systemic support for school staff and establishing protocols for coordinated cooperation between schools and external institutions to ensure timely support for children with complex needs.

### **Ethical Statement**

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for scientific research. We obtained informed consent from all of the participants in advance and ensured their anonymity and confidentiality. The research was approved by the Ethics Commission of the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana.

### **Data Availability Statement**

The datasets analysed in the current study are not publicly available due to ethical and confidentiality restrictions related to the protection of the research participants, but they are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

### **Disclosure Statement**

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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## Biographical note

**NINA AMON PODOBNIKAR** is a teaching assistant in the field of social pedagogical interventions and counselling processes at the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. Her research interests include school counselling, social pedagogical interventions and innovative preventive approaches in schools in relation to the community.

**JANA RAPUŠ PAVEL**, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Social Pedagogy, Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana. Her research focuses on action and qualitative research with vulnerable groups, particularly vulnerable families, children and young people with psychosocial difficulties. Her recent work centres on developing flexible and innovative models of collaboration with vulnerable families.



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## Psychosocial Distress and Community Support: Students' Perspectives and the Role of Social Pedagogy

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KRISTINA DEBENJAK<sup>1</sup>

Psychosocial distress is a significant challenge for students transitioning to adulthood. The present study explores students' perspectives on psychosocial distress and the community's response to it. Using an arts-based research methodology (photovoice), social pedagogy students visually documented representations of distress in their daily lives and community responses to it. The collected images and narratives were qualitatively analysed through thematic analysis to identify generative themes. The findings highlight the diverse ways in which students experience and interpret distress, revealing the emotional, social and structural factors that influence their wellbeing. A critical aspect of the research is recognising both the importance and challenges of non-formal support systems in mitigating distress. In order to foster meaningful dialogue with youth, social pedagogy should integrate concepts from the pedagogy of the oppressed and the pedagogy of liberation, addressing the individualisation of psychosocial distress and advocating for collective, community-based solutions. This approach is particularly relevant in the context of societal crises and growing uncertainty during the transition to adulthood. The study highlights the potential of arts-based participatory research methods to facilitate dialogue, co-create knowledge and foster intersubjectivity, including within higher education. By amplifying students' voices, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of students' perceptions of distress and advocates for community responses that go beyond individualised solutions.

**Keywords:** arts-based research, non-formal support networks, photovoice, psychosocial distress, students as emerging adults

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<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia; [kristina.debenjak@pef.uni-lj.si](mailto:kristina.debenjak@pef.uni-lj.si).

## Psihosocialne stiske in skupnostna podpora: perspektive študentk in socialnopedagoški razmisleki

KRISTINA DEBENJAK

~ Psihosocialne stiske predstavljajo pomemben izziv za študentke in študente na prehodu v odraslost. Izsledki te raziskave predstavljajo perspektive študentk o psihosocialnih stiskah in odzivu skupnosti nanje. Z uporabo na umetnosti temelječe raziskovalne metodologije (fotoglas) so študentke socialne pedagogike vizualno dokumentirale reprezentacije stiske v njihovem vsakdanjem življenju in odzive skupnosti nanje. Zbrane fotografije in pripovedi so bile kvalitativno analizirane s tematsko analizo z namenom prepoznavanja generativnih tem. Ugotovitve prikazujejo, kako študentke doživljajo in interpretirajo stiske, ter razkrivajo čustvene, socialne in strukturne dejavnike, ki vplivajo na njihovo dobro počutje. Raziskava kritično prepozna pomen in tudi izzive neformalnih podpornih sistemov pri blaženju stisk. Za grajenje pristnega dialoga z mladimi mora socialna pedagogika vključevati koncepte pedagogike zatiranih in pedagogike osvoboditve, izvajati individualizacijo psihosocialne stiske in zagovarjati kolektivne, na skupnosti temelječe rešitve. Tak pristop je še posebej pomemben v kontekstu družbenih kriz in naraščajoče negotovosti mladih na prehodu v odraslost. Raziskava poudarja potencial participativnih, na umetnosti temelječih raziskovalnih metod za grajenje dialoga, soustvarjanje znanja in za krepitev intersubjektivnosti, tudi znotraj visokošolskega izobraževanja. Z osredinjanjem na perspektivo študentk prispeva k poglobljenemu razumevanju njihovega doživetja stiske in zagovarja odzive skupnosti, ki presegajo individualizirane rešitve.

**Ključne besede:** na umetnosti temelječe raziskovanje, neformalne podpirne mreže, fotoglas, psihosocialna stiska, študentke in študenti na prehodu v odraslost

## Introduction

### Psychosocial Distress and Young Adults

Mikuš-Kos (2017) refers to psychosocial distress as difficulties caused by an adverse social environment, such as recurring stress, traumatic experiences, dysfunctional family circumstances, peer violence, poor relationships or negative life experiences. Mental health and mental disorders lie on a continuum that includes transient emotional struggles and crises (e.g., bereavement, romantic disappointments, academic failure), which are a normal part of life. Such emotional distress and crises usually subside once the reasons for emotional imbalance disappear. Distress is experienced subjectively as emotional, behavioural and cognitive deviances primarily resulting from the individual's interaction with their social environment.

Psychosocial distress in young people is a wide public health concern. Findings from a Slovenian nationwide youth survey (Lavrič et al., 2021) indicate a notable decline in subjective health and life satisfaction among young people aged 15–29. Over the course of the previous decade, the proportion of young people self-reporting as mostly or very satisfied with their health decreased from approximately 80% to 70%. Overall life satisfaction also fell markedly, despite concurrent improvements in certain dimensions of health and living standards. Reports of loneliness increased by 76% over the same period, while the proportion of young people experiencing stress on some or most days of the week rose by 110%. According to the World Health Organization (2022), the pandemic precipitated a global increase of 28% in major depressive disorders and 26% in anxiety disorders in the year 2020 alone.

Authors and studies emphasise the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic on emerging adults, as this is a period in which young people explore different options, gain autonomy and explore identity. Various studies have reported an increase in loneliness in young and emerging adults as a result of a lack of close and deep friendships and meaningful connections. The pandemic influenced the decrease of the support system of friendship and the possibilities of building new relationships (Akgül, 2023; Lippke et al., 2021; Rapuš Pavel et al., 2022). Akgül (2023) emphasises that it significantly hindered key aspects of emerging adulthood, particularly opportunities to explore, meet new people and engage in active daily life.

In their research, Molloy-Vickers et al. (2024) highlight that support from peers was the most important protective factor in maintaining long-term mental health in adolescents during the pandemic. Other community support

– school support, community and family connections – and other factors were important at the beginning of the pandemic, but not later on.

Beyond the pandemic, other broader socioeconomic structures shape young people's psychosocial wellbeing. Scholars have pointed to the effects of neoliberal capitalism (Hari, 2019; Harvey, 2012; U'ren, 1997; Zeira, 2022) and widening social inequalities (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2012, 2017) as significant contributors to distress. The transition to adulthood is marked by societal expectations and risks, as theorised by Beck's (2009) concept of the risk society and individualisation. In the post-socialist context, processes associated with postmodernity, such as those identified by Beck (2009), were later to emerge, and societies like Slovenia have only grappled with their full impact in the past two decades (Bogdan Zupančič, 2020). In the 1990s, neoconservatism and neo-liberalism began to dismantle the solidarity institutions in society that are not based on the logic of profit. For young people, individual success and career were established as the basic standards for self-realisation (Ule, 2002).

The pandemic amplified the rates of social disconnection and loneliness that had already been on the rise (Birrell et al., 2025). It also amplified social inequalities and deepened the gap between the “winners” and “losers” of the pandemic (Razpotnik & Zorc Maver, 2022). Thus, the pandemic did not bring radically new changes, but instead amplified, deepened and accelerated the social processes and problems that were already present.

### Community Responses to Distress

Several international studies (Martel et al., 2021; Renwick et al., 2022) emphasise the importance of community-based approaches and informal support networks for individuals experiencing psychosocial distress. The key principles of such approaches include strengthening and sustaining informal support networks, encouraging solidarity within the living environment and fostering self-organisation within communities (Rapoša Tajnšek, 1993). Slovenian studies (Dekleva et al., 2018) have also noted the significance of informal support for young people, particularly within neighbourhoods and peer communities. Even when not explicitly addressed in the research design, young people themselves frequently raised this issue, identifying informal support as either a crucial resource or, conversely, a major absence during periods of distress. The findings point to a lack of community approaches, services and forms of support for young people in psychosocial distress, approaches that would function as broader socially integrative mechanisms rather than merely as specialist responses to individual problems. This can be linked to an ecological systems perspective

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Neal & Neal, 2013), which situates the understanding of psychosocial distress within the wider context of environment, social systems and relationships, factors that mutually influence one another. Other international research strongly advocates “fostering positive social connections and focus on social networks of young people” (Birrell et al., 2025, p. 1).

In a Slovenian study, Ule (2024) identifies a shift in the socialisation of children and adolescents: as peer support and solidarity decline, young people grow increasingly dependent on family and school. However, the relationship between these two institutions has become more conflictual and competitive, and less collaborative and supportive.

### **Photovoice as Arts-Based Dialogue and Participatory Research With Young Adults**

An arts-based approach provides opportunities to explore a specific problem and examine participants’ perspectives in ways that circumvent the discomfort of verbal expression and the unconscious adherence to dominant discourses, thus allowing a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics and complexity of the issue. In terminological terms, arts-based research functions as an umbrella concept encompassing an eclectic range of methodological and epistemological orientations. What unifies these approaches is the integration of artistic forms or processes into the research endeavour, although considerable variation exists in how art is incorporated (Greenwood, 2019). Participative photography or photovoice is an artistic form of qualitative research used within the framework of the arts-based approach (Greenwood, 2019) as well as being a method of community-based participatory research (Wang, 2020).

In the process of photovoice, individuals photograph their everyday realities. The process actively encourages participants to use images to express their perceptions of life within the community, accompanied by written or oral narratives about the meaning of their photographs. It represents a bottom-up approach and is often used in community-based participatory research because it creates a process through which people can identify, present and propose changes within their communities. Such projects have been carried out with various (vulnerable) groups, enabling participants to explore and communicate important messages about their lives and communities (Wang, 2020). Images overcome the limits of language, which is important in cross-cultural contexts. They explain people’s social lives by giving a narrative to what is shown in photographs (Oh, 2012).

As a method of community-based participatory research, photovoice has two overlapping dimensions. The first dimension is photovoice as a

research method for gathering data. Rooted in Freire's work, photovoice uses photography to codify the lived experiences of the community, followed by the process of decodification, dialogue and the recognition of generative themes of the community (Freire, 1971).

The second dimension is a dialogue and participation research praxis that evokes change and empowerment in the process of research itself. Photovoice is used in various projects with marginalised groups in order to give them a voice and engage them in dialogue (Alam et al., 2018; Duran & Thacker Darrow, 2023; Glaw et al., 2017; Oh, 2012).

In the present study, photovoice is used as a participative arts-based method to gather data, and also as a critical pedagogy praxis to encourage dialogue and expand the study process of social pedagogy (Freire, 1971; Wang, 2020).

The research questions of this photovoice study are:

1. How does a group of social pedagogy students experience and interpret psychosocial distress?
2. How does a group of social pedagogy students perceive the importance and challenges of community support?

## **Method**

### *Research Design*

Framed as a case study of a group of social pedagogy students, the research design follows a qualitative, arts-based and participatory approach using the photovoice method. As a preliminary study for the doctoral research entitled *The Importance of Informal Support Networks of Youth in Psychosocial Distress*, the aim is to identify generative themes for further research in this field.

The study unfolded in four phases: (1) introduction of the photovoice assignment during the course, including ethical and methodological instructions; (2) a one-month period of data collection, during which the students independently captured photographs and wrote reflections; (3) submission of visual and narrative materials; and (4) coding and analysis.

### *Participants*

The participants were recruited through convenience sampling, as all of the students enrolled in the course *Deviant Phenomena* were invited to participate in the research. The course covers mental health and community work, thus providing students with a broader and deeper understanding of the research topic. The participants were social pedagogy students at the University

of Ljubljana in 2023, most of whom were aged between 20 and 21 years, with one 22-year-old and one 24-year-old. A total of 27 students participated in the photovoice process, after which 24 students (23 females and 1 male) voluntarily agreed to participate in the research. The strong prevalence of female students is connected to the feminisation of the social pedagogy profession (Bogdan Župančič, 2021).

### *Data Collection Instruments*

Data were collected using photovoice materials, i.e., photographs and accompanying written reflections. The students were given a task to make three or more photos from their daily life that symbolise the following topics: (1) Distress in my world: Where do I see and feel psychosocial distress in my world? How do I feel it myself, in my surroundings or as a support person? (2) Social madness: How do I feel or recognise social madness? What is “mad” for me in this society or what in this society is producing “madness”? (3) Community reactions to distress – reality and wishes. How is the community responding to psychosocial distress? How do I want the community to respond?

The students submitted their photos individually with written explanations and reflections. There was a short group process of sharing the photos and topics, but this was not included in the research. Due to a lack of time, and in view of the students participating, this process was guided towards reflection on the overall study course topics. The students did not express their personal narratives in the group.

Some photos were documentary photos capturing everyday situations, reflecting the participatory process introduced by Freire (1971). Others were symbolic, representing the students’ feelings and experiences through arts-based expression (Greenwood, 2019). Both of these approaches were presented to the students as valid research practices commonly found in other photovoice studies (Duran & Thacker Darrow, 2023).

The analysis focused solely on individual submissions. All of the materials were anonymised. The motives of the photos were not analysed independently but in terms of their contextualisation in the narrative. The analysis involved personal lived-experience narratives; generalised statements or opinions about other groups were excluded.

The written narratives were analysed qualitatively with the method of thematic analysis using an inductive coding approach. After a process of free coding, the codes were organised to identify thematic areas and generative themes. Initial coding was carried out manually, followed by coding with Delve software (without the AI feature).

## Results

The results represent the generative themes from a group of transitioning young adults: university students of social pedagogy (96% female). At the time of the Covid-19 pandemic (2020–2021), most of the students were transitioning from high school to university.

The subjects of the photographs were diverse. The students' written reflections and interpretations of their images were crucial for the processes of understanding, coding and identifying generative themes.

In analysing the research question *How does a group of social pedagogy students experience and interpret psychosocial distress?* two thematic areas were identified: (1) factors contributing to distress, and (2) the dynamics and processes through which distress is experienced.

### Factors of Distress

A diverse range of factors of distress were mentioned by the students. A group of distress factors were identified connected to the (*internalised*) *pressure of social norms and expectations* faced by young people transitioning to adulthood (present in 25% of the narratives): pressure and individual responsibility for life choices and paths; pressure and expectations regarding behaviour, appearance and career choices; pressure towards perfection; fear of the future and prioritising work over relationships; pressure to achieve results and developmental milestones; competing with deadlines and obligations; fear of failure; feeling guilty when not being productive; pressure not to show emotional distress (“don’t feel sorry for yourself”, “young people are overly sensitive and fragile”).

Another prevalent factor of distress is *loneliness* (present in 17% of the narratives).

The factors of distress mentioned in two narratives include financial distress, loss (the death of a close person or other stressful life events) and discomfort or distress in new situations or unfamiliar groups.

Other representations of distress mentioned by individual students relate to social relationships characterised by a lack of emotional connection (e.g., financial gifts replacing emotional closeness: “buying love with money”), disrespect and patriarchal family relationships; taking on the distress of others; forced hospitalisation of a close person; anxiety in crowds; experiencing and feeling emotions in extremes (e.g., manic–depressive cycles); undifferentiated anxiety; feelings of loss of control; and preoccupation with one’s body image.

## The Dynamics and Process of Experiencing Distress

The most prevalent theme in relation to the dynamics of experiencing distress is *concealing distress* (present in 38% of the narratives). The students were inclined to hide even significant distress from others and try to process it independently.

The reasons mentioned for concealing distress are connected to *social judgement and exclusion*, including fear of being judged or excluded, wanting to appear like everyone else and worrying about what others might think. Student AR-AK explains:

When someone asks you [how you are], most of the time you don't tell the truth at all. You say that you're fine because you don't want to discuss it and you're afraid of what the person will think of you. You feel this discomfort and there's no longer a quiet sense of support and trust. We're all under this phone with a light, waiting for you to do something wrong, but it doesn't offer even a hint of help. (Student AR-AK)

### Figure 1

*Photograph by student AR-AK*



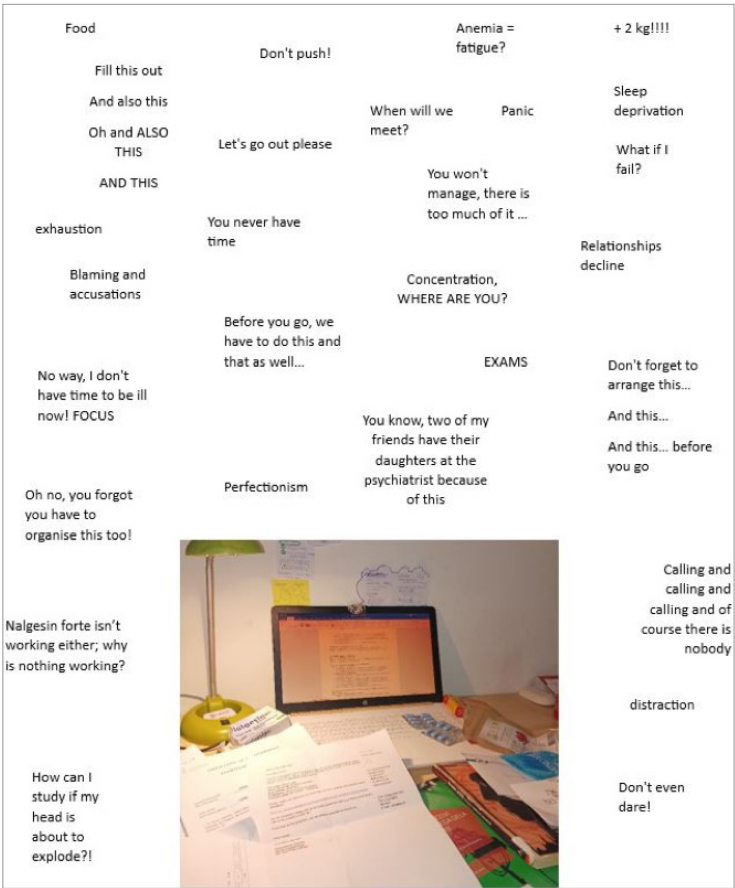
Other reasons are linked to an *inner pressure to stay productive and strong*, such as perceiving oneself as the person others rely on, not wanting to be a burden and maintaining focus on achieving personal goals. Further reasons relate to *feelings of guilt and the minimisation of distress*, including a belief that others have greater problems, that one has no right to feel distressed, or that worse things are happening in the world. Some of the students also described *internal blockages*, referring to a sense of being unable to overcome an inner barrier in order to share distress with others.

Most of the students emphasised that being in distress is “normal”; the problem they experience arises from the *accumulation* of multiple sources of distress (mentioned in 17% of the narratives). Distress in an area of life can affect other areas, leading to a build-up of distress. This accumulation can also occur when different forms of distress follow one another across various aspects of life.

There appears to be a continuum in the experience of distress: at one end, distress is perceived as a *transient state* that also reflects resilience and the capacity to cope; at the other end of this continuum lies the theme of the *immutability of distress*, or the feeling of being trapped within it (mentioned in 13% of the narratives).

**Figure 2**

*Photograph with mind map representing the accumulation of distress of student Io-Ao*



## The Importance and Challenges of Community Support

When the students describe what is important to them, when they need support and what kind of community response they would like, the most frequently recurring theme is *acceptance* (mentioned in 29% of the narratives). This notion of acceptance refers both to recognising and valuing a person for who they are and what they feel (without judgement), and to accepting a period of distress as it is, without immediately attempting to change or resolve it. As student Io-Ao expressed:

People tell you that it'll be fine and that everything will work out. And yes, I know it will, BUT RIGHT NOW IT JUST ISN'T FINE. Why is it so difficult to accept that sometimes a person doesn't feel okay and just needs time and peace? Everyone wants to convince you otherwise, and then you feel even worse because you feel the way you do, even if you don't often feel that way. That doesn't help at all; if anything, it makes the situation even worse. (Student Io-Ao)

The theme of acceptance also appears in relation to the ability to express oneself freely, without judgement, and to feel understood, valued and sincere, i.e., to be able to exist authentically. As student Vo-Jo described:

Sometimes I have the feeling that in some spaces I always have to feel good or smile and be positive. In such moments, I like to return to my room, where I can cry and feel miserable. This is a kind of space where I don't get a reaction, which is fine for me. I don't need to regulate my reactions according to what the environment communicates to me. I need more of this in society: people who care but don't dig into you; spaces where you know that you can rely on others, but they also give you peace and space, so that you can express yourself and simply be. (Student Vo-Jo)

Several narratives also thematise the experience of being a support person. Some of the students describe a high level of sensitivity towards the distress of others, which can be situated along a continuum ranging from a sense of satisfaction, connection and purpose to feelings of being overwhelmed with expectations, pressure and responsibility, resulting in feelings of constriction and distress.

The study also revealed several challenges associated with non-formal support systems: the need for emotional intelligence and self-awareness in providing support; the recognition of personal capacity limitations and the

potential withdrawal of the support person, which may leave the individual without alternative support; uncertainty or lack of confidence in how to respond appropriately; and the dispersion and inconsistency of supportive persons, leading to varied levels of support and reliability.

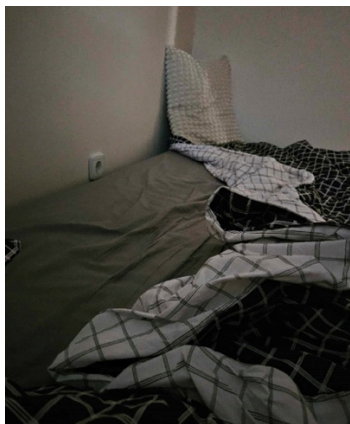
### Time as a Generative Theme

A cross-cutting generative theme of *time* was identified, appearing in 33% of the narratives. Time emerges as an important aspect in the process of experiencing distress. In dealing with or experiencing distress, time is perceived either as part of a transient state, reflecting resilience and the capacity to let emotions pass, or as a marker of permanence, where distress is experienced as a state of being stuck. Some of the students described needing a long time to process and work through distress. Others associate distress with “wasted time”, referring to periods when one is not productive, resulting in an additional sense of guilt. As student Io-Ro expressed:

Guilt kicked in because I wasn't directing my time towards confronting distress and resolving it. The time spent in bed became lost time, similar to how people perceive time when... they are in institutions. Once I'd fallen into distress, into my bed, I suddenly became heavier and needed more and more effort to get up, while time kept passing. Why did I feel guilty for wanting to lie down with the pain for a while? I was driven to productivity when I should have been conserving and directing my energy towards stabilising my feelings. (Student Io-Ro)

### Figure 3

*Photograph of lost time by student Io-Ro*



Time is also highlighted as a crucial factor in community support. The participating students noted that the constant rush of daily life, structured by timetables and competing obligations, makes it difficult for them to take time for relationships. It is important to take time for a person in distress: to wait, be present and provide undistracted attention. Time enables recovery and emotional processing. The students stressed the importance of the consistency of the support person, ensuring that they are also present after the acute distress has passed, so that the person can rely on them if distress reoccurs.

Student Io-Ao illustrates these dynamics particularly well:

I miss being able to take time for family and friends, and others too, more often and without feeling guilty, so that we can meet and talk in peace more often, without the pressure that after a certain time it's enough and we have to do something, because just sitting over a drink is not productive enough. If it even happens at all, since coordinating schedules is already science fiction, because there is always someone somewhere "on the way". And this is also illustrated below in the picture, showing how the chairs are empty because we don't have time to sit on them and calmly talk to each other. (Student Io-Ao)

#### **Figure 4**

*Photograph by student Io-Ao*



## Discussion

The results show that young adults face significant (internalised) pressure from social norms and expectations, described in terms of individual responsibility, productivity and achievement. The findings reflect the distress arising from the individualisation of life trajectories (Beck, 2009). Young people often internalise the dominant rhetoric of individualism, which frames personal difficulties as the individual's responsibility. While relying on oneself may seem like an effective solution, it becomes fragile and concerning when it is not supported by a strong social and community safety net (Razpotnik et al., 2024).

The themes of the students' narratives are strongly connected to research findings reflecting the rising level of distress among youth. The process of growing up requires young people to develop increasing resilience to contradictory pressures. These pressures arise from the requirements for ever greater independence and creativity in shaping one's identity, as well as from the growing expectations and demands of contemporary society. The balance between what is required or expected of a young person and what they can provide or accomplish is conditional and exposed to numerous risks (Ule, 2024).

These contradictory expectations are mirrored in the experiences of the participants in the present study: trying to meet external demands while concealing inner distress. The tension between self-reliance and the fear of vulnerability often leads to silence and withdrawal, which reinforces feelings of isolation.

The societal experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic amplified the social processes of individualisation and inequality that were already present. The gap between "winners" and "losers" has become more visible and threatening (Razpotnik & Zorc Maver, 2022). As Ule (2022) notes, the threat of vulnerability is especially acute when young adults face the challenges of managing adult life, with all of its ambiguities, crises and instabilities, and the individual responsibility for navigating them.

Wilkinson and Pickett (2012, 2017) link the disintegration of traditional communities to an increased fear of social evaluation, which is found to be one of the strongest causes of stress. The primary sources of stress affecting health fall into three social categories: low social status, lack of friendships and stress experienced in childhood. The authors find that all three factors influence how we feel in relation to others, i.e., whether we feel relaxed and confident in social settings. It can therefore be argued that the pressure and stress of social evaluation are connected to an increased risk of vulnerability. Young adults may be concerned about finding themselves on "the side of the losers" and struggle to maintain or achieve social status.

Transitions to adulthood are closely connected with social pressure, distress and loneliness. In a qualitative study exploring the perception of loneliness among young adults from deprived areas in London, Fardghassemi and Joffe (2022) observed similar experiences to those identified in the present photovoice study, although the two groups of young adults come from different social contexts. Young adults in the study associated loneliness with:

the feeling of being disconnected (65%; not being able to express myself, my feelings, or my issues; not feeling understood; and feeling that I do not matter); contemporary culture (54%; social media as fake portrayals of reality; changing one's identity or not being true to oneself, lack of face-to-face social interactions and care from people), pressure (52%; pressure to fit in or be accepted; pressure related to work, finding a career, earning a living, and money); social comparison (48%; general comparison; feeling stuck or behind while everyone else is progressing) and transitions between life stages (48%; relationship breakups, losses; transitory periods). (Fardghassemi & Joffe, 2022, p. 7).

These findings echo some of the central insights of the present study. Social pressure and expectations (career advancement, achieving milestones, being productive, etc.) and the concealment of distress (the feeling of being disconnected; not being able to express oneself, one's emotions or issues) can thus be understood as being related to loneliness. The more an individual is individualised in their life choices and trajectories, the more they are alone, and consequently lonely, in facing the pressures of individual responsibility.

Lippke et al. (2021) emphasise that in the emerging societal and ecological crisis, the need for real connection is even more crucial. Narratives from the present study indicate that students can perceive the community as a source of inflicting pressure, guilt and judgement. Within this framework, the generative theme of acceptance represents a call for community change and a deeper need to be recognised, understood and enabled in order to remain sincere and authentic. This implies acceptance of the individual as they are and as they feel, without judgement, and the provision of opportunities for free and open self-expression.

Some of the participating students referred to their own room, with its solitude, as the only place where they can be safe to feel and be who they are. If one's own room is the only place one feels totally accepted, shouldn't there be more spaces like this? Does this mean that loneliness is the only place of acceptance?

As emphasised by Freire (1971), acceptance constitutes a fundamental condition for genuine dialogue and is central to the principles of social

pedagogy, which begin from the position of acknowledging the person's current lived reality. At the community level, acceptance requires time and the capacity to remain with the individual in moments of uncertainty; it entails recognising and holding periods of distress as they unfold and sustaining dialogue even in the presence of ambiguity.

The recognition of distress as an acceptable state alleviates the perceived pressure of constant productivity, thus allowing the time necessary for recovery and emotional regulation. It requires the capacity to stay with the discomfort of pain and uncertainty while maintaining faith in the individual (Freire, 1971) rather than offering solutions aimed at removing the distress as soon as possible. This is connected to the basic social pedagogical principle of "not having fixed recipes" (Rothuizen & Harbo, 2017) and navigating together through life challenges (Müller, 2006). Additionally, approaching or holding uncertainty is a new emerging concept in the field of social pedagogy and social work (Afrouz, 2021; Powietrzynska et al., 2021).

Related to the findings of the present study, it can be recognised that acceptance calls not only for holding uncertainty but also for *holding time* itself: remaining still and present, creating a temporal space without pressure. Such an orientation opens the possibility for deeper forms of support, grounded in presence and trust in the individual's process.

Bennett and Burke (2018, p. 914) argue that "... time – the way it is lived, experienced, and (re)constructed through one's location, positionality, and experience – is gendered, classed, racialised, and tied to unequal power relations and socio-cultural differences". The conception of time is also central to social structures of community support. Time-management strategies assume that individuals have predictable and controllable time. Precarious employment, housing instability and caregiving responsibilities are often overlooked within an individualised, neoliberal framework dominated by self-help and self-management discourse. Rather than recognising diverse temporalities and needs, students who have to balance study with essential work or care obligations are problematised (Bennet & Burke, 2018).

A further challenge emerging from the present study concerns the limited collective imagination regarding what community support could or should look like in practice. The students' responses predominantly reflected general aspirations for more acceptance, mutual care, solidarity and connectedness among people. However, these aspirations were seldom accompanied by concrete ideas or proposals for the structural and organisational forms that such support might take. In the absence of such collective envisioning, the discourse on community support tends to revert to an emphasis on individual

responsibility, i.e., the expectation that each person should demonstrate empathy, act supportively and develop the competencies required for care. Consequently, the notion of community is confined to one's immediate social circle of friends and family, rather than extending to a broader, shared social framework. This concern regarding how to expand the notion of collective care and the ethics of care beyond our close circle is also part of important feminist discussions (O'Brien, 2023; Hrženjak et al., 2018; Čičigoj, 2023).

This orientation risks reproducing the very processes of individualisation that community support seeks to overcome. The idea of being a "support person" for others, while valuable, remains insufficient when detached from collective structures of reciprocity and shared responsibility. Such an approach individualises care, placing emotional and practical burdens on isolated actors rather than distributing them across the community.

Care has been socially constructed as a feminine practice, shaped by intersecting inequalities of class, race and age. In both collective structures and individualised care, care is disproportionately undertaken by women (Hrženjak et al., 2018). The gender composition and study orientation of the present case study group reflects the broader gendered reality of the research topic. Further comparison to other studies or groups would be needed to determine whether, or how, gender has shaped the generative themes that emerged.

The findings suggest that a more sustainable model of community support would conceptualise care as a collective capacity rather than an individual role. In such a model, the challenges identified by the participating students – feelings of being overwhelmed, uncertainty about how to help and limited personal resources – would be recognised as shared responsibilities. By redistributing the practices of support and care across the community, the emotional and practical burden of helping could be mitigated, fostering a more resilient and equitable network of mutual support.

## Conclusions

The generative themes that unfolded in the present photovoice study support the broader findings and theoretical discussion on the social changes among youth and emerging adults (Ule, 2024). They emphasise two main factors of distress: the (internalised) pressure of social norms and expectations, and loneliness. The study discusses how these two factors can be interconnected and influence each other. Within the dynamics and process of experiencing distress, the central theme is the concealing of distress. The accumulation of distress and the perceived continuum between the immutability of distress and

distress as a transient state, which also reveals resilience in coping, are problematised. In relation to community support, an important principle identified by the students is acceptance. Overall, a cross-cutting generative theme recognised is *time*.

The application of these conclusions in practice suggests a need to re-think the notion of time; the concept of *holding time* appears to be an important principle in creating dialogue and spaces for community support. By resisting pressures for efficiency and by valuing acceptance and longer time frames, communities can create environments that prioritise presence and relational trust over quick solutions, the minimisation of distress or individualised self-help and self-management.

One limitation of the study is that the photovoice process did not conclude with a community dialogue to foster further discussion. In this sense, the process, which was meant to be dialogical, reflected the same difficulties: a lack of time to gather together. Similarly, in the evaluation of the study courses, we recognise the students' avoidance of group conclusions, since they prioritise their time and preparation for exams (Razpotnik, personal communication, 5 June 2023). The phenomenon of "empty classrooms" has already been noted by Zaviršek (2018) as a form of absence, passivity and the relativisation of study in students' lives.

A more dialogical process, in the context of intersubjectivity, could have clarified certain topics or opened new ones. Within this process, there should have been more time and trust for students to share sincerely. The individual photographs and reflections served as a method to enable students to express their experiences honestly, without fear of judgement. In future studies, sufficient time and structure should be provided to foster genuine dialogue. This reflects the broader challenges of cultivating critical pedagogy and community voice. It is easier to complete an individual task, especially under the pressure of time and obligations, than to engage in an uncertain and transformative collective process.

Future lines of research could place greater emphasis on the community process and collective capacities for care in order to better understand and develop participatory strategies for community support concepts and praxis.

## Ethical Statement

The research study was approved by the Ethics Commission of the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia.

## Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available to protect the anonymity of the small, specific sample, but they are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

## Disclosure Statement

The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

When preparing this article, the author used ChatGPT in August 2025 for the purpose of language translation, formatting and grammar checking, with the prompts: “Translate the text in British English”, “Check the British English grammar”, “Suggest a shorter version of the text” and “Suggest academic writing style improvements”. The author subsequently reviewed and edited the output as necessary and accepts full responsibility for the content and integrity of the publication.

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## Biographical note

**KRISTINA DEBENJAK** is a teaching assistant in the Department of Social Pedagogy at the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. Her research interests include community work, social spaces, circus pedagogy, support networks of youth in psychosocial distress, participatory arts-based research.

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## Pedagogical Renewal and the Role of Teachers in Secondary Schools: Insights From Five Case Studies in Spain

LAURA FARRÉ-RIERA<sup>1</sup>, NÚRIA CARRETE-MARÍN<sup>\*2</sup>, MAR BENEYTO-SEOANE<sup>1</sup>  
AND ESTHER FATSINI-MATHEU<sup>1</sup>

☞ This article presents the results of a research project funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation of the Government of Spain, which aims to analyse secondary schools whose teaching practices are transformative because they go beyond temporary innovations, generating changes and improvements that impact the school, students and the local community and promote inclusion and meaningful learning. This article examines the role that teachers play in secondary education in relation to teaching practices and methodologies in the current context of demands for constant transformation, through the study of five secondary schools in different regions of Spain. Observations, focus groups, analysis of school documents and in-depth interviews were carried out, and the data were analysed using Atlas.ti software. The results show how pedagogical renewal in secondary education is based on teaching aspects such as educational leadership, strategies to promote personalised learning that place students at the centre of educational action, the establishment of relationships with the community to share educational and social projects that promote a sense of belonging to the local context, and the need to modify resources, spaces and times to accommodate more global and transversal teaching and learning processes.

**Keywords:** teachers' role, professional identity, pedagogical renewal, secondary education, case studies

1 Universitat de Vic – Universitat Central de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain.

2 \*Corresponding Author. Universitat de Vic – Universitat Central de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain; [nuria.carrete@uvic.cat](mailto:nuria.carrete@uvic.cat).

## Pedagoška prenova in vloga učiteljev v srednjih šolah: ugotovitve iz petih študij primerov iz Španije

LAURA FARRÉ-RIERA, NÚRIA CARRETE-MARÍN, MAR BENEYTO-SEOANE IN  
ESTHER FATSINI-MATHEU

~ Ta članek predstavlja izsledke raziskovalnega projekta, ki ga je financiralo Ministrstvo za znanost in inovacije Republike Španije, katerega cilj je analiza srednjih šol, katerih pedagoške prakse so transformativne, saj presegajočasne inovacije ter ustvarjajo spremembe in izboljšave, ki vplivajo na šolo, učence in na lokalno skupnost ter spodbujajo inkluzijo in smiselno učenje. Članek preučuje vlogo, ki jo imajo učitelji v srednješolskem izobraževanju v povezavi s pedagoškimi praksami in z metodologijami v trenutnem kontekstu zahtev po nenehni transformaciji, in sicer prek študije petih srednjih šol v različnih regijah Španije. Izvedli smo opazovanja, fokusne skupine, analizo šolskih dokumentov in poglobljene intervjuje, podatki pa so bili analizirani s programsko opremo Atlas.ti. Izsledki kažejo, kako pedagoška prenova v srednješolskem izobraževanju temelji na pedagoških vidikih, kot so: vodstvo v izobraževanju, strategije za spodbujanje personaliziranega učenja, ki učence postavljajo v središče izobraževanja, vzpostavljanje odnosov s skupnostjo za izmenjavo izobraževalnih in socialnih projektov, ki spodbujajo občutek pripadnosti lokalnemu okolju, ter potreba po prilagajanju virov, prostоров in časa, da se omogočijo bolj globalni in prečni procesi poučevanja in učenja.

**Ključne besede:** vloga učiteljev, poklicna identiteta, pedagoška prenova, srednješolsko izobraževanje, študije primerov

## Introduction

This article draws on research conducted within the project *(Re)Situating pedagogical renewal in Spain from a critical perspective: Five case studies in secondary schools in Aragon, Catalonia, Castile and León, the Valencian Community and the Basque Country* (PID2019-108138RB-C22). The aim of this project is to study the current pedagogical renewal taking place in secondary schools in Spain, looking at the role of teachers, the educational practices they promote in their schools and the connections they establish with their social environment and community. In Spain, compulsory schooling includes both primary education (ages 6–12) and secondary education (ages 12–16). This article focuses on secondary education.

In the Spanish context, the concept of pedagogical renewal goes beyond that of innovation (Torrent & Feu-Gelis, 2020) and aims to advance a global, critical and emancipatory educational approach that is responsive to its social context, grounded in democratic and participatory principles, and underpinned by a socially and politically committed vision oriented towards the transformation of the educational model (Carbonell, 2022). Its educational practices are characterised by being sustainable and permanent over time and reviewed through constant teacher reflection for improvement, considering students as agents in their own learning. The important role of the community is recognised, and the relevance of the changing role of teachers is highlighted (Beneyto-Seoane et al., 2023).

This work complements other work on the role of teachers and their attitude and leadership in schools (Aliu & Kaçaniku, 2023; Šarić & Šteh, 2017), but provides an additional perspective which addresses a gap in the research, given the scarcity of work on transformative teaching practices in secondary schools (De Castro-Calvo et al., 2024).

## The Professional Identity of Secondary School Teachers

Compulsory education is constantly under scrutiny due to the expectations placed on the teaching and learning processes and the development of a critical, tolerant and inclusive youth (UNESCO, 2022). This becomes more evident after the publication of international comparative educational results (PISA), as educational reports tend to focus on the challenges that remain to be met in different educational systems rather than on achievements, calling into question the changes in educational practices in schools. This process also questions the role that teachers play in schools, casting doubt on the profile, the

competencies and teaching identity of teachers (Bolívar, 2007).

It is essential to consider how teachers perceive and practice their profession (Bolívar, 2007) in the face of a constantly changing and evolving educational and social context that impacts organisational, work, relationship and learning systems. This has a direct impact on how they develop their practice and construct their teaching identity in a constant process of professional development and reflection (Berbegal et al., 2024). It is essential for teachers, as agents of change in educational institutions (Serrano & Pontes, 2016), to develop a professional profile that enables them to respond appropriately to the new challenges, demands and needs of today's society (OECD, 2005; UNESCO, 2022).

Teacher identity is made up of cognitive, emotive and affective factors, resulting from the relationships and tensions with personal, cultural and social identity (Bolívar, 2007; Olave, 2020). It is the result of a process in which each teacher reconfigures the way they carry out their professional practice based on their personal experiences, initial training, experiences at the beginning of their professional career, relationships with other teachers and students, the social context and the culture of the school in which they work (Flores & Day, 2006; Serrano & Pontes, 2016). There are processes of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of professional identity that coexist with pre-established social expectations about the figure of the teacher (Olave, 2020) and with a shared social representation of their role and attributes (Orozco-Gomez, 2023). Some of the key elements of these processes include initial and ongoing training to promote their professional development (Bolívar, 2007), as well as other factors including cooperation between teachers, co-teaching and structured spaces for coordination among teachers. In addition, attention to emotional aspects and external support are highly important, even more so than the accumulation of years of experience (Martínez et al., 2022).

Teacher training, particularly in secondary schools, should be a primary objective of the education system to improve the quality of education (García, 2010; OECD, 2005) and should be integrated alongside disciplinary training (Bolívar, 2007). To achieve this, it is necessary to explore teachers' motivations, needs and challenges, while also considering the high rate of school failure and early school leaving, factors that clearly impact teaching quality (Scholes et al., 2017) and academic success in Spain. However, an increasing number of schools are promoting a new approach to secondary education, rethinking their educational project, including the school's vision, goals, values, and priorities for student learning, as well as their methodological approach, encompassing how teaching is delivered and incorporation of new learning methodologies. They

are also reflecting on their school culture, projecting new challenges and responsibilities for teachers. In this context, actions that aim to change the pedagogical perspective and provide greater shared meaning on how to carry out one's own professional practice can be considered rejuvenating, since they aim to transform educational contexts, placing students at the centre and considering the community and the area (Fargas Malet & Bagley, 2024; Ndayisenga & Sindayigaya, 2024).

### **Pedagogical Renewal in the Current Educational Context**

Changes in education are necessary to keep up with social progress. While some are driven by external pressure, such as international comparative testing, others are implemented due to the contributions that educational sciences make to teaching and learning processes, or new methodological and didactic processes (Bromley et al., 2020).

Change in itself does not imply improvement (Domínguez Rodríguez, 2016), and if it does appear, it must come from the consolidation of scientific advances that aim to guide the future. The difficulty lies in identifying those changes that appear in educational practices and that go beyond the introduction of mere innovations (Beneyto-Seoane et al., 2023). Renewal pursues a profound change that permeates the culture of the school, encompassing a global approach to educational action that goes beyond specific changes in classroom contexts (Pericacho & Andrés-Candela, 2018), and it does so from a conception of education as a tool for social transformation.

The difficulty of moving towards transformative educational contexts is also made explicit by the vagueness of its conceptual definition, since it has changed over time across different historical periods in Spain (Martínez Bonafé, 2021; Torrent & Feu-Gelis, 2020). It has been associated with educational innovation as it shares certain elements, such as the desire to move towards approaches that focus on improving the quality of learning, leaving behind more conventional school models (De Castro-Calvo et al., 2024). However, we do not consider these terms to be synonymous (Díez-Gutiérrez et al., 2023) since renewal aims at a profound transformation from an inclusive and critical perspective, with a clear commitment to social justice and the desire to promote an authentic democratic participation of the educational community (Pericacho & Andrés-Candelas, 2018).

A transformative educational context moves away from the hegemonic model, favouring a reflective and metacognitive attitude among teachers towards educational action (Postholm, 2012). It is the teaching team that engages

in dialogue, debates and makes collaborative decisions about the educational practices developed in the school to offer quality education that is tailored to the interests of the students, the educational context of the school and the challenges of today's society (Beneyto-Seoane et al., 2023; Pericacho & Andrés-Candelas, 2018).

It is critical to rethink the professional identity of teachers in order to move towards an educational context in which, beyond seeking academic results at the end of secondary education, we can influence how educational outcomes have been reached by learners. It is also important to consider whether the learning process is in place to respond to the intended pedagogical purposes rather than to the demands of the school graduate, which are more or less linked to strategies of ephemeral market fads and neoliberal policies (Díez-Gutiérrez & Rodríguez- Fernández, 2021).

The article aims to analyse the role played by teachers in the implementation of practices and methodologies aimed at pedagogical renewal, in the context of a constant demand for improvement and transformation in secondary schools. Based on a case study of five schools in different regions in Spain, the article poses the research question: How are secondary school teachers' professional practices experienced within contexts of educational transformation in Spain?

## Method

This research aims to analyse how professional teaching practices are experienced within complex educational contexts, such as secondary education, and how they are linked to processes of educational change that contribute to sustainable and profound transformations in schools and their communities. Taking into account the interpretative paradigm, and based on a qualitative approach, a multiple case study was chosen as the research method (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Stake, 1995), emphasising the opinions and experiences of the participants (Korthagen, 2007).

## Participants

The cases, intentionally selected for their connection to the concept of renewal in teaching practices, correspond to five secondary schools in the communities of Aragon, Castile-León, Catalonia, the Valencian Community and the Basque Country (Spain). They were selected considering criteria related to accessibility, interest in participation, territorial distribution, the validity of the

renewal project, and the schools' connection with the educational community and the surrounding environment (De Castro-Calvo et al., 2024). They all share a common commitment to improving educational quality and implementing pedagogical practices that contribute to the global education of students and the well-being of the local area.

The sample (Table 1) includes 107 participants belonging to four key profiles within the educational community: teachers ( $n = 39$ ), members of the management teams ( $n = 16$ ), secondary school students ( $n = 32$ ) and families ( $n = 20$ ). This composition ensured a broad and balanced representation of the main actors involved in school life and decision-making processes. Although different participant profiles were considered, the analysis was conducted holistically with Atlas.ti, integrating all opinions in the results presented below.

**Table 1**

*Distribution of participants by region and profiles (%)*

|                               | Teachers | Management team | Students | Families | %    |
|-------------------------------|----------|-----------------|----------|----------|------|
| Catalonia                     | 6        | 4               | 6        | 6        | 21.5 |
| Aragon                        | 9        | 2               | 7        | 4        | 20.6 |
| Basque Country                | 12       | 3               | 10       | 3        | 26.2 |
| The Valencian Community       | 5        | 3               | 5        | 5        | 15.9 |
| Castile and León              | 7        | 4               | 4        | 2        | 15.9 |
| Total participants by profile | 39       | 16              | 32       | 20       |      |
| (%)                           | 37.4     | 14.0            | 29.9     | 18.7     | 100  |

## Instruments

Data collection took place during the 2023-2024 academic year, following a multimethod qualitative design. To capture the complexity of organisational cultures and participatory practices in schools, four complementary instruments for gathering data were developed. Each instrument was supported by its own protocol to ensure consistency, reliability and comparability across the five participating regions. Four instruments were designed: semi-structured interviews, focus groups, observations and analysis of the school's institutional documentation. Voice recordings were used in the interviews and focus groups for transcription and data analysis. A total of 78 documents (Table 2) were obtained for subsequent analysis using Atlas.ti software, version 23.

**Table 2**  
*Data collection instruments (by region)*

| Region (Spain)          | Semi-structured interviews | Observations | Focus groups | School's documentation |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|--------------|--------------|------------------------|
| Catalonia               | 5                          | 5            | 4            | 4                      |
| Aragon                  | 2                          | 6            | 4            | 6                      |
| Basque Country          | 3                          | 4            | 3            | 1                      |
| The Valencian Community | 2                          | 5            | 4            | 0                      |
| Castile and León        | 9                          | 2            | 2            | 7                      |
| Total (n)               | 10                         | 22           | 17           | 18                     |

**Research Design**

The study followed a qualitative content analysis design, integrating data from interviews, focus groups, observations and institutional documents. Content analysis using Atlas.ti was carried out through data coding, the selection of representative quotes from the transcripts and the identification of relevant information.

The analysis began with a systematic coding process applied to the full dataset. Transcripts and documents were read in detail to identify meaning units relevant to the research questions. Coding was carried out using a codebook of pre-established analytical categories, selected on the basis of the project's theoretical framework and previous literature on pedagogical renewal and teacher roles. These categories included: methodology and strategies, time management, spaces, organisation and grouping of students, curriculum, teacher/educational agent role, work with the community and the environment, commitment to the school, identity traits, leadership, assessment and digital culture. These codes were chosen for their connection with educational practices, the methodologies used and the teaching role in contexts of educational transformation. For the interpretation and analysis of the results, elements of pedagogical renewal were considered, based on a systematic review carried out under the scope of the project (Beneyto-Seoane et al., 2023). These elements include the following students placed at the centre of educational action, relationship between educational stages and levels, reflective teaching attitude, actors and scenarios showing commitment to and responsibility for the region and school innovation in the digital age.

Interpretation of the results also considers credibility criteria for selecting and obtaining the most representative results (Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Data analysis process*

| Process followed for data analysis (content)                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Criteria for data credibility                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Detection and coding of information based on pre-established codes and a review of the specific literature</li> <li>- Identification and selection of significant quotes and information</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High frequency of code appearance</li> <li>- Saturation and representativeness of quotes that justify content interpretations</li> <li>- Comparison of the descriptions and interpretations with the results reported in other similar studies on pedagogical renewal and the current teaching role</li> </ul> |

The project followed the ethical principles of educational research in the university setting; the privacy and anonymity of participants' personal data were guaranteed throughout the process. Furthermore, efforts were made to encourage the involvement of various stakeholders in the study, periodically sharing the findings to enable joint monitoring and incorporate new information when necessary.

## Results and Discussion

The main results obtained from the analysis are presented below, based on the selected quotes and the triangulation and complementarity of the data collected. It should be noted that the results presented here integrate the perspectives of the different participant subsamples, which were analysed jointly. As this study forms part of a larger project, it was decided to consider all quotes and information from all participants together in order to address the study objective.

This approach allowed us to capture a wide range of perspectives across the topics presented in the results section. In general, the focus in writing the results was on the diversity of responses rather than on participants themselves. However, in certain cases, it was considered appropriate to highlight a particular subgroup of participants, due to the significance of the information they provided for achieving the study objectives.

Thus, by examining the analysis performed with Atlas.ti on the number of quotes obtained per code (Table 4), we can identify the relative weight of each code within the analysed documents.

**Table 4**  
*Categories, codes and number of quotes analysed*

| Code                                    | Quote | Category                                       | %     |
|-----------------------------------------|-------|------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Teacher/educational agent role          | 104   | Teaching culture and teacher training          | 31%   |
| Leadership                              | 8     |                                                |       |
| Curriculum                              | 39    |                                                |       |
| Organisation and grouping of students   | 25    | Student-centred learning approach              | 17.7% |
| Methodology and strategies              | 50    |                                                |       |
| Assessment                              | 11    |                                                |       |
| Time management                         | 8     | Organisational, temporal and didactic elements | 20.3% |
| Spaces                                  | 40    |                                                |       |
| Materials                               | 51    |                                                |       |
| Work with the community and environment | 81    | Commitment to the local area                   | 26.9% |
| Commitment to the school                | 28    |                                                |       |
| Identity traits                         | 22    |                                                |       |
| Total number of quotes analysed         | 487   |                                                | 100%  |

The analysis of the 487 coded quotes revealed an uneven distribution (Table 4), enabling the identification of the predominant themes. Categories were established to structure the interpretation of the data around the most relevant aspects. These categories were defined in relation to the codes, grouping those that share a common logic or address complementary dimensions of the phenomenon studied. This thematic organisation facilitates a comprehensive reading of the results and highlights the main areas of focus, with the following categories:

- Teaching culture and teacher training: This includes the role of teachers as educational agents, their leadership, ongoing training and professional positioning.
- Student-centred learning approach: This includes references that place students at the centre of the educational process, highlighting their active participation, autonomy and decision-making capacity.
- Organisational, temporal and didactic elements: Aspects relating to the planning and development of the educational practice, including management of time, spaces, materials and methodological strategies.
- Commitment to the local area: The school's relationship with its local area, highlighting collaborative work with the community and institutional commitment.
- Digital age: Digital transformation in the educational field and

transversally related to the opening towards new ways of teaching and learning mediated by technology.

- Global approach: This encompasses a transversal and integrative category that runs through all the previous ones. It is not linked to a single code, but rather emerges from the interrelationship between them. The global approach allows us to understand how the different elements are structured to promote meaningful and contextualized learning that is connected to the social and physical environment.

The results from these six categories are described below.

### **Change in Teaching Culture**

As shown by the results obtained from the study, the reflective attitude of teachers in schools experiencing educational transformation is essential. Processes of change are enhanced if the faculty is strong in strategic decision-making, for which training is also necessary. Shared leadership and having a committed and adequately trained teaching staff in the school's working methods and philosophy is important to optimise the implementation of transformative practices, although most schools approach changes with a lack of training in specific tools and practice a certain degree of self-teaching, an aspect that is also consistent with other studies (Bolívar, 2007). The teachers involved in our study mention the exhaustion, overexertion and need for preparation required when teaching in a renewal environment in secondary schools, this being precisely one of the aspects that stands out in this type of school (Bergebál et al., 2024).

Participants also reported solutions such as freeing up teaching staff to develop ad hoc materials that are implemented, evaluated and constantly improved, and providing ongoing training tailored to the specific needs of the schools to ensure project continuity. In particular, members of the management teams emphasised the stability of teaching staff to help them face the challenge of working in complex and more professionally demanding environments (Olave, 2020). The participants highlighted the importance of strengthening the sustainability of the educational project through shared pedagogical debate with the teaching staff, addressing the challenge of the usual dynamics of each academic year, such as the mobility of the teaching staff, complex relationships with the administration and lack of coordination time.

## Students as Protagonists of the Educational Process

Different learning experiences have been identified in schools that place students at the centre of the educational process so that they can develop holistically. The methodological and organisational aspects are conceived and designed by teachers so that students can become protagonists of the learning process (Ndayisenga & Sindayigaya, 2024; Pericacho & Andrés-Candelas, 2018).

Teachers from our study view students as proactive agents with the capacity for participation, debate and decision-making. They promote problem-solving, critical thinking, mutual aid and peer cooperation. Teachers work towards achieving inclusive schools that adapt to students' needs and respond to their diversity, contributing also to their personal, emotional, academic and social well-being (De Castro-Calvo et al., 2024).

An example of educational experiences that promote greater student protagonism and awareness of learning can be found in an initiative called the "Free Project", a dedicated project-based learning time that provides a space for students to develop their own interests or abilities, fostering self-knowledge and individual development. It can also be found in the linguistic and mathematical fields, where teachers have designed and organised various multilevel learning activities. This structuring aims to enable each student to focus on the activity that best suits their level of proficiency and previously defined individual goals. In these experiences, teaching practices are organised to foster student autonomy and self-management, as well as responsibility for their learning process, seeking to develop a critical perspective in these contexts, in line with other studies (Pericacho & Andrés-Candelas, 2018).

In this student-centred approach, assessment is also understood as part of the learning process, not the reproduction of information. In the five participating schools, self-assessment and peer assessment are encouraged for the self-regulation of learning. Most schools adopt a perspective less focused on conventional exams and more focused on formative assessment, which includes multiple sources of evidence of learning, an aspect that pupils themselves report as particularly valuable. Assessment activities are also aligned with the level and progress of each student and class group, ensuring that teachers respect the diversity of learning paces.

## Organisational, Temporal and Didactic Elements

Considering the educational centres and participants analysed, teachers propose a time structure based on educational and pedagogical reflection,

serving educational projects. They state that the split schedule (morning/afternoon) is the one that benefits students, concluding that teachers' preferences for a compact schedule (intensive in the morning) are not a pedagogical justification.

The five participating schools agree that flexible scheduling is important for students to make the most of their class time, and it is a source of debate and reflection for teachers. Its implementation is demanding since it requires a high level of student concentration on the planned activities, but it is an element is beneficial while respecting the diversity of needs and learning rhythms. The data analysed shows the need to have specific times for individualised tutoring to ensure a personalised follow-up.

The schools studied organise time slots with extended durations that are not distributed according to subjects in a conventional format. Class hours are distributed according to a pedagogical pattern that alternates between individual activities of personal and independent work and cooperative and global work, individualised tutoring and multigrade work experiences. This point was agreed upon by the teachers and the management team.

Regarding the use of spaces, the results obtained indicate that the classroom is losing its central role as a regular work space, with the school (classrooms, corridors, staff room etc.) and its immediate surroundings (school playground and exterior, neighbourhood) becoming the spatial context in which the teaching activity takes place. Regarding internal uses, there is a need to find a balance between making spaces multipurpose and facilitating student interaction with the need for specific spaces that allow for individual work. In the schools studied, teachers are redesigning them with the goal of making them versatile and multifunctional to adapt to active and participatory methodologies. In addition, free student movement is encouraged, given that sometimes questions need to be resolved regarding an aspect of learning that does not fit the discipline of the teacher currently in the classroom.

Regarding teaching materials, teachers comment that the process of replacing resources involves abandoning the textbook as the basis for teaching, and focusing on different types of texts, alternate reading strategies and other pedagogical practices related to the use of more active and participatory methodologies. The changes occur progressively, moving from the individual use of textbooks to the sharing of materials, then replacing the content of the books with photocopies from various sources, eventually leading to the creation of their own materials. They do not question the validity or appropriateness of the textbooks within the regulatory framework, but they emphasise that the creation of materials provides pedagogical value and clearly entails reflection both on the appropriateness of the materials for students in real-life contexts and on teaching practice itself.

The learning of curricular content is promoted, and the development of personal skills, emotional education and the individual growth of each student is also essential. For teachers, creating their own materials allows them to decide on the precise content and choose the appropriate teaching methodology, fostering meaningful learning and a sense of belonging to their place of residence (Carrete-Marín et al., 2024). It is also the result of working pedagogically based on the integration of content and learning areas, creating possibilities for changes in the established order of textbooks and thus being able to adapt it to current school projects. Teachers are responsible for creating the materials, which entails an investment of effort and time from their personal life to coordinate and design the educational proposals (Carrete-Marín et al., 2024).

In most of the schools that participated, the teaching resources are presented as a coherent extension of their ideological and pedagogical approaches (Domínguez Rodríguez, 2016), embodied in a trust-based, person-centred pedagogical model. The goal is to generate resources that foster students' personal experiences and relationships with their social environment and the world from a local and global perspective (Abós et al., 2021).

### **Commitment to the Local Area**

Schools involved in processes of reflection and educational transformation feel a clear commitment and responsibility towards its immediate surroundings (Beneyto-Seoane et al., 2023; Champollion, 2018; Feu et al., 2025), which leads teachers to design, organise and develop practices that aim to improve relationships with and the conditions of the context in which the school is located. It feels to them as if it is a responsibility to strengthen and improve the community. To achieve this, the participating schools are implementing projects committed to the local area, with a particular focus on environmental care (Pericacho & Andrés-Candelas, 2018), in a mutual relationship that contributes to the community and to the education of the students as active citizens in the world. As the study showed, these projects and connections are also highly valued by families and pupils.

Although the various renewal schools analysed share this perspective, this connection between the local area and the school is changing and diverse. The participating agents are not always the same; however, students and teachers are key players in promoting commitment and responsibility to the local context. Organisations and associations, public administration and management and the business sector are all involved.

Based on the research findings, three main areas of development can be

identified. The first area occurs in direct relationships with stakeholders in the local community. Teachers in renewal schools expect participation in school activities, whether from families, organisations, the administration or local resources. The ways, spaces and moments in which these stakeholders participate are diverse, and no renewal school uses the same formula for participation, neither where, how, with whom nor when. Evidence of this is found in some schools that require families to contribute to the acquisition of new materials or to the organisation of school days, in learning communities or school cooperatives. The same is true of municipal organisations and associations; some schools leverage these institutions to build community, such as festivities at senior centres or theatre performances open to the community. The same applies to the relationship established with businesses, which become educational settings that in addition to being part of a professional self-discovery programme, offer visitor spaces that enrich students' learning. These experiences connect the local community with young people's personal and professional interests, expanding their knowledge and fostering a more contextualised understanding of reality.

The second area of connection occurs indirectly in the classroom. It is there that teachers encourage students to develop a critical view of society, particularly by encouraging reflection on aspects of social impact related to human rights, global conflicts, ecology, hate speech and gender perspectives. These projects allow students to undergo transformational experiences both within their local community and personally, incorporating a more human and transformative perspective (UNESCO, 2022).

The third area focuses on the school's relationship with its local area. Teachers promote the educational institution as an agent of social change (Serrano & Pontes, 2016), contributing to the sustainability of education, the preservation and promotion of local culture, language, and traditions, and the advancement of human rights, through practices designed to enrich learning experiences and cultivate critical thinking.

### **School Innovation in the Digital Age**

In renewal schools, educational innovation often emerges through the introduction of technological resources to enhance the learning experience and make it more engaging for students; teaching the appropriate use of screens, recognising the shared responsibility between the school and families in the adequate use of technology; teaching students to discern between true and false information, fostering the development of critical skills to evaluate and use it

with responsibility; improving teaching and learning; and educating on basic digital tools and how to use them effectively (Biloisova et al., 2025).

The data show that most activities at the participating schools are conducted digitally, with easy access for students, through autonomous and asynchronous use or by leveraging technological tools that support specific subjects. Faced with this transition between school innovation and technological innovation – from analogue to digital – teachers who implement transformative practices face various challenges to equal access and digital opportunities (Beneyto-Seoane & Collet-Sabé, 2023).

A first challenge that emerges from the research is supporting students in the rational use of screens and electronic devices, as well as setting limits and appropriately managing the time spent on digital activities within the school grounds. Digital dependence worries teachers, especially if it can lead to the loss of conventional skills in terms of holistic development. There is concern that excessive use of technology influences the loss of interpersonal contact and in-person social activities. A second challenge is the lack of training and skills. The introduction of technology in classrooms highlights a digital divide between teachers and students, an aspect that must be addressed in ongoing training (Beneyto-Seoane & Collet-Sabé, 2023). While students may lack a complete understanding of the tools they use, teachers need greater specialisation in specific digital tools and applications. A third challenge has to do with the growing concern about the proper use of technology and the information available on the internet, given the indiscriminate access to content that is not always verified (Biloisova et al., 2025). Finally, a fourth challenge lies in the difficulty keeping students focused on educational activities since there is a temptation to get distracted by games or social media.

### **An Integrated Approach to Learning**

Teachers' reflective attitudes towards educational action also calls into question the pedagogical and methodological approaches within schools. The teachers participating in the study constantly seek to create, design and generate new teaching and learning proposals, experimenting with alternative pedagogical methodologies and seeking continuous improvement in their teaching practice. Thus, they alternate conventional classes with other transdisciplinary projects that promote collaborative work among students.

They emphasise the importance of sharing experiences and knowledge among teachers, as well as collaboration and teamwork, to successfully implement these innovative methodologies. They discuss the advantages of this

approach in relation to teachers' freedom of action in the classroom, in a way that shows that personal effort also results in professional improvement.

The methodological changes are based on a curriculum vision that overcomes the fragmentation of subjects and opts for the integration of knowledge and its learning content, breaking away from disciplines. This means that all teachers must be involved and work together, with varying degrees of responsibility, in all the projects. This represents a challenge as they must support students in learning different subject areas, and it means dealing with resistance from teachers, who are very tied to the content of their subject matter (Bolívar, 2007).

In the renewal schools studied, this broader vision of the teacher's role in the learning and teaching processes is addressed by investing in shared discussion time and strengthening action models in practice as part of their identity, understood as collaborative spaces where teachers identify and discuss good educational practices. However, it is evident that the shift towards interdisciplinary and global projects entails a change of mentality among teachers and educational staff (De Castro-Calvo et al., 2024).

## Conclusions

In the secondary education in Spain, teachers work in an environment marked by strong social and administrative pressures aimed at improving educational outcomes. Pedagogical renewal is not conceived as a mere occasional incorporation of innovative methodologies or technological tools (Díez-Gutiérrez et al., 2023), but as a process of profound transformation that stems from the collective reflection of the teaching staff, together with the social environment and the community. This is evident in the five schools who participated in this study, where change does not respond to passing fads, but rather to pedagogical debates that permeate all aspects of the school and seek to influence not only internal improvement but also the transformation of the local area in which they are located (Pericacho & Andrés-Candelas, 2018).

The research results show that there is no single model for renewal. The key principles translate into the need to comprehensively review the components of the educational system: the material (spaces, digital resources, contextualised materials), functional (time management, interdisciplinarity, flexible scheduling) and personal (distributed leadership, collaborative work, connection with the community) components. Far from being implemented in a linear manner, these changes require a continuous process of adjustment, monitoring and improvement, which entails a sustained investment of effort

and commitment on the part of teachers (Bolívar, 2007; Olave, 2020). It is precisely in this process – often complex and fraught with tension – that teaching practice gains meaning and is strengthened.

From this perspective, educational renewal in secondary schools places students at the centre of pedagogical action, promoting their autonomy, active participation and development. Through active methodologies, formative assessment, personalised support and commitment to the local community, more inclusive, contextualised and meaningful learning contexts are generated. The schools studied are committed to a pedagogy of trust, based on mutual responsibility and the collective construction of knowledge, which promotes both student well-being and strengthens the role of teachers. This renewal model represents a comprehensive transformation that, while demanding, opens paths towards a more just, humane and socially committed education.

Finally, it is essential for educational authorities to recognise and support these transformation processes from a structural and sustained perspective. While the findings of this study highlight the importance of ensuring the stability of teaching teams, offering ongoing training linked to the school's current context, and promoting policies that facilitate organisational and pedagogical autonomy (Fatsini-Matheu et al., 2025; Scholes et al., 2017), several limitations must be acknowledged. These include the contextual nature of the cases analysed and the challenges associated with transferring such processes to other educational settings with different structural and policy conditions. In this regard, future research should explore how these transformation processes can be adapted and sustained across diverse contexts, as well as examine their long-term impact on educational practices and student outcomes. Addressing these challenges is crucial to consolidating educational change that does not rely exclusively on teachers' individual commitment and overexertion, but is instead supported by solid, institutionally legitimised structures aligned with an educational vision committed to equity, inclusion, and social justice.

## **Ethical Statement**

The research study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Vic-Central University of Catalonia (UVic-UCC) and was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for pedagogical research in the social sciences.

## Data Availability Statement

The datasets analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to ethical and privacy considerations at UVic-UCC to protect the research participants. However, the data is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Disclosure Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

They further confirm that no artificial intelligence tools were used in the processing of the data or in the writing of this manuscript. The authors accept full responsibility for the content and integrity of the publication, which was conducted exclusively for academic and scientific purposes.

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## Biographical note

**LAURA FARRÉ-RIERA**, PhD, is a lecturer in the Department of Pedagogy at the Faculty of Education, Translation, Sport and Psychology, University of Vic – Central University of Catalonia, Spain. Her research interests focus on democracy and active citizenship education, pedagogical renewal, and students' voice and participation in school contexts, with particular attention to how educational practices foster democratic values, social inclusion, and students' active involvement in school decision-making processes.

**NÚRIA CARRETE-MARÍN**, PhD candidate, is a researcher at the Faculty of Education, Translation, Sports and Psychology, University of Vic – Central University of Catalonia, Spain. She is an expert in rural education and inclusive education, and has received special awards for her work on the Bachelor's degree programme in Primary Education and the specialist Master's programme in Education in Rural Areas. Her main areas of research interest are inclusion, attention to diversity, rural education, multigrade teaching, the territorial dimension in rural schools, resources and materials for multigrade teaching, educational research methods, educational assessment and guidance, teacher training and pedagogical renewal.

**MAR BENEYTO-SEOANE**, PhD, is a lecturer Professor in the Department of Pedagogy at the Faculty of Education, Translation, Sports and Psychology, University of Vic – Central University of Catalonia, Spain. She teaches in the fields of Social Education and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Her research focuses on the organization and planning of educational institutions, as well as on social and digital inclusion. She also works on community development, international educational cooperation, and the design of socio-educational projects. Her work is oriented towards fostering inclusive, equitable, and socially engaged educational practices.

**ESTHER FATSINI-MATHEU**, PhD, lecturer in the field of Didactics and school organization at the Faculty of Education, Translation, Sport and Psychology, University of Vic - Central University of Catalonia, Spain. Her main areas of research are on education, territory and citizenship, specifically on the following themes: gender and education; processes of reflection on practice in teacher training; mentoring and teacher identity; and democracy and school participation, from an inclusive and innovative perspective in her pedagogical practices and approaches.



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## Primary School Teachers' Attitudes, Perceptions and Self-Efficacy Regarding Students With Special Educational Needs: A Comparative Study of the Education Systems in Slovenia and Kosovo

ARBEN KEKA<sup>1</sup>

☞ The purpose of this paper is to explore teachers' attitudes, perceptions and self-efficacy regarding students with special educational needs in Slovenia and Kosovo, as well as to identify the similarities and differences between the two education systems in terms of inclusive practices. Quantitative data were collected from a sample of teachers working in grades 1–5 of primary schools in Slovenia ( $n = 258$ ) and Kosovo ( $n = 255$ ). The data were gathered using the Sentiments, Attitudes and Concerns about Inclusive Education scale and the Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practice scale and analysed using SPSS version 21.0. The findings indicate higher means of samples in both Slovenia and Kosovo in negative sentiments, attitudes and perceptions regarding inclusive education, while statistically significant differences were identified in attitudes and other factors, such as age, gender or teaching experience with students with special educational needs. Teachers in Slovenia and Kosovo scored higher in self-efficacy, which is negatively correlated at a significant level with sentiments, attitudes and perceptions regarding inclusive education.

**Keywords:** teachers' sentiments, attitudes, perceptions, self-efficacy, inclusive education, students with special educational needs

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1 PhD student at Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia;  
[arbenkeka@gmail.com](mailto:arbenkeka@gmail.com).

## Stališča, zaznave in samoučinkovitost osnovnošolskih učiteljev glede učencev s posebnimi učnimi potrebami: primerjalna študija izobraževalnih sistemov v Sloveniji in na Kosovu

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ARBEN KEKA

☞ Namen prispevka je raziskati stališča, zaznave in samoučinkovitost učiteljev glede učencev s posebnimi učnimi potrebami v Sloveniji in na Kosovu ter ugotoviti podobnosti in razlike med obema izobraževalnima sistemoma v smislu praks inkluzije. Kvantitativni podatki so bili zbrani na vzorcu učiteljev, ki delajo v 1.–5. razredu osnovnih šol v Sloveniji ( $n = 258$ ) in na Kosovu ( $n = 255$ ). Podatki so bili zbrani s pomočjo lestvice o občutkih, stališčih in o pomislekih glede inkluzivnega izobraževanja (Sentiments, Attitudes and Concerns about Inclusive Education Scale) ter lestvice o učinkovitosti učiteljev za prakse inkluzije (Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practice Scale) ter analizirani s programom SPSS različice 21.0. Ugotovitve kažejo na višja povprečja vzorcev v Sloveniji in na Kosovu pri negativnih občutkih, stališčih in pomislekih glede inkluzivnega izobraževanja, statistično pomembne razlike pa so bile ugotovljene pri stališčih in drugih dejavnikih, kot so starost, spol ali izkušnje s poučevanjem učencev s posebnimi učnimi potrebami. Učitelji v Sloveniji in na Kosovu so dosegli višje rezultate pri samoučinkovitosti, ki je negativno povezana z občutki, s stališči in z zaznavami glede inkluzivnega izobraževanja, povezanost pa je statistično značilna.

**Ključne besede:** občutki učiteljev, stališča, zaznave, samoučinkovitost, inkluzivno izobraževanje, učenci s posebnimi učnimi potrebami

## Introduction

### Inclusive Education Reforms Globally

Over the last decades, inclusion of children with special educational needs (SEN) has increased significantly in mainstream schools. According to Avramidis and Norwich (2002, p. 131), this trend is seen “as part of a broad human rights agenda”. The development is reflected in numerous international documents, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1990), the Salamanca Statement and the Framework for the Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO & Ministry of Education and Science Spain, 1994), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2007). These documents clearly recognise that all children must have their fundamental rights and aims met in order to guarantee quality education for all and to provide the necessary comprehensive support to develop the potential of each child. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organizations (UNESCO, 2005, p. 13), inclusive education can be defined as “a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education”. Education system reform, particularly the transformation from traditional to inclusive schools, cannot be achieved without shifting the focus from segregation to integration and access of all children to education processes. Prior to defining inclusive education, UNESCO (1994) outlined the crucial aspects of inclusive schools as follows:

Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities. (p. 12)

Such developments have led to significant reforms in education systems worldwide. Despite the political consensus on the need to embrace a comprehensive global agenda on inclusive education, Šuc et al. (2017) have argued that “significant differences seem to exist between countries, often related to cultural, historical, and legal differences between different environments” (p. 938). Even well-developed countries that promote inclusive education are still struggling to advance inclusive education practices. “Efforts to create more inclusive communities are fraught with multiple difficulties, dilemmas, and contradictions that often result in piecemeal or sequential reforms” (Vlachou, 2004, p. 3).

## Teachers' Attitudes and Perceptions

Regardless of the local context and the differences between countries, the role of the teacher is indicated as an important factor in the success of inclusive education policies and practices (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Yada et al., 2018; Dulčić & Bakota, 2008; De Boer et al., 2011). In several studies, teachers' attitudes are therefore a crucial factor in the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream schools (Schmidt, 2011; Engelbrecht et al., 2015; Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Kemp & Carter, 2009; Dulčić & Bakota, 2008; De Boer et al., 2011). In a qualitative study of the understanding and attitudes of Kosovo teachers regarding inclusive education, Zabeli et al. (2021) found that teachers perceive the achievement of children with SEN in regular classrooms only in terms of socialisation and social acceptance, and not in terms of academic achievement. Moreover, recent studies have found that many teachers have less than positive attitudes towards students with SEN and their inclusion in mainstream education classrooms (Dupoux et al., 2005; Loreman et al., 2007; Ross-Hill, 2009) and that teachers' negative attitudes have a detrimental effect on teaching practice in the classroom (Gal et al., 2010). Negative attitudes of teachers impact the academic performance of students with SEN and are correlated with low expectations of such students with regard to school achievement (Wilczenski, 1993). On the other hand, positive attitudes allow and encourage inclusive practices that guarantee the success of inclusion (Hobbs & Westling, 1998). According to Agbenyega (2007), positive attitudes towards inclusive education are correlated with a lower degree of concern about such education. In addition, Avramidis and Kalyva (2007) found that a positive attitude is closely linked with high-quality, well-planned, and long-term training. Positive attitudes of teachers regarding the inclusion of children with SEN also feature in studies by Campbell et al. (2003) and Forlin (2010), who emphasise that such attitudes are positively linked to the implementation of different teaching strategies by teachers that enable them to embrace individual differences (Forlin et al., 2011).

Research has acknowledged factors that can have an impact on teachers' attitudes, such as gender, age, experiences of and contacts with students with SEN, level of education, training, distribution of resources, sources of support, colleagues' administrative support, organisational framework and class size (Forlin, 1995; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). Another factor that influences teachers' perceptions of children with SEN is the individual's belief of how confident and competent s/he is to work with diverse learners. Various studies have highlighted the fact that the positive attitude of teachers is impacted by their self-perception, which involves the level of information they have received and

their awareness of the capacities and development of children with SEN (Avramidis et al., 2000; Schmidt & Čagran, 2011; MacFarlane & Woolfson Marks, 2013; Kranjčan, 2015). In this regard, teacher education is viewed as a decisive component in developing the affirmative attitudes and competences required for successful implementation. Providing relevant teacher training should therefore be a priority for policymakers (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). On the other hand, the level of inclusion of children with SEN depends on the amount of prior contact that education professionals have had with persons with disabilities during their lifetime, whether as family members or in a friendship (Gething et al., 1997; Subban & Sharma, 2006).

According to Linton et al. (2015), teachers who have had previous experience with children or adults with disabilities have more social representation elements than their counterparts without any such experience. These results highlight the role of contextual factors and prior experience in shaping teachers' attitudes. When considering the influence of age, gender and role on inclusive attitudes, research has shown mixed results (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Vaz et al., 2015). Some researchers have noted that female teachers have a greater level of tolerance towards the inclusion of children with SEN, while other studies have reported no effect of gender (Ellins & Porter, 2005). With regard to age, younger teachers and those with fewer years of work experience have been found to have more positive attitudes (Berryman, 1989; Center & Ward, 1987; Clough & Lindsay, 1991). According to a study by Forlin (1995), teachers with less experience are reported to be more supportive of the inclusion of children with SEN than those with more work experience. However, the most significant factors affecting attitudes towards the inclusion of SEN students remain the type and severity of the disability (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Moberg & Savolainen, 2003). According to Avramidis and Norwich (2002), students with physical or sensory impairments are accepted more readily than students with learning difficulties and emotional-behavioural difficulties.

### **Teachers' Self-Efficacy and Sources**

Jordan et al. (2009) highlighted the fact that "effective inclusionary practices have been found to depend to a noticeable extent on the sentiments of teachers about the nature of disability and their perceived roles in supporting students with special needs" (as cited by Forlin et al., 2011, p. 51). Savolainen et al. (2012) found a positive relationship between teachers' self-efficacy and their attitude towards inclusive education, indicating that teachers with a higher

level of self-efficacy are more open to embracing inclusive education practices. However, Savolainen et al. (2012) also found that, among three sub-dimensions of self-efficacy, efficacy in collaboration had the strongest positive relationship with attitudes towards inclusion compared to efficacy in managing behaviour and using inclusive instructions, which implies that teachers need support in implementing inclusion practices.

According to Bandura (1997), “teachers with a high sense of instructional efficacy operate on the belief that difficult students are teachable through extra effort and appropriate techniques and that they can enlist family supports and overcome negating community influences through effective teaching” (p. 240). Moreover, evidence shows that the teacher’s self-efficacy is associated with the student’s motivation, increased self-esteem, strong self-direction, ease in managing school transition and more positive attitudes towards school (Bandura & Locke, 2003; Pajares, 2003; Hofman & Kilimo, 2014). According to Hofman and Kilimo (2014, p. 181), a study by Ross et al. from 2001 found that “teacher’s self-efficacy may also contribute to promote student’s own sense of efficacy, foster their involvement in class activities and their efforts in facing difficulties in their educational career”.

### **Rationale for Choosing the Sample Countries**

The present study aims to research teachers’ attitudes, perceptions and self-efficacy regarding inclusive practices in two diverse countries in terms of overall developments in the field of education: Slovenia and Kosovo. Despite the fact that the Republic of Slovenia is among 92 signatory countries to the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO & Ministry of Education and Science Spain, 1994), the importance of inclusion was more widely recognised by the White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia (1995), which formed the foundation for reforms fostering the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream schools (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2023). Complementary, the Placement of Children with Special Needs Act (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, 2011) introduced a new legislative dimension and policy framework for the inclusion of children with SEN. The term ‘Children with Special Educational Needs’ refers to all children who need extra support and adjustments. According to this Act, all children – including children with SEN – have “the right to education and equal participation in everyday life”, while also emphasising that education should be free of charge.

The decision regarding the placement of children with SEN – whether they should be enrolled in a mainstream school or placed in an adapted or

special programme – and the type of educational support is determined by the Committee for Directing Children with Special Needs (Opara, 2005) and the Stage of Disabilities (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, 2003). In this regard, several types of educational programme are provided at the preschool and primary school level.

Despite the provision of legal grounds for the implementation of inclusive education, there is still a big gap between legislation and practice (Kavkler et al., 2015). Slovenian legislation maintains a dual education system, whereby students are either educated separately from their peers in special institutions or attend regular schools together with their peers (Schmidt & Vrhovnik, 2015), but the number of children with SEN included in regular schools has gradually increased every year. According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (2024), there were 19,418 children with SEN in regular and adapted basic education programmes in the 2023/2024 school year, representing 10% of all children in basic school. Most of them (85%) were included in regular programmes with adapted implementation and additional professional assistance, representing 8% of all pupils in regular basic education programmes (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2024). However, the paradigm shift from segregation to inclusion has raised the question of whether teachers are sufficiently qualified and confident to teach students with SEN in their classes. Recent studies on inclusive education show that the vast majority of Slovenian teachers face numerous barriers to the implementation of inclusive practices, such as inadequate teacher qualifications, lack of training or inappropriate training and insufficient support from the special education sector, as well as barriers related to the general societal resistance to change (Mitchell, 2015).

In Kosovo, inclusive education policy was introduced within the legislative framework only in 2011, in the form of the Law on Pre-University Education. 'Inclusion' as a concept permeates the whole law, which is based on the Salamanca Statement on inclusion and the European Convention on Human Rights. Since then, numerous reforms at all levels of education have led to changes in the education system regarding the education of children with SEN. Apart from mainstreaming, there have also been processes of the transformation of traditional schools to inclusive schools, while special schools have been converted into resource centres. It is therefore considered that all children, including those with SEN, should be educated alongside their peers in mainstream schools.

However, many children with SEN are still not in school, or their specific needs and rights are not taken into account in their schooling. According to a report by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (2015), only 33.4% of children with disabilities were enrolled in pre-university education in

Kosovo in the 2011/2012 academic year, although institutions emphasise that the percentage has been gradually increasing in recent years. Considering these statistics and Kosovo educational contexts, it can be concluded that there is a limited understanding within communities and among teachers about the learning needs of students with SEN, which is often fuelled by prejudices surrounding disability. In an effort to analyse the factors behind the decreasing rate of inclusion of students with SEN in educational settings, the present study is based on the assumption that teachers' attitudes and perceptions have an impact on the low performance or poor academic achievement of students with SEN, as well as on their ability to comprehend the curricula and follow the teacher's instructions. It is therefore necessary to examine the attitudes and perceptions of teachers regarding students with special educational needs in order to identify deficiencies within the education system.

### **Research Problem and Research Questions**

Ultimately, the aim of the present study is to explore similarities and differences in inclusive education policies and practices regarding the inclusion of students with SEN in primary schools (grades 1–5) in Slovenia and Kosovo through a representative sample of approximately 500 respondents.

The following research questions guided the research work:

1. What are teachers' attitudes and perceptions regarding the inclusion of students with special educational needs in primary schools?
2. What are the factors influencing teachers' perceptions and attitudes regarding students with special educational needs?
3. How does self-efficacy for inclusive practices influence teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education?

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

The Kosovo sample was drawn from the largest and most diverse municipalities in Kosovo, representing three different regions. The sample comprised 255 primary school teachers of grades 1–5. Due to difficulties collecting the sample related to the Covid-19 pandemic, structured random sampling could not be used; however, the respondents do represent a diverse sample of Kosovo teachers in terms of the type of location (rural and urban) as well as the type of school (inclusive and traditional). The majority of the Kosovo respondents

were reached with the help of a small number of teachers who were interested in the results of the study and therefore facilitated the data collection process within their respective educational institutions.

The data related to the Slovenian sample were collected in a much broader geographical area, representing 35 municipalities. This distribution was not initially planned, but was necessary due to the low response rate. The participating teachers are from regular schools (grades 1–5), as attached (special) classes are not organised anymore following the transformation of the Slovenian education system into a regular system. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Slovenian sample of 258 teachers was collected virtually using existing platforms to contact teachers in 69 locations, where the majority of respondents (65.9%) are from schools located in the country's major cities.

**Table 1**

*Demographics of the Kosovo (n = 255) and Slovenian (n = 258) sample*

|                                                         |                                 | Kosovo | Slovenia |
|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------|----------|
| Gender (% female)                                       |                                 | 88.5   | 88.4     |
| Age (%)                                                 | 25 years or less                | 2.4    | 0.8      |
|                                                         | 26–35                           | 21.6   | 18.2     |
|                                                         | 36–45                           | 37.6   | 27.9     |
|                                                         | 46 or more                      | 38.4   | 53.1     |
| Highest level of education (%)                          | BA in education                 | 68.1   | 66.7     |
|                                                         | Master's in education           | 12.4   | 17.8     |
|                                                         | Pedagogical High School         | 5.6    | 0.0      |
|                                                         | Master's in Inclusive Education | 2.0    | 1.6      |
|                                                         | Master's (Other)                | 9.6    | 5.4      |
|                                                         | Other education                 | 2.4    | 8.1      |
| Teaching years (%)                                      | 0–2                             | 4.0    | 5.0      |
|                                                         | 3–5                             | 9.5    | 11.2     |
|                                                         | 6–10                            | 14.2   | 9.3      |
|                                                         | 11–15                           | 21.3   | 8.9      |
|                                                         | 16–20                           | 19.0   | 14.3     |
|                                                         | 21+                             | 32.0   | 51.2     |
| Type of setting                                         | Rural                           | 80.8   | 64.0     |
|                                                         | Urban                           | 19.2   | 36.0     |
| Interaction with persons with disabilities              | Zero                            | 18.2   | 1.2      |
|                                                         | Little                          | 59.3   | 66.3     |
|                                                         | High                            | 22.5   | 32.6     |
| Knowledge about local legislation/policies on inclusion | None                            | 4.7    | 1.2      |
|                                                         | Poor                            | 15.4   | 20.2     |
|                                                         | Medium                          | 43.5   | 46.9     |
|                                                         | Good                            | 28.5   | 25.6     |
|                                                         | Very good                       | 7.9    | 6.2      |
| Amount of inclusive education training                  | None                            | 18.2   | 19.4     |
|                                                         | Little                          | 59.3   | 60.5     |
|                                                         | High                            | 22.5   | 20.2     |

*Note.* Percentages are calculated from valid responses for each variable; therefore, denominators vary because of missing responses. Overall sample sizes are 255 for Kosovo and 258 for Slovenia. Percentages within categories may not sum to 100% because of rounding.

The data in Table 1 show that the total number of participants was 513 ( $n = 258$  in Slovenia and  $n = 255$  in Kosovo). Based on the most recent country data, the total number of teaching staff in Slovenia is 25,304, including basic education and upper secondary school (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2024). In Kosovo, there were 22,067 teachers in primary and upper secondary education in the 2023/2024 school year (Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation, 2024). The percentage of female teachers is similar and very high in both countries (88.4–88.5%). This is explained by the disproportionate numbers of male and female teachers working in primary/basic and upper secondary education in both countries: 13,661 women in Kosovo as opposed to 3,340 men, while in Slovenia there are 20,604 women employed compared to 4,231 men. Similarities between teachers in both countries are also identified regarding the level of education, with the vast majority of teachers in both countries (67–68%) reporting having completed a bachelor's (BA) degree. In terms of teaching experience, the largest group of surveyed teachers in both Slovenia and Kosovo declared having more than 21 years of experience, but this accounted for 51.2% of the Slovenian teachers compared to only 32.0% of the teachers in Kosovo.

### Instruments

The questionnaire begins with a cover letter explaining the aim of the study and confidentiality. The first section requests demographic data, while the two other sections represent two standardised instruments. The six categories of students referred to in the demographic data for research purposes include only those with developmental disabilities that begin in childhood (before the age of 18), are life-long and significantly affect intellectual capacity and/or adaptive skills. The Teacher Self-Efficacy for Inclusive Practices (TEIP) scale (Malinen et al., 2012; Savolainen et al., 2012; Sharma et al., 2012) was used to measure the perceived teacher efficacy to teach in inclusive classrooms. According to Malinen et al. (2012), the scale consists of 18 items that are rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale from 1 – 'strongly disagree' to 6 – 'strongly agree', whereby higher scores indicate higher teacher self-efficacy. The TEIP scale can be divided into three subscales measuring efficacy in instruction, efficacy in managing behaviour and efficacy in collaboration.

Teachers' perceptions regarding inclusive education are measured using the Sentiments, Attitudes, and Concerns about Inclusive Education Revised (SACIE-R) scale. According to Forlin et al. (2011), the scale is developed to measure teachers' perceptions "in three constructs of inclusive education,

namely, sentiments or comfort levels when engaging with people with disabilities; acceptance of learners with different needs; and concerns about implementing inclusion” (p. 50). The SACIE-R is a 15-item scale rated on a 4-point Likert-scale from 1 – ‘strongly disagree’ to 4 – ‘strongly agree’, whereby the highest score indicates *higher negative sentiments, attitudes and concerns* about inclusive education.

In both countries, the TEIP scale scores had a high alpha reliability coefficient, with 0.946 in Kosovo and 0.670 in Slovenia.

### *Translation of the Questionnaires*

The TEIP and SACIE scales are originally written in English. Two different translation processes were used to translate the scales into Albanian and Slovenian and adapt them for the respective samples. Both instruments were translated into Albanian and Slovenian by independent translators and researchers in the field and then back-translated to verify the translations. This was followed by the adaptation of the instruments, which were crosschecked with the original English versions. The adaptation process for the Slovenian version was carried out by a university professor, while a specialised civil society researcher adapted the Albanian version. Some items were slightly revised to adapt them as much as possible to the respective contexts. The items seeking demographic data were written by the author in English, translated into Albanian and Slovenian and then back-translated to verify the translations.

### **Research Design**

The study relies on quantitative data obtained through a survey that was administered in-person or virtually. The data collection process was initially foreseen to begin early in 2020, but was significantly delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, lockdown and prevention measures taken by both countries throughout the following three-year period 2020–2022. Therefore, the data collection process took place in various periods, respecting the measures and the preferred response method by educational institutions and teachers. The Kosovo sample participants preferred the responses to be collected in-person with the support of a few teachers in each region/municipality who were interested in the results, while the Slovenian sample was collected entirely via virtual channels (Google form) after contacting the schools individually. Due to the global situation during the Covid-19 pandemic, and considering the transformation of educational programmes into virtual programmes, the data collection process was particularly challenging. Both the virtual version and the

hardcopy of the questionnaire began with a statement by the author explaining the purpose and objectives of the study, as well as its ethical principles and anonymity criteria.

### Data Processing and Analysis

The data were processed via the Statistical Package for Social Scientists – SPSS 21.0. The statistical methods used are frequency distribution, basic descriptive statistics, Pearson Correlation Coefficient and One-Way ANOVA.

## Results

### Teachers' Attitudes and Perceptions About the Inclusion of Students With Special Educational Needs in Primary Schools in Slovenia and Kosovo

The results revealed relatively high negative attitudes and perceptions of teachers about inclusion of students with special educational needs in both countries. In the 15-item scale of Sentiments, Attitudes, and Concerns about Inclusive Education Revised (SACIE-R), teachers in Kosovo self-reported high scores indicating *higher negative sentiments, attitudes and concerns* about inclusive education ( $M = 2.29$ ,  $SD = .34$ ). Similar results were found in the Slovenian sample, where teachers scored highly on negative sentiments, attitudes and concerns ( $M = 2.35$ ,  $SD = .39$ ).

The items with the highest means in both countries were mostly statements identifying the presence of students with disabilities in the classroom as the leading cause for an increase in workload, worry that the presence of students with disabilities in the classroom would affect teachers' attention to all of the students in the class, and the teachers' self-perception that they do not have the necessary knowledge and skills to teach children with disabilities.

Teachers' negative sentiments, attitudes and concerns about inclusive education are mostly related to their performance and their ability to support all of the children in their classrooms. Consequently, teachers reported slightly lower means, which were nonetheless significant in terms of the inclusion of students who need an individual education plan, students who have difficulties expressing themselves, or students who need communication technology in the classroom (i.e., sign language and Braille). An important factor in this regard is the experience and contact teachers have had throughout their teaching career.

**Table 2***Level of interaction with different categories of children with disabilities*

| Interaction with children with special educational needs                                              | Kosovo | Slovenia |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|----------|
| Physical disabilities (% Yes)                                                                         | 23.1   | 35.3     |
| Light intellectual impairments (% Yes)                                                                | 65.9   | 86.0     |
| Deaf and blind (% Yes)                                                                                | 8.2    | 28.3     |
| Chronic Health Impairment (e.g., FASD – Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders, muscular dystrophy) (% Yes) | 8.0    | 36.4     |
| Autism Spectrum Disorder (Autism, Asperger Syndrome) (% Yes)                                          | 20.4   | 51.9     |
| Multiple impairments (% Yes)                                                                          | 17.3   | 36.0     |

As shown in Table 2, the Slovenian sample showed a significantly higher level of experience in interaction with all six groups of children with disabilities compared to the Kosovo sample. However, interaction with children with light intellectual impairments (learning difficulties) prevailed compared to other categories in both countries, with 65.9% declared in Kosovo and 86.0% in Slovenia. The Slovenian sample of teachers also had a significantly higher level of experience with various categories of disability and a greater variety of problems.

### **Factors Influencing Teachers' Attitudes and Perceptions About Students With Special Educational Needs**

Teachers' attitudes and perceptions remain one of the most important factors influencing the inclusion of children with disabilities. Both countries showed similar results regarding the means of negative sentiments, attitudes and concerns about inclusive education. However, there are few individual factors that might impact their overall perception in this regard.

**Table 3**

*Result of One-Way ANOVA testing the differences in groups of attitudes with respect to the teacher's age group in Kosovo and Slovenia*

| Groups of variables                                             | Age        | N   | Mean | SD   | Levene test | One-Way ANOVA |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|------------|-----|------|------|-------------|---------------|
| Sentiments, attitudes and perceptions score in Slovenian sample | 25 or less | 2   | 2.2  | .094 | .31         | .11           |
|                                                                 | 26–35      | 47  | 2.4  | .28  |             |               |
|                                                                 | 36–45      | 73  | 2.2  | .34  |             |               |
|                                                                 | 46 or more | 136 | 2.3  | .32  |             |               |
| Sentiments, attitudes and perceptions score in Kosovo sample    | 25 or less | 6   | 2.03 | .29  | .23         | .00           |
|                                                                 | 26–35      | 53  | 2.06 | .41  |             |               |
|                                                                 | 36–45      | 94  | 2.23 | .34  |             |               |
|                                                                 | 46 or more | 97  | 2.32 | .34  |             |               |

The overall mean of the negative sentiments, attitudes and perceptions about students with special educational needs in Slovenia and Kosovo is relatively high. However, in terms of *age as a potential influencing factor*, One-Way ANOVA shows a statistically significant difference only in the Kosovo sample, with  $p = .000$ . The age gap between teachers in Kosovo and Slovenia is not of concern, as the majority of teachers in both countries are below the age group of 46 or more.

**Table 4**

*Result of One-Way ANOVA testing the differences in groups of attitudes with respect to the teacher's gender in Kosovo and Slovenia*

| Groups of variables                               | Gender | N   | Mean | SD  | Levene test | One-way ANOVA |
|---------------------------------------------------|--------|-----|------|-----|-------------|---------------|
| Sentiments, attitudes and perceptions in Slovenia | Female | 228 | 2.28 | .32 | .51         | .76           |
|                                                   | Male   | 30  | 2.29 | .32 |             |               |
| Sentiments, attitudes and perceptions in Kosovo   | Female | 221 | 2.22 | .37 | .26         | .88           |
|                                                   | Male   | 29  | 2.23 | .33 |             |               |

The results presented in Table 4 do not show any statistical significance for the gender factor. Considering the vast majority of the respondents (over 85%) in both countries are female, similar findings were expected in the data analysis. Another factor expected to have a significant impact on the negative attitudes and perceptions of teachers of grades 1–5 was the type of disability. The

surveyed teachers provided information about whether they had had contact with students from the six different groups of disabilities in their teaching experience in the last five years. Once again, the ANOVA results do not show any statistically significant difference in the sample of Slovenia regarding their experience with various types of disabilities. However, the results do show slightly different indications for the Kosovo sample. The ANOVA results confirm the existence of a statistically significant difference in sentiments, attitudes and perceptions, and one particular type of disability that the Kosovo sample had had contact with – deaf and blind students – with  $p = .043$ .

### **Self-Efficacy for Inclusive Practices and Its Impact on Teachers' Attitudes Towards Inclusive Education**

Teachers' self-efficacy was measured through the Teacher Self-Efficacy for Inclusive Practices (TEIP), where higher scores indicate higher teacher self-efficacy. The samples from both countries showed high means in self-efficacy during descriptive analysis in Slovenia ( $M = 4.79$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ) and in Kosovo ( $M = 4.91$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ). Generally, both samples scored highly in both instruments, despite the opposite direction of their sentiments, attitudes and concerns versus self-efficacy. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient was therefore performed to elaborate further potential relations between two aspects of teachers' self-reporting data.

There was a significant but negative relationship between teachers' sentiments, attitudes and perceptions in relation to teacher's self-efficacy for the sample in Slovenia,  $r(14,749) = -.281$ ,  $p = < .000$ . Similar results were drawn from the sample of Kosovo, where the teachers' sentiments, attitudes and perceptions as well as teachers' self-efficacy negatively correlate and the 2-tailed significance value proves that our correlation is significantly high and not just a function of random sampling error,  $r(11,731) = -.163$ ,  $p = < .009$ .

### **Discussion**

The present empirical study initially examined the sentiments, attitudes and perceptions of primary school teachers (grades 1–5) in Slovenia and Kosovo regarding the inclusion of students with special educational needs. The aim was to determine the level of negative sentiments, attitudes and perceptions regarding inclusive education and the factors affecting them via the SACIE-R: teachers' age, gender, and contact with students with various types of disabilities during their teaching experience.

- The descriptive analysis showed that teachers in both countries scored significantly high means in the SACIE-R, which is designed to collect information on potentially negative sentiments, attitudes and perceptions among teachers regarding SEN students. According to the self-reporting instruments, the majority of the concerns relate to the increase in workload, as well as to teachers' self-perceived inability to dedicate themselves to all of the children in the class, or even whether they are prepared to work with children with disabilities if they are integrated in their classrooms. The teachers therefore did not embrace the idea of including in their classrooms students who were subject to assessment and have an Individual Education Plan, children who cannot express themselves properly, or even those who need communication devices.
- Despite thorough analysis to examine potential influencing factors, the teachers' gender or the type of disability of the students were not found to be significant in either the Slovenian or the Kosovo sample, with the exception of age and only one type of disability (deaf and blind) in the Kosovo sample. Individual influencing factors are a very important factor in embracing inclusive education by teachers of primary and upper secondary school. With regard to gender, it should be noted that women make up the vast majority of the teacher population in both countries, which is also reflected in the sample and may have impacted the results of the study.

The high results regarding self-efficacy drawn by the data collected through the Teacher Self-Efficacy for Inclusive Practices (TEIP) are negatively correlated with results of the SACIE-R. Teachers in both countries perceive themselves as competent to work in their classrooms and deal with various difficulties with students, parents or other parties involved. However, they still reported high levels of negative sentiments, attitudes and concerns, mostly related to the perceived difficulties that the presence of students with disabilities brings to the classroom.

## Conclusions

Empirical studies have found that gender, age, teachers' experiences and contact with students with special educational needs (Forlin, 1995; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996) as well as working experience with students with special needs or exposure to people with disabilities (i.e., friend or family member) (Gething et al., 1997; Subban & Sharma, 2006) are among the factors influencing positive attitudes towards persons with special educational needs. On the

other hand, there are a few studies that have shown that female teachers have a greater level of tolerance regarding the inclusion of students with special educational needs (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Despite the fact that the vast majority of the respondents in both countries (Slovenia and Kosovo) are female, such indications are not identified in the current study.

Although slight differences were identified between the samples of the two countries, data measuring self-efficacy via the TEIP scale showed surprising results, as the teachers in both countries indicated high levels of self-efficacy in their self-administered questionnaires. Despite studies showing a strong link between teachers' self-efficacy and positive attitudes towards inclusion (Bandura, 1997; Jordan et al., 2009; Savolainen et al. 2012), the present research demonstrates the opposite for the samples in both countries.

However, studies worldwide have shown that many teachers have fewer positive attitudes towards students with special educational needs and their inclusion in mainstream education classrooms (Dupoux et al., 2005; Loreman et al., 2007; Ross-Hill, 2009). This might not necessarily disrupt teachers' perceptions of their self-efficacy, which measures various sub-dimensions, including efficacy in collaboration, efficacy in managing behaviour and use of inclusive instructions. Teachers' attitudes towards children with special educational needs were also measured during the extraordinary circumstances of virtual classrooms and teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns. Sakarneh (2022) found that, despite positive attitudes and perceptions, teachers in Jordan reported low self-esteem regarding the need to adapt e-learning to children with special educational needs. This particular study reflects how important it is for both sides of the learning process – teacher and student – to adopt the methodology and instruments that are in the best interest of the child, especially for students with special educational needs. In the present study, comparison of the attitudes and perceptions in two countries is important, especially considering the fact that Kosovo is still in the transition process and inclusive education policies and practices came to light only in 2011, when they were introduced in the Law on Pre-University Education. Meanwhile, an analysis by Ermenc (2020, p. 262) revealed that “the Slovenian policy primarily reflects a human rights-based understanding of inclusion, focused on students with special needs”. This is done by respecting the standards for the placement of students with special educational needs, respecting the criteria for the academic preparation of teachers as per the requirements, and highlighting school involvement at all levels as crucial.

Exchanging knowledge and comparing inclusive education processes with other countries that have gone through similar processes in the past could

significantly support advancing inclusive policies and practices in Kosovo. Moreover, considering the fact that Kosovo is embracing an inclusive culture, it might also represent a good example with the potential to contribute regionally to inclusive education policies and practices. Positive sentiments, attitudes and perceptions regarding students with special educational needs are crucial for mainstream education, as they have a considerable impact on the academic achievement and performance of such students, as well as encouraging the inclusive practices and policies necessary for adequate reforms to ensure equality for all children.

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The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

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## Biographical note

**ARBEN KEKA**, MA, is a PhD candidate at Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia and recipient of the Open Society Foundation Civil Society Scholar Award. Considering his background on psychology and educational sciences as well as long-term experience on civil society inclusive education programmes, his main research interests include exploring inclusive practices, policies and culture with specific focus on teachers' and educators' perceptions and self-efficacy in relation to the educational inclusion of students with special educational needs.



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## School Improvement Framework for Indonesia

YUNA PUTERI KADARISMAN<sup>\*1</sup>, MOH. RIFQI RAHMAN<sup>2</sup>, SUYANTO<sup>3</sup>,  
CEPI SAFRUDDIN ABD JABAR<sup>3</sup> AND AHMAD UMAR<sup>4</sup>

Indonesia is determined to improve the quality of education. Many top-down policies have been issued to direct the necessary improvement, from making education compulsory from grade 1 to grade 9 in 1977, to the withdrawal of the high-stakes exam policy in 2021. However, none of these policies encourages schools to conduct school improvement plans tailored to their needs. Instead, they tend to be directed towards school effectiveness or quality assurance. The present research aims to formulate a school improvement framework of domains and indicators culturally and institutionally suitable for Indonesian settings. The study implements a systematic literature review methodology to extract and synthesise the most pertinent and prevalent domains from a corpus of relevant literature on school improvement frameworks. Four overarching domains of recommended focal points for school improvement efforts are determined: (1) Teaching and Learning, (2) Leadership and Management, (3) Assessment, and (4) Community and Culture. The research underscores the foundational role of pertinent data collection in these domains. Furthermore, the study discusses the implications of these emerging domains for the academic community and policymakers, highlighting how the proposed framework can significantly contribute to refining school improvement practices and policies in Indonesia. Detailed subdomains and domain indicators serve as theoretical implications to be elaborated in further research.

**Keywords:** school effectiveness, quality assurance, school improvement, framework, systematic literature review

1 <sup>\*</sup>Corresponding Author. PhD student at Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Indonesia; [yunakadarisman14@gmail.com](mailto:yunakadarisman14@gmail.com).  
2 Institut Al Azhar Menganti Gresik, Indonesia.  
3 Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Indonesia.  
4 Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo Semarang, Indonesia.

## Okvir za izboljšanje šol v Indoneziji

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YUNA PUTERI KADARISMAN, MOH. RIFQI RAHMAN, SUYANTO, CEPI  
SAFRUDDIN ABD JABAR IN AHMAD UMAR

Indonezija je odločena izboljšati kakovost svojega izobraževanja. Za usmerjanje potrebnih izboljšav so bile izdane številne politike od zgoraj navzdol, od uvedbe obveznega izobraževanja od prvega do devetega razreda leta 1977 do umika politike preverjanj znanja s pomembnimi posledicami za učence (na podlagi njihove uspešnosti) leta 2021. Nobena izmed teh politik pa ne spodbuja šol k izvajanju načrtov za izboljšanje šol, ki bi bili prilagojeni njihovim potrebam. Namesto tega so običajno usmerjene v učinkovitost šol ali zagotavljanje kakovosti. Namen te raziskave je oblikovati okvir za izboljšanje šol, ki bi obsegal področja in kazalnike, kulturno in institucionalno primerne za indonezijsko okolje. Študija uporablja metodologijo sistematičnega pregleda literature, da bi iz korpusa na to tematiko vezane literature o okvirih za izboljšanje šol izluščila in strnila najbolj relevantne in prevladujoče domene. Določena so štiri osrednja področja priporočenih glavnih točk za prizadevanja za izboljšanje šol: 1) poučevanje in učenje; 2) vodenje in upravljanje; 3) ocenjevanje; 4) skupnost in kultura. Raziskava poudarja temeljno vlogo ustreznega zbiranja podatkov na teh področjih. Poleg tega študija obravnava posledice teh nastajajočih področij za akademsko skupnost in oblikovalce politik ter poudarja, kako lahko predlagani okvir pomembno prispeva k piljenju praks in politik za izboljšanje šol v Indoneziji. Podrobni kazalniki podpodročij in področij služijo kot teoretične posledice, ki jih je treba razviti v nadaljnjih raziskavah.

**Ključne besede:** učinkovitost šole, zagotavljanje kakovosti, izboljšanje šol, okvir, sistematični pregled literature

## Introduction

Research on school quality and school improvement in Indonesia remains fragmented and needs more comprehensive coverage. Some studies advocate enhancing capacity building to elevate education quality (Sumintono et al., 2012, 2014), while others promote community involvement, including active engagement from parents (Pradhan et al., 2014) and emphasise a conducive school climate to cultivate a quality improvement culture (Budiharso & Tarmam, 2020). Some scholars highlight local wisdom to instil a commitment to quality improvement (Hayudiyani et al., 2020), foster the critical role of evaluating school management practices (Bandur et al., 2022; Iswan et al., 2021; Marpaung et al., 2023; Siahaan et al., 2023), or even harness the necessity to re-evaluate the policy of accreditation (Susetyo et al., 2022).

In Indonesia, two governing bodies oversee education: the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA). Together, they are responsible for the management of 399,376 schools and madrasahs (Finaka, 2023), 56.63% of which are private schools and madrasahs (Annur, 2023; Kemenag, 2024). Reform will therefore be challenging unless the initiative includes a bottom-up drive.

Over the years, the Ministry of Education has issued various policies to enhance education quality across Indonesia. In 1977, the Indonesian government achieved a significant milestone by establishing compulsory education for grades 1–6 of elementary school. Subsequently, several programmes were introduced in 1978 to elevate the quality of teachers, curricula, books and educational support systems (Werf et al., 2000). In 1990, teachers were incentivised to attend professional development programmes and training to promote professional growth (Nielsen, 1998). Advancement came in 2001 with the introduction of school-based management to empower schools to enhance student attainment (Bandur, 2018). Further developments include the policy of decentralisation of education, which enables schools to manage their resources (Government of Indonesia, 2004), and a data-based improvement to plan, monitor and evaluate quality improvement in schools (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). Despite these efforts, the latest MOE policy lacks a clear framework for sustainable data-based improvement to guide and focus on the improvement process.

This budding partial attention to improving the quality of education in Indonesia calls for a comprehensive framework to map ideas into one policy recommendation, in order to avoid the ‘free-floating’ phenomenon whereby ideas float and have only a minimal impact on the implemented policy (Hopkins & Reynolds, 2001). In order to ensure the impact of education quality improvement initiatives, there is also a need for a comprehensive set of domains to

enable schools and policymakers to measure the improvement and response in a relevant way (Reezigt & Creemers, 2005). Unfortunately, there is still minimal research in the area of school improvement. Moreover, many of the policies implemented in Indonesia still focus on either education assurance or education effectiveness, with little to no emphasis on school improvement.

The national exam, as the only standardised end-of-school exam, was discontinued in Indonesia in 2021 (Kemdikbud, 2021). Many high schools subsequently changed their effectiveness measurements from national assessment scores to university acceptance rates: the more students accepted into prestigious state universities, the better the quality of the school. However, the same consideration cannot be applied to elementary and junior high schools, as the government removed the label of elite schools when implementing the zoning policy in 2017 (Wahidi, 2022).

These popularity contests are closer to school effectiveness than to school improvement. School effectiveness is the ability of a school to perform its functions efficiently (Cheng, 2022), while school functions relate to the output and outcomes of school graduates (Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools, 2021). Consequently, using school effectiveness to measure education quality is prone to bias, as many inequalities result in schools' outputs and outcomes (Scherer & Nilsen, 2019).

Similarly, the accreditation programme cannot serve as a foundation for school improvement in Indonesia, as accreditation is more closely related to quality assurance. Quality assurance in education relies on how well schools meet the standards prescribed by policy (Loock & Scherman, 2020), while quality improvement is an iterative process involving goal setting, data collection and evaluation (Schildkamp, 2019). Moreover, in the discussion of school improvement, the goal, data collection and success criteria are set by each school with regard to their needs and educational objectives (Grützmacher et al., 2023). In the long run, these improvements are expected to meet or go beyond the standards of quality set by the related policies.

Each educational context implements different standards for quality assurance (Flavian, 2020; Rosa et al., 2020). In Indonesia, the accreditation process uses the eight *Standar Nasional Pendidikan* (SNP) [Standards of National Education]. Quality assurance provides a unified quality measurement and an easy fix for school effectiveness. However, the set standards cannot be too high, as only a few schools could meet them, which would indicate low standards of education throughout the country; nor can they be too low, as they would lose their primary purpose of increasing the national quality of education.

In an accreditation process, a low-performing school with a limited budget is unable to select its preferred measures for improvement; if its chosen

improvement does not adhere to the prescribed standards, it will not be recognised, even if it is necessary for the school. For example, the school might decide that it needs to improve communication between teachers and parents, so it establishes a new online channel to send school-related information directly to parents. This breakthrough represents essential progress for the school, but since it is not on the list of accreditation standards, it will not be noticed and will not impact the school's accreditation result.

On the other hand, a high-performing school does not have room for improvement once it has met all of the standardised criteria. Once it has achieved an 'A' assessment, there are no more boxes to tick or indicators to fulfil. School assurance is vital to enable policymakers to observe the overall quality of education. However, it is limited by the fact that it does not provide room for schools positioned at the extremes of the quality continuum to show progress, whether they are situated on the far left or the far right of the spectrum.

The only aspect related to school improvement in the Indonesian context is the educational goals of Indonesia, as outlined in Law 20 Year 2003 regarding the System of National Education: "The cultivation of students' potential to foster individuals with faith and reverence towards God, characterised by moral integrity, robust physical health, academic acumen, adeptness, creativity, autonomy, and the embodiment of democratic principles alongside a sense of accountability as citizens" (Government of Indonesia, 2003). These overarching objectives are relevant regardless of any change in the intended curriculum, but without proper details an unnecessary bias is created that hinders any attempt to attain them.

As school improvement closely reflects the implementation of improvement plans, school stakeholders and policymakers need to be able to translate the intended policy and regulations into feasible routines if sound improvement is to be achieved (Nordholm & Adolfsson, 2023). In light of this, the present study offers recommendations concerning school improvement within the framework of Indonesian education.

The study aims to fill the gap in the need for a school improvement framework in Indonesia. An improvement framework is necessary to help design practical approaches to evaluating quality before developing relevant plans to improve the quality of education (Garira, 2020) it can be difficult to obtain such descriptions in an effective manner. This article aims to propose a unified conceptual framework for quality of education in schools to facilitate an understanding of the quality of education. The conceptual framework proposed here is multi-dimensional in nature and based on operational experience by the authors with studying education systems' performance in general, and particularly, quality of education in schools. The unified conceptual framework proposed here is informed by systems theory

and acknowledges the interdependence among the components of quality of education and levels of the education system. In conclusion, we reiterate the importance of a conceptual framework for quality of education that explicates the relationships among the numerous education components (inputs, processes, and outputs. A framework designed for a specific context will yield more targeted improvement results (Reezigt & Creemers, 2005). In addition, the framework must balance global relevance in educational development with a focus on local issues, ensuring that the anticipated improvements address regional challenges effectively while contributing to quality enhancement recognised worldwide. Therefore, the present research introduces a localised perspective that grounds the research findings in context. This approach does not aim to oversimplify complexities, but to demonstrate that the framework is genuinely suited to resolving the problem contextually. While Indonesia still needs to acquire a contextual framework to guide the improvement of school quality, other neighbouring countries and beyond have developed their framework in a context on the level of the nation, the state or even the district. Australia has *School Performance Improvement Frameworks* (SPIF) (Australian Department of Education, 2014); Scotland has the *National Improvement Framework* (NIF) (Forde & Torrance, 2021; Leng, 2019); Washington, USA, has the *Washington School Improvement Framework* (WSIF) (Washington State Board of Education, 2020); and even Lewisham, a district in south-east London, has developed its own context-specific school improvement framework (Lewisham Learning, 2024).

A framework for planned programmes is essential because it provides a common language for discussion related to the issues that may arise in programme planning, implementation or evaluation (Evans et al., 2012). To be precise, the school improvement framework allows policymakers to identify the core component of the school improvement process, support schools through this process, and assess the performance against the domains and indicators of the framework (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2014). However, the OECD (2020) recommends including only a few domains and indicators in the school improvement framework, in order to avoid turning the evaluation process into a checking-the-box exercise.

The conceptual framework should comprehensively discuss Indonesia's school improvement issues. This discussion is expected to help formulate a framework that encompasses the key domains essential to the school improvement process in countries worldwide and includes subdomains that address local issues specific to Indonesia. Below are the research questions that guide the discussion of the present research.

1. What are the recommended domains for the school improvement framework for Indonesia's educational context?

2. What are the recommended subdomains for the domains of the improvement framework for Indonesia's educational context?

## Method

The present study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology to investigate school improvement research and frameworks published since the year 2000. The SLR approach is designed to minimise bias in identifying, selecting, synthesising and interpreting relevant literature in order to address the research questions (Mareza et al., 2024; Moher et al., 2015), while also providing evidence-based grounds for further policy studies (Booth et al., 2022). In order to facilitate this process, the study utilises the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework, which provides a structured technique for systematically selecting, reducing and analysing relevant databases by encompassing several critical stages: search strategy, selection criteria, selection process, data collection and analysis (Idris et al., 2022). These stages are systematically categorised into four main phases: identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion, as illustrated in Figure 1.

In the identification stage, the present study utilises the databases <https://www.tandfonline.com/>, <https://journals.sagepub.com/>, <https://eric.ed.gov/>, <https://www.jstor.org/>, and <https://garuda.kemdikbud.go.id/>. The initial intention was to include some frameworks or research on frameworks from Indonesia; however, at the time this article was developed, no relevant record of a school improvement framework for the Indonesian context was found.

In order to maintain a perspective available to the average readership in Indonesia, the research focuses on open-access frameworks, journal articles and reports; not all policy researchers or policymakers have access to restrictive journals to support their intention to develop similar frameworks.

The research employs Boolean search techniques to find relevant articles about the school improvement framework according to the RQs. The search was initiated by implementing two keywords – “school improvement” and “framework” – in order to focus more on school improvement as opposed to “school effectiveness”, while the keyword “framework” was used to focus more on the framework as opposed to the “design” or “plan”. On the other hand, the research uses general keywords and is not specifically tailored to the RQs. This is because some articles only mention the domain (RQ 1) but do not mention the subdomain to ensure that the proposed domains are relevant to the local context in Indonesia (RQ 2). However, such articles still fall under the category of the school improvement framework.

Next is the screening stage, as summarised in Table 1. The research only includes articles from the year 2000 onwards, in order to ensure that the shifting trend of framework development is covered. Articles in books, series of books, chapters in books, reports and research articles are included, but weblogs are excluded, in order to ensure that the chosen documents are finalised and timestamped properly. Moreover, the emphasis is on frameworks that focus on education in general, such as K-12 education, while frameworks applied to specific majors (e.g., nursing education) or outside K-12 education (e.g., higher education) are excluded. Frameworks that claim to be aimed at school improvement but in fact only discuss certain qualities in education, such as quality assurance and school effectiveness, are also excluded.

School improvement frameworks aim to acquire sustainability of the expected qualities (Askell-Williams & Koh, 2020), so it is essential to carefully develop domains and subdomains that align with the specific context. In this regard, domains and subdomain indicators are extracted from the documents using three lenses, as recommended by Alexander (2013) and Heck (2004), in order to help organise the literature and delimit the scope based on the problems discussed. Alexander (2013) recommends three lenses to examine policy: a rational framework to cover relevant goals, a cultural framework to explore the appropriate cultural background of schools in Indonesia, and an institutional framework to focus on structural factors based on the Indonesian context of school administrations. Heck (2004) then recommends using cultural perspectives to translate the framework into policy processes in the target context, i.e., Indonesia. These limitations reduce the records significantly to 28 documents. Table 1 below provides details of the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the article search.

**Table 1**

*Inclusion and exclusion criteria*

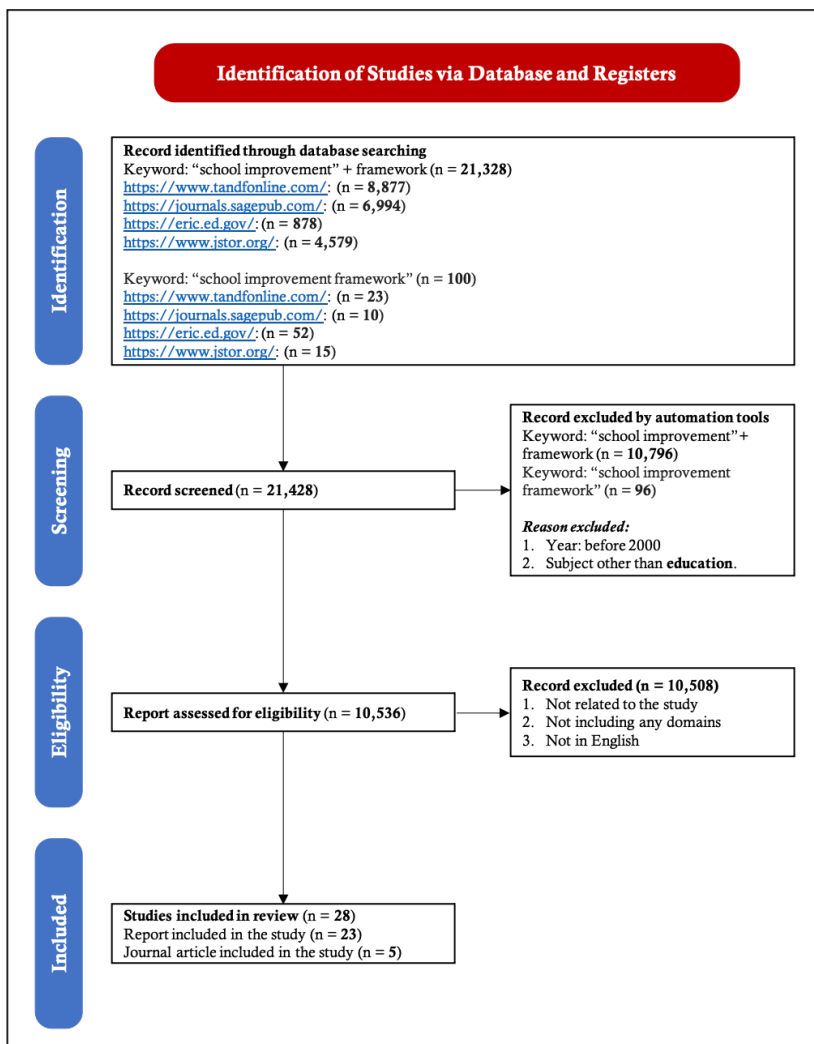
| Criteria        | Inclusion                                                        | Exclusion                               |
|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Timeline        | 2000–present                                                     | Before 2000                             |
| Type of article | Book, series of books, chapter in book, report, research article | Weblog                                  |
| Focus           | K-12 education as general                                        | Specific major in education             |
| Discussion      | School improvement                                               | Quality assurance, school effectiveness |
| Language        | English                                                          | Non-English                             |

Eligibility is the stage that follows the application of inclusion and exclusion criteria. The present study's eligibility stage involved a manual process, whereby manuscripts were reviewed based on their titles and abstracts to ensure relevance. Articles that lack relevance, fail to address the domain and

indicators of school improvement, or are written in a non-English language were removed from the list of articles. Consequently, out of the 21,428 article documents initially identified, only 28 remained eligible after the eligibility stage. These 28 articles will serve as the primary reference for developing the domain (RQ 1) and subdomain (RQ 2) of the school improvement framework. The results of each process are summarised briefly in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*The PRISMA flow diagram in the school improvement framework research*



The present research aims to propose a school improvement framework based on a review of previous research findings. In essence, it synthesises data from mixed-design framework research. Therefore, the data analysis technique employed in the research is qualitative thematic analysis. According to Fleming et al. (2019), thematic analysis is the most efficient method for synthesising data from mixed-design research. Additionally, Xu and Zammit (2020) argue that this analysis is similar to synthesising interpretation and explanation.

Consequently, the 28 research findings were meticulously reviewed, focusing on abstracts, findings and discussions. Data addressing RQ 1 and RQ 2 were collected and abstracted for further evaluation. Thematic analysis was then conducted to identify the composition of relevant domain themes and subdomains by noting similarities, counting, grouping and detecting patterns among domains and subdomains. The origin and type of documents used in the research are explained below.

**Table 2**  
*Descriptions of the 28 eligible articles*

| No. | Type of document                | Relevant to                                                                                         |
|-----|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1.  | Framework document              | States in Australia, New Zealand, the USA, Canada, ESI project countries in Europe, Scotland, Wales |
| 2.  | Journal article                 | Across nations                                                                                      |
| 3.  | Report on framework utilisation | States in Australia, Kazakhstan, States in the USA                                                  |

**Results and Discussion**

The 28 documents selected were divided into categories based on the domains they put forward to characterise improvements. Table 3 shows the four domains of the highest frequency used in all of the records.

**Table 3**  
*Four domains with the highest frequency in the 28 documents*

| Domain                | Frequency of occurrence | Percentage of occurrence |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Teaching and Learning | 21                      | 75.00%                   |
| Community and Culture | 17                      | 60.71%                   |
| Leadership            | 16                      | 57.14%                   |
| Assessment            | 14                      | 50.00%                   |

The domain selection (RQ 1) was determined based on the frequency within the 28 selected documents, as shown in Table 2, and then the determination of subdomains (RQ 2) was further elaborated directly from the 28 documents, with careful consideration of the Indonesian context. Table 4 below provides a more detailed breakdown of subdomain findings based on the domain above, considering three lenses: goal, cultural and institutional.

**Table 4**

*The subdomains derived from the domains*

| Domain                    | Subdomains                                                                                                                                                                      | Sources                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Teaching and Learning     | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Inspiring teacher</li> <li>2. Excellent teaching</li> <li>3. Stimulating learning</li> </ol>                                          | (ACT Department of Education and Training, 2009; Australian Council for Educational Research, 2023; Australian Department of Education, 2010; Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2014; Department for Education, Children and Young People, 2022; Dimmock, 2002; Education Review Office of New Zealand, 2022; Institute for Educational Research, 2001; Mackey & Alabama State Superintendent of Education, 2020; Masters & Australian Council for Educational Research, 2010; Ministry of Education of Canada, 2013; NSW Government, 2023; Office of School Support and Improvement, 2015; Reezigt & Creemers, 2005; School Improvement Design Unit, 2022; Scottish Government, 2022; Texas Education Agency, 2019; University of California, 2021; Unterman et al., 2023; Welsh Government, 2021; WestEd, 2017)2020; Masters & Australian Council for Educational Research, 2010; Ministry of Education of Canada, 2013; NSW Government, 2023; Office of School Support and Improvement, 2015; Reezigt & Creemers, 2005; School Improvement Design Unit, 2022; Scottish Government, 2022; Texas Education Agency, 2019; University of California, 2021; Unterman et al., 2023; Welsh Government, 2021; WestEd, 2017 |
| Leadership and Management | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Strategic leadership</li> <li>2. Resourceful and effective management</li> <li>3. Transparent and organised administration</li> </ol> | (ACT Department of Education and Training, 2009; Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2014; Department for Education, Children and Young People, 2022; Dimmock, 2002; Education Review Office of New Zealand, 2022; Evans et al., 2012; Mackey & Alabama State Superintendent of Education, 2020; Ministry of Education of Canada, 2013; Northern Territory Government, 2016; NSW Government, 2023; Office of School Support and Improvement, 2015; School Improvement Design Unit, 2022; Scottish Government, 2022; Texas Education Agency, 2019; Welsh Government, 2021; WestEd, 2017)2020; Ministry of Education of Canada, 2013; Northern Territory Government, 2016; NSW Government, 2023; Office of School Support and Improvement, 2015; School Improvement Design Unit, 2022; Scottish Government, 2022; Texas Education Agency, 2019; Welsh Government, 2021; WestEd, 2017                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Assessment                | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Meaningful assessment</li> <li>2. Constructive feedback</li> <li>3. Comprehensive assessment data</li> </ol>                          | (Australian Department of Education, 2010; Dimmock, 2002; Education Review Office of New Zealand, 2022; Institute for Educational Research, 2001; Ministry of Education of Canada, 2013; Minnesota Department of Education, 2022; Nahar et al., 2022; OECD, 2020; Office of School Support and Improvement, 2015; Reezigt & Creemers, 2005; School Improvement Design Unit, 2022; Texas Education Agency, 2019; Unterman et al., 2023; Washington State Board of Education, 2020)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |

| Domain                | Subdomains                                                                                                                                                 | Sources                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Community and Culture | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Continuous professional development</li> <li>2. Positive school culture</li> <li>3. Engaged community</li> </ol> | (ACT Department of Education and Training, 2009; Australian Council for Educational Research, 2023; Australian Department of Education, 2010; Education Review Office of New Zealand, 2022; Institute for Educational Research, 2001; Mackey & Alabama State Superintendent of Education, 2020; Masters & Australian Council for Educational Research, 2010; Ministry of Education of Canada, 2013; Minnesota Department of Education, 2022; Nahar et al., 2022; Office of School Support and Improvement, 2015; Reezigt & Creemers, 2005; Scottish Government, 2022; Texas Education Agency, 2019; Unterman et al., 2023; Vermont Agency of Education, 2020; WestEd, 2017)2020; Masters & Australian Council for Educational Research, 2010; Ministry of Education of Canada, 2013; Minnesota Department of Education, 2022; Nahar et al., 2022; Office of School Support and Improvement, 2015; Reezigt & Creemers, 2005; Scottish Government, 2022; Texas Education Agency, 2019; Unterman et al., 2023; Vermont Agency of Education, 2020; WestEd, 2017 |

The study limits the context of discussion to schools in Indonesia, so subdomains irrelevant to the Indonesian curriculum were excluded from the list. Some examples include the arrangement of school systems that implement the grade division 6–8 and 9–12 as middle school and high school, respectively (Office of School Support and Improvement, 2015), as opposed to the system in Indonesia, which divides grades into 7–9 and 10–12 as middle school and high school respectively. Another exclusion criterion is the role of headteachers (Scottish Government, 2022), which is not known in the Indonesian context. Subdomains that refer to a specific part of the local curriculum are also excluded from the discussion. This includes the implementation of dual credit participation to monitor the progress of school improvement (Washington State Board of Education, 2020) and incorporating local values and beliefs into learning processes (Education Review Office of New Zealand, 2022). Later, indicators closely related to specific standards of education relevant to a particular area are also excluded from the discussion.

The study also considers the eight components of the Indonesian national education standards. Based on the latest documents of education standards in Indonesia, the eight *Standar Nasional Pendidikan* (SNP) [Standards of National Education] in Indonesia are: (1) the standard of school graduate competency, (2) the standard of content, (3) the standard of process, (4) the standard of education assessment, (5) the standard of educational personnel, (6) the standard of facility and infrastructure, (7) the standard of management, and (8) the standard of financing (Government of Indonesia, 2022).

Below is how the SNP is accommodated into the recommended domains of the School Improvement Framework for Indonesia (SIFI).

**Table 5**

*SNP accommodation in the School Improvement Framework for Indonesia (SIFI) domain recommendations*

| Domains in the SIFI       | Related SNP                                                                                                                              |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Teaching and Learning     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Standard of content</li> <li>- Standard of process</li> </ul>                                   |
| Leadership and Management | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Standard of management</li> <li>- Standard of financing</li> </ul>                              |
| Assessment                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Standard of school graduate competency</li> <li>- Standard of education assessment</li> </ul>   |
| Community and Culture     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Standard of educational personnel</li> <li>- Standard of facility and infrastructure</li> </ul> |

**Figure 2**

*School Improvement Framework for Indonesia (SIFI)*

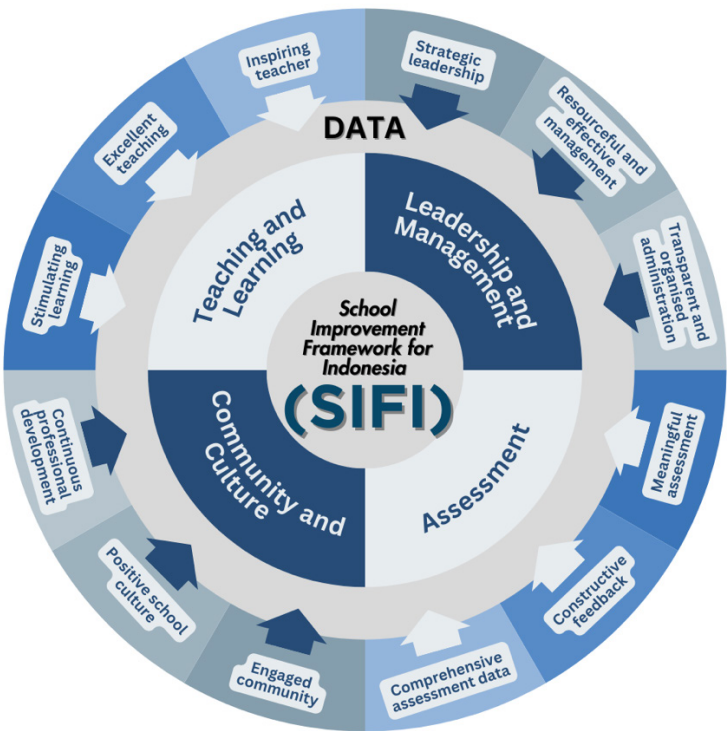


Figure 2 illustrates how the *School Improvement Framework for Indonesia* (SIFI) integrates key domains to enhance the quality of education within the Indonesian context. All of the related subdomains contribute to the overall progress of school improvement and are monitored through data collected from these processes. Each domain functions not in isolation but in conjunction with others, contributing collectively to the school improvement process, as demonstrated by the data gathered from the subdomains. Below is an elaboration of each part of the domain and the incorporated data that ties all of the domains and subdomains into one framework of school improvement.

### Teaching and Learning

The teaching and learning domain focuses on improving the quality of teaching and learning in class. The related subdomains in the documents discuss various topics but can be grouped into three categories: teacher professionalism, classroom instructions and student learning. Teacher professionalism pertains to the inspiring practices of teachers (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2014), classroom instructions prioritise excellent teaching methods (OECD, 2020), and student learning underscores stimulating learning processes (Masters & Australian Council for Educational Research, 2010).

Teaching and learning are at the heart of school improvement. This domain covers teaching and learning activities and how teachers prepare their professional capabilities to conduct stimulating teaching and inspire students. Teachers who are allowed to conduct personal development training may positively impact overall school improvement plans (Gericke & Torbjörnsson, 2022). In the Indonesian context, the most accessible activity related to this is participating in a subject-teacher association. This kind of association has been promoted since 2003 through law 20/2003 on the national education system; however, to date, there is no official data regarding the overall number of teachers involved in such activities, despite sporadic research about the impact of associations on teachers' professional development (Pajar et al., 2023; Sumiyani, 2023).

The teaching and learning domain encompasses some subdomains, as previously outlined in categories, including inspiring teachers, excellent teaching practices and stimulating learning experiences.

The subdomain inspiring teachers encompasses teachers' capabilities to conduct teaching and learning activities professionally. Teachers need relevant and updated knowledge and skills to do this. Moreover, they also need to conduct collaborative teaching activities to learn from one another (Greatbatch & Tate, 2019).

Excellent teaching focuses on how teachers master the content of the curriculum. The ability to deliver the curriculum effectively is a direct outcome of this mastery, because:

The school has a coherent, sequenced plan for curriculum delivery that ensures consistent teaching and learning expectations and an apparent reference for monitoring learning across the year levels. The plan, within which evidence-based teaching practices are embedded and to which assessment and reporting procedures are aligned, has been developed and refined collaboratively to provide a shared vision for curriculum practice. This plan is shared with parents and caregivers. (Masters & Australian Council for Educational Research, 2010, p. 11).

Therefore, teachers with relevant and updated knowledge and skills are expected to interpret the curriculum in their classroom in order to create meaningful, differentiated learning to accommodate different learning needs (NSW Government, 2023). These diverse learning needs also entail meticulous considerations, notably concerning managing various types of student literacy behaviours (Masters & Australian Council for Educational Research, 2010).

Stimulating learning points towards the notion that the teacher is the primary actor. In order to achieve stimulated learning, teachers need to have high expectations of what their students can learn. Students can participate in collaborative and inspiring learning through authentic, relevant and meaningful inquiry processes. Furthermore, if feasible, teachers possess the capacity to cultivate learning environments that are intellectually stimulating, conducive to comfort and characterised by civility, and that promote healthfulness (Masters & Australian Council for Educational Research, 2010).

As mentioned in the introduction, national exams once represented a measure of teaching and learning quality within the Indonesian educational landscape. With the cessation of national exams, there is no formal indicator of teaching and learning quality. Many parents have transitioned to regarding the rate of student admissions into higher education institutions as an immediate indicator of quality education (Salfiah et al., 2022; Thoyyibah et al., 2022). Nevertheless, this metric cannot be uniformly applied to elementary and junior high schools, given the government's elimination of the elite school designation subsequent to the adoption of the zoning policy in 2017 (Wahidi, 2022). This indicates that the portrayal of teaching and learning quality in Indonesia still predominately focuses on students' output rather than optimising the components integral to teaching and learning. Conversely, the results of the present research advocate for a shift in school improvement within the teaching and

learning domain towards enhancing these critical components, which entails prioritising teachers who inspire, deliver exceptional learning experiences and encourage learning stimulation.

Focusing on outcomes to capture the actual quality of learning is not inherently problematic, but this perspective is more aligned with school effectiveness than school improvement. School effectiveness is the ability of a school to perform its functions efficiently (Cheng, 2022). School functions relate to the output and outcomes of school graduates (Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools, 2021). Schools that focus on school effectiveness by measuring their output through student attainment in certain assessments are prone to fall into teaching-to-the-test routines (Bellei et al., 2020). The recommendation is therefore for schools not to confine themselves to this perspective of school effectiveness. Schools should dare to take a step forward and engage in school improvement. In other words, the school's role must be broadened beyond merely considering the output and outcome aspects of school effectiveness; it should encompass optimising the elements of teaching and learning as the manifestation of school improvement implementation.

### **Leadership and Management**

The school principal is responsible for providing leadership and direction for the school improvement plans and programmes. Thus, principals must have specific skills and knowledge to ensure that all school stakeholders are ready to contribute to the school improvement plans (Brion, 2020; Yeigh et al., 2019). Liljenberg and Wrethander (2023) even argue the importance of training practice for school principals as a crucial component in school improvement programmes, in order to ensure that principals are equipped for schools to start embracing any school improvement plans.

In this framework, the concepts of leadership and management are articulated through three subdomains: strategic leadership (Evans et al., 2012; Northern Territory Government, 2016), resourceful and effective management (Minnesota Department of Education, 2022; Vermont Agency of Education, 2020), and transparent and organised administration (Evans et al., 2012; Vermont Agency of Education, 2020). Strategic leadership incorporates “substantive decision-making responsibilities, beyond the interpersonal and relational aspects usually associated with leadership” (Finkelstein et al., 2009, p. 17). In the Indonesian context, strategic leadership is influenced by the form of the school, as regular schools are under the management of the MOE while madrasahs (religious schools) are under the management of the MORA. The principal of a madrasah must be able to

differentiate the policy and regulations in the context of the MOE and the MORA, as they are structurally under the MORA but also required to implement certain policies issued by the MOE. On the other hand, principals of regular schools only need to consider the policy released by the MOE.

The next subdomain is resourceful and effective management. In their report, the MOE stated that only 25% of elementary schools and 40% of high schools have suitable conditions to support learning, despite the increased budget for education (Ulya & Djumena, 2020). Principals, teachers and administrations should maximise the available resources to meet education standards and expectations. This subdomain helps schools to pay attention to their facilities and infrastructure, and to plan improvement in order to achieve relevant progress towards meeting the expected goals set by the school rather than the standards.

It is essential to recognise that the fulfilment of standards and the expectations outlined above should not serve as the foundation for claims regarding school improvement. The approach to resources must be stratified, suggesting that the development of school resources adheres to the distinct phases of achievement particular to the school (Vermont Agency of Education, 2020). Given that each school possesses unique phase achievements, the starting points for school improvement in this context may vary accordingly.

A notable area for improvement within the Indonesian educational framework is the propensity for utilising predetermined standards and expectations as definitive benchmarks for evaluating school accomplishments. This approach leads schools to prioritise attaining these benchmarks, often needing to account for their unique stages of development. Furthermore, upon reaching these established standards, schools may perceive themselves as having fulfilled their objectives, thus negating the impetus for ongoing enhancement and progress.

The last subdomain of the Leadership and Management domain is transparent and organised administration. Management and administration concerning schools as an organisation are mentioned in the selected documents (Education Review Office of New Zealand, 2022; Minnesota Department of Education, 2022; Office of School Support and Improvement, 2015). In this context, management and administration concern not only data collection and distributed resource management (Koh et al., 2023), but also actively contribute to discussions on planning school improvement programmes (Brion, 2020).

Transparency is discussed in the SIFI due to Indonesia's school operational assistance fund policy. Principals are expected to involve teachers, parents and staff in planning and reporting on the disbursement of the fund (Rachmawati, 2023; Winaya et al., 2022). However, there needs to be a specific description of how this should be conducted.

## Assessment

Only the School Improvement Tool from Australia and Minnesota's Multi-Tiered System of Support Framework from the USA discuss assessment with regard to meeting a standardised assessment expectation (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2023; Minnesota Department of Education, 2022). Other documents discuss various functions of assessment: to help develop differentiated learning (Ministry of Education of Canada, 2013), to improve learning (OECD, 2020; University of California, 2021), and to understand learning needs (Reezigt & Creemers, 2005; Stoll et al., 2009).

In the Indonesian context, assessment is a compliance indicator in the school accreditation process (Susetyo et al., 2022). One data source for this is the *Rapor Pendidikan* [Educational Report], which is provided annually for schools under the MOE based on their national assessment results (Nurkolis et al., 2022). Later, it is used to develop planning and programming (Sudadio et al., 2023). National Assessment is a sampling assessment to measure the overall quality of education in a given school. Madrasahs under the MORA do not have such a report, even though they implement National Assessment. Thus, we recommend using teachers' classroom assessment as one subdomain of the assessment domain.

Assessment plays a vital role in school improvement plans; it is an indicator of the reason an improvement needs to be made. A successful school improvement plan will reflect increased assessment attainment (Vangronigen & Meyers, 2020). On the other hand, a poor assessment result indicates the need for quality improvement.

The present research identifies three subdomains that are particularly relevant to the educational context of Indonesia: meaningful assessment, constructive feedback and comprehensive assessment data. Meaningful assessment encompasses the idea that every assessment must serve a purpose, regardless of the administrator. Well-designed assessments measure how well students meet the expected standards, but they also help teachers plan interventions to improve learning attainment (Danielson, 2002) and provide data to support continuous learning improvement (Summers, 2023). In the Indonesian context, there are still emerging problems with teachers' ability to develop valid and reliable assessments, especially since the latest curriculum, *Kurikulum Merdeka*, requires that assessments encourage higher-order thinking (Kusumaningrum & Abduh, 2022; Saragih & Nasution, 2019).

The second subdomain is constructive feedback. The selected documents discuss and encourage constructive feedback (Ministry of Education of

Canada, 2013; Office of School Support and Improvement, 2015; School Improvement Design Unit, 2022). Feedback is crucial because it signifies a positive relationship between teachers and students within the learning environment. In this context, the School Effectiveness Framework of the Ministry of Education of Canada (2013) states:

The power of positive teacher-student relationships is critical for learning to occur. This relationship involves showing students that the teacher cares for their learning as a student, can see their perspective, and communicate it back to them so they have valuable feedback to self-assess, feel safe, and learn to understand others and the content with the same interest and concern. (p. 25)

Empirically, students learn more through constructive feedback (Djou et al., 2023; Misbah, 2022; Wang et al., 2019). This subdomain targets teachers' ability to provide constructive feedback and encourage appreciation when relevant. Schools need to take a role in this process, as it reinforces expected behaviour necessary for school improvement.

The third subdomain is comprehensive assessment data. Discussion about using data to direct classroom instruction is present in some educational settings (Summers, 2023; Walte et al., 2022). Indonesia has adopted the policy of the Education Report (*Rapor Pendidikan*), whereby the MOE gathers all of the relevant data about the school in one platform. The data include the results of the National Assessment and various national surveys, such as the inclusiveness and diversity indexes. Aside from this, teachers also need to gather the necessary data from classroom interaction and assessment in order to monitor the progress of school improvement initiatives.

## Community and Culture

The last domain proposed in the *School Improvement Framework for Indonesia* is community and culture, which identifies continuous professional development, a positive school culture and an engaged community.

Teachers and administrators must continuously develop professionalism to support quality improvement (Murwaningsih et al., 2022). Exceptional support must be allocated through budgeting or encouragement to join relevant training or workshops. This subdomain prompts schools to plan continuous professional development programmes for teachers and administrators.

Continuously developing professionalism would undoubtedly be in vain without the support of a positive school culture, which is the second subdomain.

This subdomain encompasses a myriad of conditions to support learning, from the common belief that students can learn successfully (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2023; Ministry of Education of Canada, 2013) and the support to develop routines of expected behaviours (Texas Education Agency, 2019), to preserving local culture (Education Review Office of New Zealand, 2022). This subdomain asks schools to own their culture aligning with their vision and mission. Relevant school culture helps create a favourable environment to support learning (Rony, 2021; Sukadari, 2020) and nurture appropriate characters (Samsiniwati, 2022).

The final subdomain in the domain of Community and Culture is engaged community. Community in this context refers to parents and society, as well as policymakers in government offices, all of whom play an essential role in the success of school improvement programmes. In Indonesia, the community's involvement in school has been officially acknowledged since 2016, with Ministry Regulation No. 75/2016 (Kemdikbud, 2016), through the *Komite Sekolah* [School Committee], whose members are parents and local authorities. However, these initiatives have experienced mixed responses, from acknowledging that this provides opportunities for parents to better support education (Fitriani & Istar-yatiningtias, 2020), to recent emerging concerns, such as the problem of control (Sadewa & Yuniningsih, 2016). Bohanon et al. (2021) recommend encouraging initiatives to develop awareness that school improvement is an intertwining process in which all stakeholders must participate and improve. Parent involvement helps increase learning motivation (OECD, 2020). Stakeholder engagement in school activities also helps strengthen school culture (Minnesota Department of Education, 2022), while stakeholder partnership is expected to boost student well-being and achievement (Ministry of Education of Canada, 2013).

### **The Role of Data**

Data play an essential role in the *School Improvement Framework for Indonesia*, as they are used as a baseline during planning and a means to monitor the progress of school improvement programme implementations (Greatbatch & Tate, 2019), while also providing information for the evaluation processes. Data can range from qualitative to quantitative. All data must be collected and managed well in order to document the progress of school improvement programmes. Data from standardised tests or assessments can be an excellent measure of improvement (Heffernan, 2018). In the Indonesian context, where standardised test results are unavailable, schools can use classroom data to picture the progress of improvement in teaching and learning processes. Data are also used to develop

relevant programmes. Classroom assessment data that show no progress in attainment may suggest the need for an intervention, which can be undertaken following regular classroom supervision. When this data is prepared with a more detailed explanation and shows, for example, that the presumed cause is a lack of certain teaching media, the school may allocate funding to procuring teaching media in its next cycle of school improvement plans.

School improvement is an ongoing process that requires diligent data collection in order to observe the attainment within the duration of implementation. From their research across 20 nations, Barber et al. (2010) argue that it takes six years to see an observable improvement in quality at schools with proper intervention. In order to move from fair to good quality, they recommend establishing the foundations of data gathering, organisation, finances and pedagogy. Based on this, the role of data becomes crucial.

The research agrees that the 'one-size-fits-all' approach is unsuitable for school improvement plans. Every school should develop its context for improvement and implement necessary interventions until improvement can be seen. From a data-oriented perspective, each educational institution inherently possesses distinct baseline metrics determined by its unique dataset. It is imperative for each institution to optimally utilise this data, enabling a comprehensive depiction of the institution's developmental trajectory. In addition, Vangronigen and Meyers (2020) suggest that low-performing schools conduct school improvement cycles in shorter lengths, presumably per semester, in order to provide opportunities to alter or adjust initial plans. However, Meyers et al. (2023) note the extra burden placed on the principal to supervise and develop plans in time before the following planning cycle. In order to accomplish this, schools should ideally refer to their institutional data.

Generally, in order to capture school performance well, we need to provide an array of quality measurements, as using just one approach, whether quantitative or qualitative, will not be sufficient to picture the overall progress occurring at schools (Scottish Government, 2022). The result of this measurement becomes the data that will capture the progress of the improvement.

The explicit recommendation of the present analysis for education practitioners is that achieving school improvement cannot rely solely on school effectiveness data, which is prone to bias due to the many inequalities that impact schools' outputs and outcomes (Scherer & Nilsen, 2019); nor can it rely solely on quality assurance data through accreditation per se, where there is no room for further improvement once the predetermined standards are met.

Through the SIFI, practitioners can clearly map data based on domains and subdomains. Furthermore, this data mapping can provide a projection of

the school's future development direction. The SIFI positions data as something valuable that can play a crucial role in determining the direction of a school's development. In other words, the SIFI can help practitioners see data as dynamic, not static. Every piece of data can serve as a reference for continuous progressivity and not merely as a tool to meet established standards that then lose their role and meaning.

## Conclusion

School improvement processes involve more than merely striving to meet educational standards. For schools facing significant quality challenges, school improvement programmes must be carefully identified to ensure that all aspects of educational management receive balanced attention. These programmes are then designed and developed according to the school's capacity. For schools that already have a high level of quality, school improvement programmes are no longer aimed at achieving standards that have already been surpassed, but rather at realising the school's vision and mission. The *School Improvement Framework for Indonesia* offers a structured approach for schools to plan quality improvement, not only to meet the national education standards, but to go beyond them. This framework comprises four domains: Teaching and Learning, Leadership and Management, Assessment, and Community and Culture. Each domain is further delineated into three subdomains to provide a comprehensive basis for data collection and implementing improvement strategies in daily school operations.

The next phase of research will focus on formulating achievement indicators for each of the established subdomains. These subdomains are expected to strengthen the position of the SIFI as an empirically-based framework for school improvement programmes in Indonesia. Furthermore, additional research is essential to empirically validate the SIFI as an integral component of programme planning within the school context in Indonesia.

## Ethical Statement

The research did not access any raw data, nor did it involve human and animal subjects. The reviews on which it was based aggregated studies that had already received ethical approval. Consequently, no additional ethical approval was necessary.

## Disclosure Statement

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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## Biographical note

**YUNA PUTERI KADARISMAN**, MEd, is a doctoral student at Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta. Her research interests focus on educational policy and school improvement, with additional expertise in classroom assessment.

**MOH. RIFQI RAHMAN**, PhD, holds a doctorate in Islamic education policy from UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia. His research interests include education policy, technology-assisted learning, and learning assessment.

**SUYANTO**, PhD, is a professor at Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta and a distinguished scholar in economic education. His research interests also encompass education policy, management, and leadership.

**CEPI SAFRUDDIN ABDUL JABAR**, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta. His research interests focus on effective school culture, and his expertise spans the disciplines of Educational Management, Educational Leadership, and Educational Policy.

**AHMAD UMAR**, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at UIN Walisongo Semarang. His expertise lies in Educational Management and Leadership in the school context.

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## Incidental Learning From Science Journalism: The Effects of a Narrative Writing Style on the Comprehension and Situational Interest of Austrian Non-Experts in Health Sciences

CHRISTIAN AMESEDER<sup>\*1</sup>, IZTOK DEVETAK<sup>2</sup> AND DARIJA SKUBIC<sup>2</sup>

✎ Austrian non-experts in health sciences often lack the scientific knowledge to make informed decisions that affect their daily lives and society as a whole. In general, their interest in current scientific knowledge is low, so it is unlikely that they will actively seek out information. Adult non-experts therefore need to acquire relevant scientific information incidentally, e.g., by reading journalistic articles. Journalistic articles traditionally follow an inverted pyramid structure, presenting the most important information first, while narratives unfold events chronologically with intentionally acting characters. Journalistic science narratives provide information that is usually missing in inverted pyramids. This additional information may increase situational interest in journalistic science narratives. Most people are confronted with narratives more often than with explanatory texts in everyday life and can therefore process them better. Due to the linear structure, relevant information elements are automatically activated at the same time, which further facilitates processing. An online study in the context of online science journalism on nutrition topics was conducted in Austria with 461 adult non-experts in health sciences recruited via online platforms. The dependent variables comprehension, cognitive load and situational interest were investigated using a multiple-tier test and self-reports. The results indicate significantly higher comprehension and general situational interest and significantly lower cognitive load after reading journalistic science narratives compared to inverted pyramids. However, situational interest in journalistic science narratives was significantly lower after participants had read the first paragraph. It then increased and was significantly higher than that for inverted pyramids for the rest of the article. Therefore, journalistic science narratives with a strictly chronological

1 <sup>\*</sup>Corresponding Author. University of Applied Sciences Burgenland, Eisenstadt, Austria; and eLearning Academy for Communication, Eisenstadt, Austria; christian.ameseder@hochschule-burgenland.at.

2 Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia.

structure should be used with caution. When initial situational interest is low, individuals may stop reading before they have enough information to fully comprehend the content. In addition, higher situational interest is correlated with a lower perception of cognitive load.

**Keywords:** incidental learning, narrative science journalism, cognitive load, comprehension, situational interest, storytelling

## Naključno učenje iz znanstvenega novinarstva: učinki pripovednega sloga pisanja na razumevanje in situacijsko zanimanje avstrijskih nestrokovnjakov na področju zdravstvenih ved

CHRISTIAN AMESER, IZTOK DEVETAK IN DARIJA SKUBIC

Avstrijci, ki niso strokovnjaki na področju zdravstvenih ved, pogosto nimajo dovolj znanstvenega znanja za sprejemanje na informacijah temelječih odločitev, ki vplivajo na njihovo vsakodnevno življenje in družbo kot celoto. Na splošno je njihovo zanimanje za aktualno znanstveno znanje majhno, zato je malo verjetno, da bodo aktivno iskali informacije. Odrasli nestrokovnjaki morajo zato ustrezne znanstvene informacije pridobiti naključno, npr. z branjem novinarskih člankov. Novinarski članki tradicionalno sledijo strukturi obrnjene piramide in najprej predstavijo najpomembnejše informacije, medtem ko pripovedi kronološko razvijajo dogodke z namensko delujočimi liki. Novinarske znanstvene pripovedi zagotavljajo informacije, ki jih v obrnjenih piramidah običajno ni. Te dodatne informacije lahko povečajo situacijsko zanimanje za novinarske znanstvene pripovedi. Večina ljudi se v vsakdanjem življenju pogosteje srečuje s pripovedmi kot z razlagalnimi besedili in jih zato lahko bolje obdela. Zaradi linearne strukture se pomembni informacijski elementi hkrati samodejno aktivirajo, kar še dodatno olajša obdelavo. V Avstriji je bila izvedena spletna študija v okviru spletnega znanstvenega novinarstva o prehranskih temah, v kateri je sodelovalo 461 odraslih nestrokovnjakov s področja zdravstvenih ved, ki so bili pozvani prek spletne platforme. Odvisne spremenljivke razumevanja, kognitivnih obremenitev in situacijsko zanimanje so bile raziskane s večstopenjskim testom in samoporočanjem. Rezultati kažejo na boljše razumevanje in splošni situacijsko zanimanje ter bistveno manjšo kognitivno obremenitev po branju novinarskih znanstvenih pripovedi v primerjavi z obrnjenimi piramidami. Situacijsko zanimanje za novinarske znanstvene pripovedi je bilo bistveno manjše, ko so udeleženci prebrali prvi odstavek. Nato se je povečalo in je bilo v preostalem delu članka pomembno večje kot pri obrnjenih piramidah. Zato je treba novinarske znanstvene pripovedi s strogo kronološko strukturo uporabljati previdno. Kadar je začetno situacijsko zanimanje majhno, lahko posamezniki prenehajo brati, še preden dobijo dovolj informacij za popolno

razumevanje vsebine. Poleg tega je večje situacijsko zanimanje povezano z manjšim poznavanjem kognitivnih obremenitev.

**Ključne besede:** naključno učenje, narativno znanstveno novinarstvo, kognitivna obremenitev, razumevanje, situacijsko zanimanje, pripovedovanje zgodb

## Introduction

Climate change, global insect extinction, individualised genomic medicine, the emergence of novel communicable diseases (e.g., the Covid-19 pandemic) and chronic non-infectious degenerative diseases (e.g., obesity, diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular disease) are just a few of the problems affecting people worldwide (Dunwoody, 2021; Hendriks et al., 2020; Kopp, 2019). Many of these socio-scientific challenges can have serious consequences for people's personal, social and civic lives (Feinstein & Waddington, 2020). In order to be literate citizens and to be able to participate in socio-scientific discussions, individuals need a certain level of scientific knowledge, especially in an increasingly technological world (Hofstein et al., 2011; Roth & Lee, 2004).

According to a PISA study (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023), the knowledge of Austrian 15-year-old students in the natural sciences decreased significantly between 2006 and 2022. Even if the level of knowledge is high at the end of formal education, science and its methods provide reliable knowledge but not ultimate truths. Other people – or the same person at a later time – can modify or refute previous findings (Weitze & Heckl, 2016). However, adults' self-reported interest in new scientific discoveries and technological developments is low (European Commission, 2010). As a result, many adults lack (self-reported) science literacy (Austrian Academy of Sciences, 2022; European Union, 2021). Taken together, even less informed individuals have to make decisions that sometimes have far-reaching consequences for themselves and for society as a whole. Although knowledge is not the only factor in decision making (e.g., emotions are another; Angie et al., 2011), it is unlikely that informed decisions can be made without the appropriate background knowledge.

## Journalistic Science Narratives

In a field in which they are not experts, people cannot usually acquire knowledge through primary experiences. They depend on the mediation of information through secondary experiences, such as mediated messages (Burkart, 2002). Although the language used in scientific journals enables efficient communication in scientific circles, it is difficult for non-experts in science to understand (Avraamidou & Osborne, 2009). Therefore, it is journalists who traditionally fulfil the task of keeping non-experts up to date.

Adult non-experts get their information about scientific topics mainly from the mass media, especially the internet (Dahlstrom, 2014; Austrian Academy of Sciences, 2022; Weitze & Heckl, 2016). According to the Reuters Digital

News Report (Newman et al., 2022), 76% of Austrian respondents indicated online platforms (including social media) as their main source of news. However, even the increasing digitalisation of communication and the increased use of these new forms of communication do not seem to be leading to habituation. Students understand better when reading on paper than when reading on desktop computers. The difference in comprehension between print and digital even increased between 2010 and 2017 (Delgado et al., 2018). As news readers become less willing – and perhaps less able (OECD, 2019) – to read difficult material, journalists need to communicate complex issues in simple ways (Yaros, 2011). As Delgado et al. (2018) found no difference between reading narratives on paper and in digital form, a narrative writing style could be particularly beneficial in digital environments.

A ‘journalistic article’ is a news item aimed at a general audience and written by employees of professional journalistic institutions. Journalistic articles are usually written in the so-called inverted pyramid, whereby information is arranged in descending order of perceived importance (van Dijk, 1986). The term ‘news story’ is commonly used to refer to journalistic articles without implying a particular writing style. Lugmayr et al. (2017) suggest that the creation of narratives whose purpose goes beyond entertainment should be called ‘serious storytelling’. However, the notion ‘storytelling’ is also associated with economic calculations (Früh, 2014). As the present study examines writing style, and given that quality journalism should not be dictated by economic calculations, the notion ‘journalistic science narrative’ is used.

Different definitions of narration (and storytelling) have been used in previous research, which may explain the sometimes contradictory results (Frey, 2014; Früh & Frey, 2014). In a meta-analysis by Ettl-Huber et al. (2019), the most frequently mentioned elements of narratives were plot and characters, followed by space and time. Together with the topic, which can be taken for granted in a journalistic context, these elements form the core of narratives. For a narrative to have a plot, at least one state must change, while characters carrying out intended actions drive the plot forward. Articles written in the inverted pyramid already contain some elements of narratives (Frey, 2014), but unlike journalistic science narratives (JSNs), inverted pyramids lack a continuous, causal plot and characters who act intentionally.

In order to illustrate what a JSN might look like, the following is an outline of the fatty acid JSN used in the present study. The scientist is described in her laboratory, next to cages of mice. The article then briefly outlines the digestion of omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids before returning to the scientist conducting her mouse study. She observes the initial effects of different diets, then

simulates Parkinson's disease in the mice. She then observes how the results of this simulation differ between mice with an omega-3-rich diet and mice with an omega-6-rich diet. The mice that were exposed to the omega-3-rich diet had less oxidative stress in their brains and their dopamine-producing neurons were protected.

Only a few studies (e.g., Yaros, 2006, 2011; Yaros & Cook, 2013; Kleemans et al., 2018) have investigated the effects of JSNs. However, studies of science narratives without a journalistic context mainly examine their persuasiveness or effects in the context of intentional learning (Ettl-Huber et al., 2019) and are compared to advertisements or textbooks (not inverted pyramids). The processing strategy (and consequently the effects) is likely to vary depending on the different processing goals in intentional and incidental learning (Slater, 1997). Studies on general journalism, on the other hand, do not take into account the specifics of science journalism (e.g., acquisition of scientific concepts).

### Comprehension of Journalistic Science Narratives

Comprehension should be distinguished from the function of memory and the learning process (Schnotz & Kürschner, 2007): *memory* refers to the mere storage of information in the long-term memory (LTM), while *comprehension* refers to task performance that takes place only in working memory (WM), where connections between different information elements are processed. The whole procedure of processing and storing information is called *cognitive learning*, which leads to an increase in expertise. Therefore, comprehension is a factor in learning.

Whereas individuals consciously acquire knowledge in intentional learning, they do not explicitly intend to learn in incidental learning. Incidental learning is thus a by-product of other activities, such as task performance (e.g., reading online journalism). It becomes more important as individuals age, as they are increasingly less likely to attend institutions that require intentional learning (Wagnon et al., 2019).

Individuals develop scientific concepts by: (1) distinguishing the characteristics of objects in a set from each other, (2) distinguishing characteristics that are common to a set from those that are specific to individual or few objects (characteristics that instances *can have*), and (3) identifying common characteristics (characteristics that each of their instances *must have*) and developing new concepts. After developing a concept, the individual has identified its crucial characteristics and is able to recognise it in every case (Krnél & Skubic, 2015; Layng, 2019).

Lawson et al. (2000) distinguish between *descriptive concepts* (which can be observed directly), *hypothetical concepts* (which could be observed if the time frame could be extended) and the most abstract *theoretical concepts* (in which causal agents cannot be observed). Similarly, Devetak and Glažar (2010), following the work of Johnstone (1991), differentiate the *macroscopic level* of chemical concept presentation (observed chemical phenomena), the *submicroscopic level* (interpretation of observed particle interactions) and the *symbolic level* (submicroscopic representations translated into symbols, e.g., symbols of chemical elements or schematic representations). The difficulty of acquiring and understanding a concept increases with its degree of abstraction. Even adults beginning to construct concepts in a new field of study need some descriptive (macroscopic) conceptual foundation before they can construct theoretical (submicroscopic) concepts (Lawson et al., 2000). When communicating with non-experts in a field, it is therefore important to address the macroscopic level (descriptive concepts) before introducing the submicroscopic level (hypothetical or even theoretical concepts).

Novel and inconsistent information (e.g., from science journalism) requires controlled – as opposed to automatic – information processing in working memory (Jiang & Kalyuga, 2020). To consciously comprehend information (e.g., construct scientific concepts), individuals must simultaneously hold all relevant (interacting) elements in their working memory. However, working memory – and thus controlled information processing – is limited in time and capacity (e.g., Cowan, 2001; Rouder et al., 2008).

When processing the information in a message, the available cognitive resources are divided between the processes of ‘encoding’, ‘storage’ and ‘retrieval’ (Lang, 2006; Wise et al., 2009). If any of these processes requires more resources than are available or allocated to it, the message will be processed poorly (Lang, 2006). The mental resources required to perform a particular task are referred to as *cognitive load* (CL), while *mental effort* refers to the mental resources individuals actually allocate to a task. If the CL of a task exceeds the mental effort, performance will be poor (Schnotz & Kürschner, 2007). By integrating multiple information elements into a schema as a result of learning, experts can increase the number of information elements that can be activated simultaneously (Sweller et al., 2011). As science journalism is aimed at non-experts in the field, it is crucial not to rely on established schemas and to take into account the number of single information elements that readers have to activate simultaneously. Due to the linear structure of narratives, related information elements are automatically activated simultaneously while reading (van den Broek et al., 1996). Therefore, even non-experts may require fewer mental resources to retrieve information elements when reading JSNs.

Mayer (2009, pp. 79–82) further distinguishes between different types of encoding. Essential processing is required to represent the essential material (text base) in working memory, whereas generative processing refers to the utilisation of essential information (mental models), which involves integration with existing knowledge. The combination of essential and generative processing leads to comprehension and meaningful learning. Finally, extraneous processing is not related to the goal of the task.

With each encounter with certain text structures, individuals improve their ability to read them (Norris et al., 2005). Therefore, science journalism should employ text structures to which the majority of its audience is accustomed. It is assumed that non-experts are more familiar with a narrative structure than a non-narrative structure. Narratives play a prominent role in individual development and human history and resemble everyday life experiences (Mar et al., 2021). Therefore, non-experts should understand JSNs better than inverted pyramids. However, content is more complex in science journalism than in general journalism, while ‘seductive details’ can lead to extraneous processing and reduce comprehension and learning (van den Broek, 2010).

Zabrocky and Moore (1999) found that, in an *educational context*, adults’ recall of idea units and comprehension were higher for narrative texts than for expository texts, despite the fact that they reread fewer passages of narrative texts than expository texts. Similarly, a study by Thorndyke (1977) found that comprehension increased when a prose text contained more plot structure, while Fernald (1989) found that students who read narrative textbook chapters achieved significantly higher test scores. These findings are consistent with the results of a meta-analysis by Mar et al. (2021) in a general education context. However, Cunningham and Gall (1990) found no influence of writing style on test performance.

In the context of *general journalism*, individual studies have found trends in perceived comprehensibility in different directions for different topics (Früh & Frey, 2014; Zerba, 2008). Machill et al. (2007) found that narrative television news was more successful in conveying information than inverted pyramids, especially among younger participants with low knowledge and low interest in the topics, while Kleemans et al. (2018) found increased information recognition in online journalistic narratives (one of the four article topics was science). However, Sternadori (2008) found no significant differences in comprehension between narratives and inverted pyramids.

In a study by Yaros (2011) on *science journalism*, individuals performed best in a comprehension test after having read a JSN with linear links. Similarly, Yaros and Cook (2013) found higher learning success as well as less eye fixation and shorter viewing time for narratives. In both studies, however, terms with

which participants were likely unfamiliar were only explained in the narrative conditions, which may have contributed to this effect.

### Situational Interest in Journalistic Science Narratives

In order to understand a message and gain information from it, individuals first need to receive it (Früh & Frey, 2014), which means they need to be interested in it. The *Four-Phase Model of Interest Development* (Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Renninger & Hidi, 2019) distinguishes between individual and situational interest. *Individual interest* refers to the uninterrupted engagement of an individual in a specific domain. It develops over time and influences an individual's knowledge and values in the long run. *Situational interest*, on the other hand, refers to the perceived 'interestingness' of a message that arises suddenly during exposure to that message and is of short duration (Yaros, 2011).

As the present study investigates the effects of individual messages, the focus is on situational interest. According to the four-phase model, the emergence of long-lasting individual interest results from situational (text-based) interest in four phases (Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Renninger & Hidi, 2019): (1) triggered situational interest – individuals start consuming a message because of a trigger; (2) maintained situational interest – interest persists for more than a few seconds or recurs in similar activities; (3) emerging individual interest – individuals engage repeatedly with the topic and ask themselves questions about it; and (4) well-developed individual interest – the engagement has become permanent. When interest is sustained, these four distinct and sequential phases describe how it develops progressively (Hidi & Renninger, 2006).

Situational interest is assumed to increase the attention directed to a task, which in turn should lead to higher comprehension and learning: according to the level of processing framework, shallow encoding is disadvantageous for retrieval compared to deep encoding (Wagnon et al., 2019). Research shows that there is a statistically significant correlation between situational interest and the knowledge that individuals develop during a particular activity (Durik & Harackiewicz, 2007; Snětinová et al., 2018; Slapničar et al., 2024).

In an *educational* context, students in the aforementioned study by Fernald (1989) preferred narrative material to traditional textbook material. Research also found that the ratings for narrative and expository writing styles in a history textbook chapter did not differ significantly, although most of the students surveyed preferred the narrative style in a direct comparison (Cunningham & Gall, 1990). Moreover, preference for narrative over expository writing styles was found to be more pronounced for a less interesting topic (Arya & Maul, 2012).

In the context of *general journalism*, there are findings on situational interest in both directions. In some studies, narratives were rated as less interesting (Kelly et al., 2003) and were less appreciated (Kleemans et al., 2018) than inverted pyramids. Sternadori (2008) found no difference, but in a study by Zerba (2008), narratives were rated as more interesting and more enjoyable, although the difference was only significant for one of three topics. On the other hand, Knobloch et al. (2004) concluded that ratings of suspense and reading enjoyment were significantly higher for narratives than for inverted pyramids. Similar results were also described by Yaros (2011), who concluded that *journalistic science narratives* also increase situational interest.

### Research Problem, Research Question and Hypotheses

The Austrian Nutrition Report (Rust et al., 2017) emphasises that, compared to the recommended intakes, Austrian citizens eat too much of some nutritional ingredients (e.g., saturated fatty acids or added sugars), while eating too little of others (e.g., polyunsaturated fatty acids or fibre). It is therefore not surprising that 51.1% of the Austrian population aged 15 and over are overweight or obese and 38.3% have chronic diseases (Statistik Austria, 2020). Moreover, Gensthaler et al. (2022) found a steady increase in body mass index and cardiovascular risk in Austrian male adolescents over 15 years.

In order for an adult's diet to provide all of the necessary nutrients, different foods need to be combined and dosed appropriately (Pudel & Westenhöfer, 2003). For non-experts, it is difficult to grasp the connections between dietary behaviour and future outcomes (e.g., long-term health effects) because of the long intervening period, which cannot be experienced directly (Pudel & Westenhöfer, 2003; see also hypothetical concepts above). Non-experts therefore depend heavily on nutrition information. However, more than half of Austrians have an inadequate or problematic general health literacy (Sørensen et al., 2015) and lack general nutrition knowledge (Gruber et al., 2022). For this reason, the present study used journalistic science articles on nutrition as the research object and the research question was formulated accordingly: "*What effects does a narrative writing style compared to an inverted pyramid writing style have on the comprehension of and situational interest in journalistic online nutrition science articles among Austrian non-experts in the health sciences?*"

Schiefele and Krapp (1996) showed that topic interest positively influences free recall of expository texts. Therefore, individual interest must be taken into account when studying comprehension and CL.

In order to address the different aspects of the research question, five

research hypotheses were defined. Each hypothesis was derived from the findings of the literature review presented above. Since it is assumed that the narrative structure is more familiar and fewer additional information elements need to be retrieved, it is hypothesised that comprehension will be higher with the narrative style than with the inverted pyramid style. If reading JSNs requires less cognitive resources to retrieve information elements, it should also result in less CL. To apply the previous considerations more generally (independent of JSNs), the correlation between comprehension and CL is assessed. JSNs provide information that is usually missing from inverted pyramid articles (continuous causal plot and intentionally acting characters), which is hypothesised to increase situational interest. Finally, it is hypothesised that situational interest increases attention to a task, so comprehension should also increase with situational interest.

- H1: After controlling for individual interest, journalistic online science articles on nutritional issues lead to significantly *higher comprehension* in non-experts when they are written in narrative compared to inverted pyramid style.
- H2: After controlling for individual interest, non-experts' *cognitive load* is significantly *lower* when reading journalistic online science articles on nutritional issues written in narrative compared to inverted pyramid style.
- H3: There is a significant *negative correlation* between non-experts' *comprehension* of journalistic online science articles on nutritional issues and their *cognitive load* while reading.
- H4: After controlling for individual interest, non-experts' *situational interest* in journalistic online science articles on nutritional issues is significantly *higher* when they are written in narrative compared to inverted pyramid style.
- H5: There is a significant *positive correlation* between non-experts' *comprehension* of journalistic online science articles on nutritional issues and their *situational interest* while reading.

## Method

In this cross-sectional research, a 2 (writing style: narrative, inverted pyramid)  $\times$  3 (topic: fatty acids, fructose, amino acids) mixed factorial design was used. To increase external validity, the effect was analysed in different settings (i.e., articles on different nutrition topics).

## Participants

The inclusion criteria for participants in the research were: (1) they were native speakers of German, (2) they were over 18 years of age, and (3) they were not nutrition experts. In addition, demographic information (age, gender, education) was collected.

Participants were recruited via the University of Applied Sciences Burgenland newsletter and the online survey platforms surveycircle.com and surveyswap.io. A total of 604 respondents participated in the research. For quality reasons, responses with incorrect attention test items (65) and participants who read an article for 25 seconds or less (111) were excluded (the cut-off point was chosen beforehand based on the reading time of two fast readers). Due to a technical problem, the complete self-reports of 123 participants were not fully recorded. The final sample size therefore amounts to 461 participants for the comprehension test and 338 participants (213 female, 125 male; 171 under 30 years old, 167 equal to or above 30 years old; 148 with an educational level below or equal to secondary school, 196 above secondary school) for the self-reports (see instruments).

The participants in the study were all volunteers, so no statements can be made about those who chose not to participate. Furthermore, only subscribers to the UAS Burgenland newsletter or individuals who participate in the two online platforms could take part. Therefore, the study sample is not representative of the Austrian population and the results should be extrapolated with caution. However, the purpose of the study was to make relative statements about how the dependent variables change as a result of different stimuli. Therefore, the aim was not to obtain a representative sample (Brosius et al., 2012), but rather to achieve a comparable distribution of the demographic characteristics of the participants in the different groups. In support of this aim, all *p*-values for comparisons of demographic data between writing style groups were  $> .05$ .

## Instruments

*Individual interest* was measured using five self-report items from Appel et al. (2002). All of the self-report items in the present study are 5-point Likert-type items. One of the items loaded equally (weakly) on two factors and was therefore excluded, resulting in a four-item scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ). An example of the items is shown in Figure 1. The mean of the four items was calculated so that the participants' ratings ranged from one to five points.

*Perceived cognitive load* was measured using the mental effort rating scale and the perceived task difficulty rating scale (based on the German version by

Schmeck et al., 2015). Furthermore, five items on perceived processing fluency and topic knowledge were administered (based on Shulman & Sweitzer, 2017). One item was excluded due to cross loadings, and two items were excluded to increase internal consistency (final Cronbach's  $\alpha = .86$ ). An example of the items is shown in Figure 2. As the mean of the items was calculated, the participants' ratings ranged from one to five points.

*Situational interest* was measured using three self-report items from Yaros (2006; 2011), which asked about the reader's desire to continue reading at different points in time, allowing for an estimation of changes in interest levels during reading (Ainley et al., 2002). Since readers had to read the entire article, an item was added asking them whether they would have read the entire article if they had read it outside the study. Finally, two items from Appel et al. (2002) and Fröh and Frey (2014) were added. The first item (presented after the first paragraph of the article) did not load sufficiently on the factor and was excluded. The remaining five items have excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .91$ ). An example of the items is shown in Figure 3. The mean of the items was calculated so that the participants' ratings ranged from one to five points.

**Figure 1**

*Example of items from the individual interest questionnaire (translated from German)*

The figure displays three items from an individual interest questionnaire, each with a five-point Likert scale. The items are presented in a light gray box.

Item 1: The topic is very important for me personally.\*

|                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Strongly agree        | Agree                 | Undecided             | Disagree              | Strongly disagree     |

Item 2: The topic concerns issues that I have often thought about.\*

|                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Strongly agree        | Agree                 | Undecided             | Disagree              | Strongly disagree     |

Item 3: The issue is not important to me.\*

|                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Strongly agree        | Agree                 | Undecided             | Disagree              | Strongly disagree     |

**Figure 2**

*Example of items from the perceived cognitive load questionnaire (translated from German)*

Overall, I found the language used in this article difficult.\*

|                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Strongly agree        | Agree                 | Undecided             | Disagree              | Strongly disagree     |

The article was easy to understand.\*

|                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Strongly agree        | Agree                 | Undecided             | Disagree              | Strongly disagree     |

I am confident in my understanding of the content of the article.\*

|                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Strongly agree        | Agree                 | Undecided             | Disagree              | Strongly disagree     |

**Figure 3**

*Example of items from the situational interest questionnaire (translated from German)*

Even if I had read the article outside of this survey, I would have read it to the end.\*

|                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Strongly agree        | Agree                 | Undecided             | Disagree              | Strongly disagree     |

Overall, I found the article interesting.\*

|                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Strongly agree        | Agree                 | Undecided             | Disagree              | Strongly disagree     |

I would like to read another article on the topic of the article.\*

|                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Strongly agree        | Agree                 | Undecided             | Disagree              | Strongly disagree     |

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of the self-reports was performed using SPSS AMOS (27.0.0). Comparison of the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) of the models including and excluding the item ‘Situational Interest 1’ supported the exclusion of this item (Eaton & Willoughby, 2018). The  $\chi^2$  statistic is affected by sample size, so the result does not necessarily oppose a good fit (Babak & Green, 2010). All other indices indicate that the model fits the data (RMSEA, CFI, TLI (Hair et al., 2014);  $\chi^2/df$  (Cole, 1987); see Table 1 for details). Internal validity (CR > .70), convergent validity (AVE > .50) and discriminant

validity (square roots of AVEs > inter-construct correlations) were achieved for both latent variables (Hair et al., 2014).

**Table 1**  
*Fit indices for CFA of self-reports*

| Sig. $\chi^2$ | $\chi^2/df$      | RMSEA | CFI | TLI |
|---------------|------------------|-------|-----|-----|
| $p < .01$     | 137.57/74 = 1.86 | < .06 | .97 | .96 |

Note. RMSEA – root mean square error of approximation; CFI – comparative fit index; TLI – Tucker-Lewis index

*Comprehension* was measured using the 15 four-tier multiple-choice items from Ameseder et al. (2022). Using four-tier test questions makes it possible to identify comprehension (Gurel & Eryılmaz, 2015). For the purposes of the present paper, only the answer (first tier) and the reason for the answer (third tier) were used. CFA was conducted for each topic separately (FACTOR 12.01.02; Ferrando & Lorenzo-Seva, 2017). Since the data are binary, Robust Unweighted Least Squares estimators based on polychoric correlation matrices were used. After excluding one item per topic, reliability was good for topics 1 and 3 (>.80; Ferrando & Lorenzo-Seva, 2018) and the factor determinacy index was adequate (>.90; Grice, 2001). However, the reliability and the factor determinacy index remained unsatisfactory for topic 2 (.47 and .69, respectively). In addition, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure (Kaiser, 1974) and Bartlett’s test of sphericity were not acceptable for topic 2 (.58 and  $p = .14$ , respectively), which was therefore excluded. The fit indices for the remaining 4-item scales are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
*Fit indices for CFA of comprehension tests*

| Topic | Sig. $\chi^2*$ | $\chi^2*/df$ | RMSEA | AGFI | CFI  | TLI  |
|-------|----------------|--------------|-------|------|------|------|
| 1     | $p = .39$      | 1.87/2 = .93 | < .01 | .99  | 1.00 | 1.00 |
| 3     | $p = .37$      | 1.99/2 = .10 | < .01 | .98  | 1.00 | 1.00 |

Note. \* Robust mean- and variance-adjusted  $\chi^2$ ; RMSEA – root mean square error of approximation; AGFI – adjusted goodness-of-fit index; CFI – comparative fit index; TLI – Tucker-Lewis index

Figure 4 shows an example of the items in the comprehension test. The items were summed up so that the participants could obtain a minimum of zero and a maximum of four points.

**Figure 4**  
*Example of a four-tier item from the comprehension test (translated from German)*

What was the effect of the high-protein and high-fat diet on the mice in the experiment compared to the high-fat diet with a conventional protein content?

☒ Accelerated development of atherosclerosis

☐ Mice gained weight

☐ The energy was available for the muscles more quickly

TIER 1

How sure are you of your answer?

☐ Very sure

☒ Sure

☐ Unsure

☐ Very unsure

TIER 2

Please choose the answer that best explains your choice in the previous question

☐ Oxidative stress led to more deposits (plaque) in artery walls

☐ Macrophages failed to do their task and died earlier

☐ Increased oxidation of dietary fat

☐ Blood cholesterol level increased

☐ The protein facilitated fat absorption in the intestine

☐ None of the above; please write:

TIER 3

How sure are you of your answer?

☐ Very sure

☐ Sure

☐ Unsure

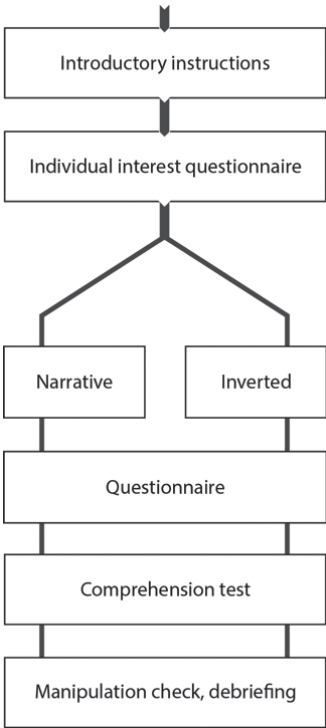
☐ Very unsure

TIER 4

Research Design

The present study used a cross-sectional, between-subjects design. Two factors were used, one with two levels (writing style: narrative and inverted pyramid) and the other with three levels (topic: fatty acids, fructose and amino acids). Varying the topic should enable the external validity to be increased by examining the effect in different settings (see Figure 5 for the procedure). A pilot study was conducted to ensure the smooth flow of data collection, the comprehensibility of the technical terms used in the stimulus texts and self-reports, and the successful manipulation of the stimulus type.

**Figure 5**  
*Schematic illustration of the procedure*



Before reading the science journalistic article (stimuli), the participants were exposed to the individual interest questionnaire and were instructed to read the stimuli at their own pace, just as they would read journalistic articles in everyday life. To avoid influencing their reading behaviour, there was no prior knowledge test and the comprehension test was not mentioned in advance. The participants were randomly assigned to one of six groups (e.g., inverted pyramid science journalistic article on the topic fatty acids; for the other groups see Table 3). There were no significant differences in individual interest ( $U = 14,036.50, p = .70$ ), gender ( $X^2(2, N = 461) = 1.18, p = .55$ ), age ( $U = 26,169.00, p = .76$ ), or education ( $X^2(7, N = 461) = 4.42, p = .73$ ) between the narrative and inverted pyramid conditions. Thus, random assignment to the conditions seems to have been successful.

**Table 3**

*Participants randomly assigned to six groups according to the science journalistic article writing style and nutrition topic; word count of individual articles*

| Writing style    | Topic 1<br>Fatty acids        | Topic 2<br>Fructose           | Topic 3<br>Amino acids        |
|------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Narrative        | Group 1 (N = 67)<br>564 words | Group 3 (N = 80)<br>518 words | Group 5 (N = 86)<br>527 words |
| Inverted pyramid | Group 2 (N = 67)<br>506 words | Group 4 (N = 79)<br>508 words | Group 6 (N = 82)<br>507 words |

One of the six stimulus articles was then presented at random. Three of the articles were written in narrative style and three in inverted pyramid style (one narrative and one inverted pyramid per topic). Topics were chosen in which existing knowledge and individual interest had already proven to be low (Ameseder et al., 2020). As a basis for the stimuli, articles published in 2019 by the three major online news providers in Austria (Highest reach in 2019 according to <http://www.oewa.at/plus/medienanalyse> [accessed 10 February 2020]) were selected. The articles covered the three macronutrients that are important for a healthy human diet: carbohydrates (fructose), fats (fatty acids) and proteins (amino acids). Each of the articles was adapted so that there was a narrative version and an inverted pyramid version. To ensure comparability, the stimuli: (1) are (re-)written by the same authors (Shen et al., 2014); (2) are of comparable length in terms of word count (van Krieken et al., 2015; see Table 3); (3) have a comparable readability index (LIX; Björnsson, 1983); (4) use the same scientific terms (Yaros, 2011); (5) have the same number of headlines, and (6) are written in the same grammatical tense.

A (neutral) visual appearance was maintained for all of the stimuli (no logo/masthead, same typeface and layout, no images), so that they could not be assigned to existing journalistic websites. The text properties were adapted to the real conditions (based on all articles on the topic of nutrition from [orf.at](http://orf.at) and [derstandard.at](http://derstandard.at) from 2019;  $N = 104$ ).

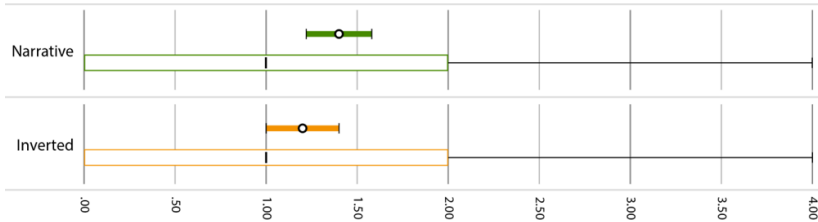
While the participants read the article, their reading time was measured and they had to answer two situational interest items. After reading, they completed the remaining situational interest items and the cognitive load items. They then answered comprehension questions on the topic they had read. To reduce order effects, the order of the items was randomised. Finally, the participants had to complete a manipulation check and provide demographic information. They were then thanked and received a debriefing.

Correlation with the dependent variables is a prerequisite for including individual interest as a covariate in the analyses of hypotheses H1, H2 and H4 (Bortz & Schuster, 2010). Therefore, the correlations between individual interest and the dependent variables were assessed in advance. There was a significant correlation between individual interest and perceived cognitive load (Pearson's  $r = -.20, p < .01$ ; Spearman's  $r = -.21, p < .01$ ) and between individual interest and situational interest (Pearson's  $r = .37, p < .01$ ; Spearman's  $r = .37, p < .01$ ). However, there was no significant correlation between individual interest and comprehension (Pearson's  $r = .03, p = .69$ ; Spearman's  $r = .04, p = .60$ ). It is therefore assumed that the covariate has no effect on the variable comprehension.

Normal distribution was assessed using Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests, z-score tests of skewness and kurtosis, and visual inspection, but was not detected for comprehension, cognitive load or situational interest. Therefore, an independent-samples Mann-Whitney U test was used to analyse comprehension. To be able to use general linear model procedures (ANCOVAs) with individual interest included as a covariate for perceived cognitive load and situational interest, the data were transformed (taking the square root for perceived cognitive load and the square root of (largest value + 1 - value) for situational interest). Perceived cognitive load was normally distributed after the transformation. Based on z-score tests, transformed situational interest was also normally distributed, but not based on the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. As parametric tests have been shown to be robust to non-normality (Blanca et al., 2017), an ANCOVA was also used for situational interest. Means and standard deviations are reported from untransformed data. Effect sizes were calculated and interpreted according to Cohen (1988). Finally, Pearson's and Spearman's correlation coefficients were computed to assess the correlations in hypotheses H3 and H5.

## Results

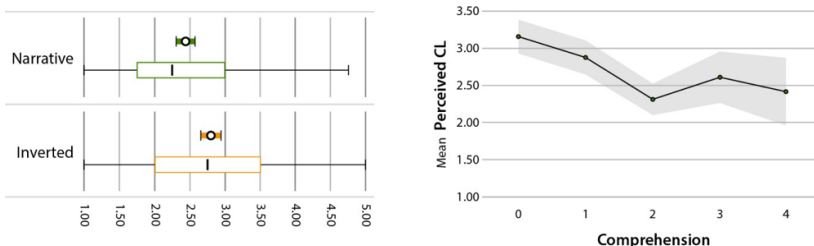
The Mann-Whitney U test indicated that *comprehension* test scores were significantly higher for readers of narratives ( $Mdn = 1.00$ , mean rank = 160.98) than for readers of inverted pyramids ( $Mdn = 1.00$ , mean rank = 141.76),  $U = 12,849.50, p < .05$ . Consequently, the test scores support hypothesis H1, which predicts that comprehension is significantly higher when journalistic science articles are written in narrative style than when they are written in inverted pyramid style, with a small effect size ( $r = .11$ ; see Figure 6).

**Figure 6***Difference in comprehension*

Note. Mean (95% CI) and boxplot

The ANCOVA indicated that *perceived cognitive load* was significantly lower for readers of narratives than for readers of inverted pyramids, after controlling for individual interest,  $F(1, 335) = 14.65, p < .01$ , with  $M = 2.45$  ( $SD = .88$ ) for narratives and  $M = 2.81$  ( $SD = .93$ ) for inverted pyramids. Therefore, the data support hypothesis H2, which states that, after controlling for individual interest, cognitive load is significantly lower when journalistic science articles are written in narrative style compared to inverted pyramid style, with a small effect size (Cohen's  $f = .21$ ; see Figure 7).

There was a significant negative correlation between comprehension and *perceived cognitive load* (Pearson's  $r = -.29, p < .01$ ; Spearman's  $r = -.31, p < .01$ ). Decreases in perceived cognitive load were correlated with increases in comprehension test achievements, thus supporting hypothesis H3, which hypothesised a significant negative correlation between comprehension of journalistic science articles and the cognitive load while reading (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7***Difference in perceived CL and correlation with comprehension (untransformed data)*

Note. Mean (95% CI) and boxplot

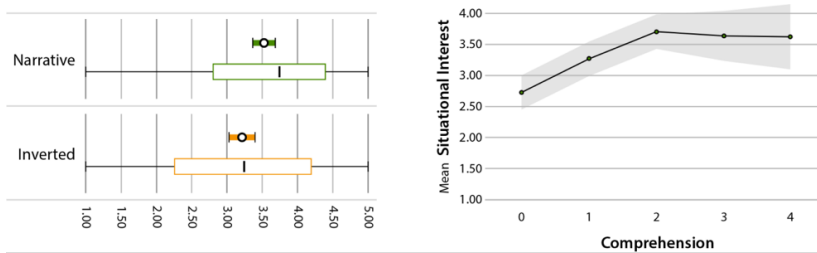
The ANCOVA indicated that *situational interest* was significantly higher for readers of narratives than for readers of inverted pyramids,

after controlling for individual interest,  $F(1, 335) = 7.34, p < .01$ , with  $M = 3.52$  ( $SD = 1.06$ ) for narratives and  $M = 3.21$  ( $SD = 1.19$ ) for inverted pyramids. The data therefore support hypothesis H4, which predicts that, after controlling for individual interest, situational interest is significantly higher when journalistic science articles are written in narrative style compared to inverted pyramid style, with a small effect size (Cohen's  $f = .15$ ; see Figure 8). As the first situational interest item (participants' desire to continue reading after the first paragraph) did not correlate sufficiently with the other items, the responses at the three different stages of reading (after the first paragraph, after two thirds of the article and after reading the article) were compared. The first rating was significantly lower for narratives than for inverted pyramids ( $U = 12,213.00, p = .02, r = -.13$ ). In contrast, the second and third ratings were significantly higher for narratives ( $U = 17,521.00, p < .01, r = .20$  and  $U = 16,157.00, p = .03, r = .12$ , respectively).

There was a significant positive correlation between situational interest and comprehension (Pearson's  $r = .31, p < .01$ , Spearman's  $r = .33, p < .01$ ). Increases in situational interest were correlated with increases in test scores, thus supporting hypothesis H5, which hypothesised a significant positive correlation between comprehension of journalistic science articles and situational interest while reading (see Figure 8).

**Figure 8**

*Difference in situational interest and correlation with comprehension*



Note. Mean (95% CI) and boxplot

## Discussion and Conclusions

The present online study investigates the effect of journalistic science narratives (JSNs) on reading comprehension and situational interest of non-experts in health sciences.

The comprehension test shows that reading JSNs leads to higher comprehension compared to the inverted pyramid writing style, suggesting that incidental learning is more likely to occur when reading JSNs than inverted pyramids. The increased comprehension is consistent with previous studies on general journalism (Kleemans et al., 2018) and science journalism (Yaros, 2011; Yaros & Cook, 2013). However, the results contradict previous studies on textbooks (Cunningham & Gall, 1990) and general journalism (Sternadori, 2008; DeAngelo & Yegiyani, 2019). The use of a diagnostic (multiple-tier) test in the present study extends the research of Kleemans et al. (2018) by examining higher levels of cognitive processes and knowledge. It also extends the research of Yaros (2011) and Yaros and Cook (2013) by providing evidence that a narrative writing style improves comprehension in science journalism, even when controlling for unfamiliar vocabulary. The present findings, in conjunction with those of Sternadori (2008), suggest that causal links between events may be crucial for the effects of JSNs on comprehension. Finally, DeAngelo and Yegiyani (2019) did not use a forced-reading design (participants could decide how much of an article to read). Therefore, requiring participants to read the entire article may have contributed to the effect of JSNs on comprehension in the present study.

In the present study, the perceived cognitive load (CL) was significantly lower for JSNs compared to inverted pyramids. This finding contradicts the results of previous studies that have investigated perceived comprehensibility (Früh & Frey, 2014; Zerba, 2008), where the direction of the effect varied depending on the topic. The means and medians of perceived CL in the present study suggest that reading the articles was not a high CL task. Therefore, the higher test scores in the narrative condition with 'seductive details' (plot and characters) are consistent with the results of the low CL conditions of Park et al. (2011). The additional details appear to increase processing motivation, as indicated by higher situational interest. The negative correlation between comprehension of the information presented in the texts and perceived CL is consistent with the Landscape Model of Reading. In inverted pyramids, related information may not be automatically activated simultaneously by textual cues, so more mental effort is needed to activate related information and identify crucial relationships. Lower CL combined with higher comprehension may indicate that relevant information was automatically activated to a greater extent than when CL was high and comprehension was low.

JSNs triggered higher situational interest than an inverted pyramid style, which is consistent with findings in the context of textbooks (Arya & Maul, 2012; Fernald, 1989), general journalism (Zerba, 2008; Knobloch et al., 2004)

and science journalism (Yaros, 2011). However, the result contradicts studies on general journalism (Kelly et al., 2003; Kleemans et al., 2018), which found journalistic narratives to be less interesting, as well as studies on textbooks (Cunningham & Gall, 1990) and general journalism (Sternadori, 2008), which found no difference between the writing styles.

The time-based analysis indicates a gradual increase of situational interest for JSNs. Situational interest was lower than in inverted pyramids after reading the first paragraph, but higher for the remaining text. This finding may explain the different results of earlier studies and is also consistent with the selective exposure design in a study by DeAngelo and Yegiyani (2019). When situational interest is low in the beginning, as in the JSNs of the present study, individuals may not continue reading, i.e., they may not read all of the information necessary for comprehension.

Significant positive correlations between situational interest and comprehension of science information were found for topics 1 (fatty acids) and 3 (amino acids), but not for topic 2 (fructose). This is consistent with the findings of Durik and Harackiewicz (2007), Snětinová et al. (2018), Slapničar et al. (2024) and Yaros (2011), all of whom found positive correlations between situational interest and the knowledge that individuals develop during a particular activity. Yaros reported significant correlations for three out of four conditions ( $.32 \leq r \leq .43$ ). In the present study, the overall correlation was  $r = .23$ , with higher individual correlations for topics 1 ( $r = .37$ ) and 3 ( $r = .27$ ). The individual correlations also correspond to the average correlation ( $r = .33$ ) found in a meta-analysis by Schiefele (1996). This result and the negative correlation between perceived cognitive load and situational interest ( $r = -.48, p < .01$ ) provide further evidence that there is a cognitive component to the triggered situational interest, as described in the Four-Phase Model (Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Renninger & Hidi, 2019).

As the material that was better understood in the present study required less cognitive load and elicited more situational interest, it can be concluded that incidental learning from science journalism involves situational interest and cognitive load. The study further suggests that a narrative writing style with a continuous, chronological plot and intentionally acting characters can improve comprehension of and overall situational interest in science journalism and reduce participants' perceived cognitive load. It may therefore increase the likelihood of message selection at the next encounter with science journalism, thus creating new opportunities for incidental learning.

Situational interest in JSNs was significantly lower after the first paragraph than in the inverted pyramid, indicating a slow build-up of tension. One

challenge for narrative journalism is therefore to create situational interest from the outset in order to facilitate incidental learning. Journalists may achieve this by using a 'reversal type' structure (Knobloch et al., 2004), a combination of a narrative and an inverted pyramid, or engaging images. In practice, journalists could, for example, start from an interesting point in the present and then jump back in time to describe an experiment chronologically. In addition, the build-up of tension suggests that journalists can use JSNs to maintain readers' situational interest. This is particularly important when dealing with complex information in long-form journalism, where it is important that readers read the whole article to understand the topic.

One limitation of the present study is the sampling method, which limits the generalisability of the findings. Online studies offer a less controllable environment than studies in which participants are physically present (e.g., no control over environmental influences or mindless choice of options, and no opportunity to check the accuracy of demographic information or answer clarification questions). However, in an anonymous study with few restrictions on participation, it is likely that most of the information provided is accurate. Attention controls were used to check whether the participants made arbitrary decisions. Another factor is that an online study can only reach participants who use the internet. However, internet use is high in Austria (95.3%; Statistik Austria, 2024) and 76% of Austrians appear to use online platforms (including social media) as their main source of news (Newman et al., 2022), so conducting a study online does not seem to be a major limitation in terms of access to relevant participants and ecological validity. In the present study, however, the resulting sample consisted mainly of Austrian students, which means that the educational level was higher than average with regard to the Austrian population. The sample also contained fewer male than female participants. As the participants in Yaros (2011) and Yaros and Cook (2013) were also students (from the USA), further research should use other samples (e.g., with lower levels of education or from non-Western cultures) as the magnitude of the effect may be different.

As the comprehension test was slightly delayed (shown after the self-reports), it may have assessed a combination of comprehension and memorisation (i.e., learning) rather than comprehension alone. Therefore, future studies should also examine comprehension and cognitive load over time (e.g., by administering the comprehension test at different time points, as was done with situational interest in the present study) to control for the influence of the participants' memory abilities. There was no prior knowledge test in the present study, as such a test might have influenced the participants' reading behaviour

and, consequently, their test performance. Although all of the participants in the study were non-experts in the field, future studies could also investigate the influence of prior knowledge on the dependent variables according to writing style.

The forced reading design limits the generalisability of the results. Individuals outside the study would stop reading if they lost interest in reading and thus miss out on information. As the present study only investigated journalistic articles on nutrition, generalisations to other science topics should be made with caution, which means that further research is needed.

The present study only compared JSNs with inverted pyramids, so future studies should investigate how a combination of writing styles or the use of images affects comprehension and situational interest at all stages of reading. Another direction for further research is to compare JSNs and inverted pyramids with other types of text (e.g., explanatory) and to investigate the motivation to engage with further science journalistic articles on the same or similar topics after reading JSNs compared to inverted pyramids (or other text types).

The correlation between situational interest and perceived cognitive load leaves open the interpretation that subjective ratings of CL may be confounded by high situational interest. Future studies should therefore use different and more objective measures of CL.

As the present study used a forced-reading design (i.e., the participants were asked to read the whole article and not stop when they lost interest), the results also shed light on the use of science journalistic texts in science education. The participants learned the topic by reading journalistic texts, which means that journalistic texts, especially JSNs, can also be beneficial in an intentional learning context. For example, when students are required to read JSNs as part of their homework, situational interest is likely to occur in a similar way as in the present study. This may increase students' motivation to finish reading the article, thereby increasing the likelihood of learning. In an educational application, journalistic articles could also be discussed in the classroom to help students understand the importance of scientific literacy so that they can understand such texts more easily and correctly.

## **Ethical Statement**

The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines for pedagogical research. The research study was approved by the Academic and Scientific Committee for Research and Doctoral Studies at the University of Applied Sciences Burgenland.

## Disclosure Statement

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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## Biographical note

**CHRISTIAN AMESERER**, PhD, is a lecturer at the University of Applied Sciences Burgenland, Austria, and Head of Online Learning Technology at the eLearning Academy for Communication, Austria. His research interests include learning experience design, public understanding of science, incidental science learning, storytelling, and data visualization.

**IZTOK DEVETAK**, PhD, is a full professor in the field of chemistry education at the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. His research interest covers the triple nature of chemical concepts, chemical concepts misconceptions, chemical knowledge assessment, environmental chemistry education, and scientific literacy.

**DARIJA SKUBIC**, PhD, is Associate Professor of Didactics of Slovenian language at the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. Her research interests include language development of preschool children, early literacy, the role of preschool teachers in early literacy, and Slovenian as a second/foreign language.

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## Croatian Teachers' Perceptions of Available Support and Barriers to Preschool Inclusion of SEN Children

SANJA SKOČIĆ MIHIĆ<sup>1</sup>, MATEA BUTKOVIĆ<sup>\*2</sup> AND SNJEŽANA  
SEKUŠAK-GALEŠEV<sup>3</sup>

☞ In line with inclusive legislation, quality in inclusive early childhood education and care institutions refers to the available support and resources in order to provide a suitable environment for diverse children. The aims of this study are to determine (1) differences in teachers' perceptions of the level of available and necessary support for preschool inclusion, and (2) the correlation between the perceptions of support and teachers' sociodemographic data, attitude towards inclusive education and perceived competencies for inclusive teaching. A representative sample of 476 Croatian preschool teachers employed in 28 early childhood education and care institutions in the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County participated in the research. The Supports Scale for Preschool Inclusion was used to establish teachers' perceptions of the necessary factors and available support for successful inclusion. Teachers indicated a lower level of available support for successful inclusion than required, while their perceptions of available support depended on their higher level of positive attitudes and perceived competencies for inclusive teaching. The perception of a higher level of perceived competencies for inclusive teaching and a more positive attitude resulted in a higher level of perceived available support, which supports previous findings underscoring teachers' professional development for inclusive teaching as a baseline for ensuring high-quality inclusive early childhood education and care that supports the development of all children.

**Keywords:** inclusive education, barriers, preschool education, support, teachers

1 Faculty of Education at the University of Rijeka, Croatia.

2 \*Corresponding Author. Faculty of Medicine, University of Rijeka, Croatia;  
[matea.butkovic@gmail.com](mailto:matea.butkovic@gmail.com).

3 Faculty for Education and Rehabilitation Sciences at the University of Zagreb, Croatia; and  
Psychological Centre Sekušak-Galešev, Zagreb, Croatia.

## Zaznave hrvaških vzgojiteljev o razpoložljivi podpori in ovirah pri inkluziji predšolskih otrok s posebnimi izobraževalnimi potrebami

SANJA SKOČIĆ MIHIĆ, MATEA BUTKOVIĆ IN SNJEŽANA SEKUŠAK-GALEŠEV

☞ Skladno z inkluzivno zakonodajo se kakovost v inkluzivnih ustanovah predšolske vzgoje, izobraževanja in varstva nanaša na razpoložljivo podporo in vire za zagotavljanje primerne okolja za različne otroke. Cilji te študije so ugotoviti: 1) razlike v zaznavah vzgojiteljev glede ravni razpoložljive in potrebne podpore za predšolsko inkluzijo; 2) povezavo med zaznavami podpore in sociodemografskimi podatki vzgojiteljev, njihovim odnosom do inkluzivne vzgoje in zaznanimi kompetencami za inkluzivno poučevanje. V raziskavo smo vključili reprezentativni vzorec 476 hrvaških vzgojiteljev predšolskih otrok, zaposlenih v 28 ustanovah za predšolsko vzgojo, izobraževanje in varstvo v regiji Primorje - Gorski kotar. Za ugotavljanje zaznav vzgojiteljev o potrebnih dejavnikih in razpoložljivi podpori za uspešno inkluzijo je bila uporabljena »Lestvica podpore za predšolsko inkluzijo« (The Supports Scale for Preschool Inclusion). Vzgojitelji so navedli nižjo raven razpoložljive podpore za uspešno inkluzijo, kot je potrebna, medtem ko so bile njihove zaznave razpoložljive podpore odvisne od njihove višje ravni pozitivnega odnosa do in zaznanih kompetenc za inkluzivno poučevanje. Zaznavanje višje ravni zaznanih kompetenc za inkluzivno poučevanje in bolj pozitiven odnos sta povzročila višjo raven zaznane razpoložljive podpore, kar potrjuje prejšnje ugotovitve, ki poudarjajo, da je strokovni razvoj vzgojiteljev za inkluzivno poučevanje izhodišče za zagotavljanje visokokakovostne inkluzivne predšolske vzgoje, izobraževanja in varstva, ki podpira razvoj vseh otrok.

**Ključne besede:** inkluzivno izobraževanje, ovire, predšolska vzgoja in izobraževanje, podpora, vzgojitelji

## Introduction

In line with inclusive legislation, the fundamental principle of quality with equity in education strives to create an education system that is accessible, equitable, inclusive and of high quality for all individuals, regardless of their differences or circumstances. Inclusive education is a global agenda that seeks to ensure every child's wellbeing and include their diverse lived experiences as an enrichment, not an impediment, to life inside the classroom and the broader community. It is an ongoing process that entails an obligation to ensure reasonable support to the individual needs of each child, removing the barriers to their learning and universal participation (e.g., Ainscow & César, 2006; UNESCO, 2000) and shifting the focus from labels, diagnosis and deficit to quality education for all children (Kielblock & Woodcock, 2023). The aim is to ensure quality and free basic education to all learners in their local community on an equal and equitable level, regardless of a child's diverse needs.

As a global descriptor of education policies (Vislie, 2003), inclusive education is based on human rights and has a firm "legal, rational, moral and empirical ground" (Bailey et al., 1998, p. 27). Its values and goals are promoted, supported and advocated in key international documents, such as the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994), the World Education Forum Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006) and the Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015), as well as in documents and related regulations at the national level.

High-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions play a crucial role in enhancing children's wellbeing, fostering their learning and promoting positive developmental outcomes (e.g., Bodin, 2021; Lundqvist & Larsdotter; Odom et al., 2004). Additionally, they contribute to building an inclusive society, with the inclusive agenda serving to advance social equality, prevent discrimination and promote solidarity (Simó et al., 2020; UNESCO, 1994). Enhancing the comprehension of quality ECEC facilitates early identification and tailored pedagogical approaches that foster an environment conducive to optimal development, learning and long-term quality of life for every child, especially those at risk of social exclusion (Antulić Majcan & Drvodelić, 2022).

Inclusive education is commonly understood as an approach to teaching that creates educational opportunities for all learners, especially learners who have traditionally been excluded from the education system, who are at high risk of being excluded, or who have not received the kind of support they need to succeed in their educational studies (Kamenopoulou, 2018).

Inclusion policies mandate and encourage the provision of sufficient support for ensuring high-quality ECEC institutions (Barton & Smith, 2015). However, these policies often become entangled in various regulations, rather than standing as independent entities in political discourse (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015). Providing comprehensive quality education for children with disabilities within the inclusive framework represents a complex endeavour (Bouillet, 2013), as inclusive practices face numerous challenges in effectively implementing these policies. Effective implementation of inclusive education requires targeted policies that address both the macro and micro levels, ensuring a comprehensive understanding and application of inclusive practices (David & Brown, 2022).

Inclusion can be understood by identifying both “barriers to learning and participation” and “resources to support learning and participation” (e.g., Booth & Ainscow, 2002), particularly for children with special educational needs (SEN), who require additional support to participate, learn and develop through various educational activities (e.g., Lundqvist et al., 2016; Lundqvist & Larsson Bodin, 2021).

Successful inclusive practices are intricately tied to the availability of human resources, such as well-trained personnel, teachers with positive attitudes, and a solid foundation of knowledge and skills, referred to as ‘inner capital’. The values, perceptions and empathy of personnel are essential factors. Additionally, inclusive programmes, support services, professional assistance, material resources (including financial support) and environmental factors such as administrative support, access to information, adaptability of space and materials, and communication support, all play pivotal roles (e.g., Karlsudd, 2017; Lieber et al., 2000; Rudelić et al., 2013).

Teachers are regarded as the most influential stakeholders who can either facilitate or impede inclusion (Leatherman, 2007). Their beliefs about their abilities and responsibilities significantly influence their perceptions of teaching in inclusive settings (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002; Gorski et al., 2012).

The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2012) has categorised the competencies of an inclusive teacher into four key areas: valuing learner diversity, supporting all learners, collaborating with others, and engaging in continuing professional development. Although there is no legal prescription for a specific set of teacher competencies for working in inclusive settings, it is emphasised that teacher competencies are crucial in providing the necessary support for all learners’ achievements and employing appropriate strategies tailored to the individual needs of children with SEN (e.g., Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006; European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012; UNESCO, 2000). However,

many teachers feel that they are inadequately trained to provide quality services to students with SEN due to inadequate pre- and in-service training (e.g., Avramidis et al., 2000; Pijl, 2010; Skočić Mihić, 2019; Skočić Mihić et al., 2022). Additional barriers to the achievement of successful inclusion include the scarce existence of adapted curricula meeting the needs of children with SEN (e.g., Skočić Mihić, 2016) and insufficiently available support from professional experts (e.g., Rudelić et al., 2013).

Küçüker et al. (2006) emphasise that the availability of supportive factors for inclusion should be observed through teachers' perceptions.

### **Early Childhood Care and Education in Croatia**

Croatian inclusive legislation, like that in most European countries, has ratified conventions and international documents, aligning the current preschool legislation with the social model and the existing legal documents (Narodne novine: Službeni list Republike Hrvatske, 2015; Ministry of Science, Education and Sports of the Republic of Croatia, 2011; Narodne novine: Službeni list Republike Hrvatske, 2022; Narodne novine: Službeni list Republike Hrvatske, 2008) in order to ensure access to equal opportunities.

The Preschool Education Act (Narodne novine: Službeni list Republike Hrvatske, 2022) provides preschool education for children from 6 months to 6 or 7 years of age (school enrolment) and inclusion for children with special needs. The State Pedagogical Standard (Narodne novine: Službeni list Republike Hrvatske, 2008) defines ten categories of special educational needs (SEN): visual impairment, hearing impairment, speech or language impairment, two categories of behaviour difficulties, orthopaedic impairment, intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, multiple disabilities, health difficulties and neurological impairment. Depending on their educational needs, children with disabilities are included in one of three available programmes – regular setting, special setting, and special education programmes – based on the opinion of an expert committee (whose establishment is regulated in the field of social welfare) and the opinion of professional support staff in the education and rehabilitation fields as well as relevant medical and other findings, opinions and decisions of competent bodies, institutions and experts (Narodne novine: Službeni list Republike Hrvatske, 2008, para. 6). Most children with SEN are enrolled in regular settings. They have the right to additional support from a professional associate who is a qualified person in the field of education and rehabilitation and provides assistance to children and teachers in their educational work, thereby contributing to high-quality, inclusive education and care.

The results obtained in a large national study on a stratified sample of 535 teachers from 66 institutions and 3,500 children, which focused on estimating children at risk of social exclusion, revealed that ECEC accessibility was highest for children with developmental disabilities (SEN) possibly due to the obligation to report children's developmental disabilities to the governing body. It was also found that ECEC accessibility was lower for children at risk of social exclusion due to poverty, ethnicity and other characteristics (Bouillet & Antulić Majcen, 2022). Although inclusive education encompasses a broad range of diverse educational needs, the present paper focuses on preschool teachers' perceptions of the support they receive in teaching children with SEN.

Despite the existence of a legislative framework of inclusive ECEC policy in Croatia that addresses children with SEN, which has been regulated by legislation in the last two decades, there are still gaps in the practical implementation of SEN support.

There is no systemic preview of available support and accommodations for preschool teachers in inclusive ECEC, and implementation varies depending on the regional location of the preschool and features such as public/private, urban/rural, big/small, as well as the following key factors: an available qualified preschool teacher (a qualified preschool teacher or unqualified substitute), available support of a professional expert in inclusive education, such as an educator rehabilitator or a speech and language therapist, and the quality of pre- and in-service teacher training in obtaining inclusive teacher competencies.

Given that preschool teachers report a lack of training to teach children with SEN, insufficient professional development opportunities and inadequate material resources, greater community engagement is needed to improve inclusive educational practice in Croatia, including more opportunities for teacher training, increased expert support, assistance in developing individualised education plans for children and access to more material resources (Skočić Mihić et al., 2016; Loborec & Bouillet, 2012; Rudelić et al., 2013).

### **Research Aims and Hypotheses**

The purpose of the present research was to identify teachers' perceptions of the facilitators and barriers to successful inclusion in Croatian ECEC institutions. Its aims were therefore to determine (1) differences in teachers' perceptions of available and necessary support for preschool inclusion, and (2) the correlation between perceptions of available and necessary support for preschool inclusion and teachers' sociodemographic characteristics, attitudes toward inclusive education and competencies for inclusive teaching.

Based on these aims, the following hypotheses were set:

- H1. Teachers perceive a higher level of needed support for preschool inclusion than is available.
- H2. Teachers' perceptions of the necessary and available support correlate with their demographic data (age, years of experience, regular or special settings, individual educational programmes (IEP), received professional support and previous participation in a course on inclusive education), their attitude toward inclusive education, and their competencies for inclusive teaching.

## Methods

### *Participants*

The stratified representative sample included 476 teachers (473 of whom were female) employed in 28 ECEC institutions in the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County. The average age of the teachers was 40 years ( $SD = 10.06$ ,  $Min = 21$ ,  $Max = 62$ ) and they had an average of 17 years of experience ( $SD = 10.11$ ,  $Min = 0$ ,  $Max = 41$ ). With regard to their education, 8% of the teachers had only completed high school education, 75% had completed two-year college education, and 15% had completed three-year undergraduate studies in early and preschool education. Two-thirds of the teachers reported having experience working with children with SEN in regular educational groups and 14% in special educational groups, while one-fifth of the teachers had experience developing an IEP for a child with SEN. Half of the teachers stated that they had participated in a course focused on working with children with SEN during their studies and in professional development programmes aimed at working with children with SEN.

### *Instrument*

With the authors' approval, the *Supports Scale for Preschool Inclusion* (Küçüker et al., 2006) was translated and used in full for the present research. The Supports Scale contains 34 items that assess teachers' perceptions of support for successful inclusion in two dimensions: necessary factors and available support. The items describe different aspects of resources for inclusion, such as environmental resources (material, physical, equipment), professional support, and training and human resources (knowledge, skills and attitudes about inclusive education of different stakeholders). The participating teachers assessed the degree of their agreement with statements on a four-degree Likert-type scale (1 – none, 2 – to a small degree, 3 – somewhat, 4 – completely). The results on the Supports Scale are presented as a minimum total score of 34 and

a maximum of 136, and as the arithmetic mean on the Supports Scale with a minimum score of 1 and a maximum score of 4.

The metric characteristics indicate a high degree of scale reliability (Cronbach alpha coefficient 0.95 on both dimensions, Bartlett's test 0.947 on both dimensions).

The *Teachers' Readiness for Inclusion Scale* includes 15 items that describe teachers' opinions about inclusive education and their competencies for inclusive teaching. The teachers assessed their level of agreement with statements on a five-degree Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The results on the *Teachers' Readiness for Inclusion Scale*, previously published by Skočić Mihić and Sekušek Galešev (2016), are presented in Table 1, as they correlate with the data obtained in the present study.

**Table 1**

*Factor structure and descriptive data on the Teachers' Readiness for Inclusion Scale*

| Factor                                                                                                                                         | N   | $\beta$ | M/SD        |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|---------|-------------|
| <i>Attitudes towards IE</i> (Eigenvalue = 6.197; Common variance = 41.316%)                                                                    |     |         |             |
| The majority of children with SEN benefit more from being in regular preschool groups.                                                         | 471 | .862    | 3.951/.915  |
| Children with SEN can progress more in regular settings than in special settings.                                                              | 471 | .814    | 3.737/.919  |
| Interaction with other children in regular groups is more beneficial for children with SEN than interaction with children in special settings. | 470 | .806    | 4.104/.815  |
| The majority of children with SEN can follow the programme in a regular setting with the support of an educational rehabilitator.              | 470 | .700    | 3.777/.921  |
| It would be best if all children with SEN were placed in regular groups.                                                                       | 468 | .634    | 3.205/1.108 |
| A regular setting in ECEC can provide for children with SEN to the same degree as a special setting.                                           | 469 | .618    | 3.141/1.080 |
| Interaction with children with SEN is beneficial for typically developing children.                                                            | 470 | .605    | 4.115/.856  |
| In many aspects, children with SEN are equal to typically developing children.                                                                 | 465 | .528    | 3.437/1.063 |
| I need to teach children with disabilities in a regular setting.                                                                               | 462 | .515    | 3.584/1.029 |
| <i>Competencies for inclusive teaching</i> (Eigenvalue = 2.246; Common variance = 14.974%)                                                     |     |         |             |
| I consider myself competent to teach children with SEN.                                                                                        | 467 | .802    | 2.807/1.075 |
| I am qualified to teach children with SEN.                                                                                                     | 457 | .737    | 2.333/1.077 |
| I can and know how to teach all children.                                                                                                      | 462 | .733    | 3.370/1.067 |
| I am capable of teaching all children effectively.                                                                                             | 467 | .681    | 3.467/.969  |
| I am sufficiently informed about the characteristics of children with SEN and how to teach them.                                               | 472 | .614    | 2.892/1.002 |
| I am motivated to teach children with SEN in a regular setting.                                                                                | 463 | .508    | 3.252/1.110 |

The factor structure and descriptive data indicate two factors: 1) attitudes toward inclusive education (IE):  $N = 9$ ;  $\alpha = 0.89$ ;  $M = 3.67$ ;  $SD = 0.72$ ; and 2) competencies for inclusive teaching:  $N = 6$ ;  $\alpha = 0.84$ ;  $M = 3.02$ ;  $SD = 0.79$ .

### ***Research Design***

After collecting data on the total number of preschools in the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County, each preschool principal was informed about the research and invited to participate. After receiving the principals' consent, 643 printed questionnaires in physical form were sent by mail to the selected ECECs' appointed preschool coordinators, who distributed them to the preschool teachers in their institution. The teachers completed a total of 482 questionnaires independently over a period of two weeks. The preschool coordinators then collected the completed questionnaires and returned them to the researchers. Of the questionnaires received, 476 were valid and therefore included in the processing. This represents 74% of the total population of teachers in the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County. Participation in the survey was anonymous.

The data were processed using the SPSS statistical programme and the basic statistical parameters were calculated. An exploratory factor analysis (varimax rotation, Maximum Likelihood Factoring) was performed to establish the factor structure of the Croatian version of the *Supports Scale for Preschool Inclusion*. Cattel's graphical representation (scree plot) was used to determine significant factors. Reliability coefficients (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) on factors were calculated. A t-test for dependent variables was used to determine the difference in scale factors. The Kendall's tau test was performed to determine the correlation between the factors and the dichotomous variables; the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to test for normality, the Pearson's coefficient of correlation was calculated for factors that have a normal distribution, while Spearman's test was used for factors with a non-normal distribution of results.

## **Results**

### ***Descriptive Data, Factor Structure and Differences Between the Dimensions***

Descriptive data, factor structure and t-test coefficients on the *Supports Scale for Preschool Inclusion* for the dimensions *Necessity* and *Availability of Support* (Küçüker et al., 2006) are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Descriptive data, factor structure and t-test coefficients on the Supports Scale for Preschool Inclusion for the dimensions Necessity and Availability of Support*

| Factors<br>Items                                                            | Necessity |                   | Availability of Support |              | t (df)          |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|-------------------|-------------------------|--------------|-----------------|
|                                                                             | $\beta$   | <i>M(SD)</i>      | $\beta$                 | <i>M(SD)</i> |                 |
| Opportunity to observe other teachers                                       | 0.396     | 3.73 (.60)        | .529                    | 1.97 (.83)   | <b>37.19***</b> |
| Collaboration with professionals outside the preschool                      | 0.745     | 3.74 (.57)        | .662                    | 2.11 (.89)   | <b>32.66***</b> |
| Additional personnel in the classroom or school                             | 0.439     | 3.68 (.64)        | .577                    | 1.91 (.93)   | <b>32.47***</b> |
| Classroom/school's physical environment adapted for CSN                     | 0.465     | 3.73 (.61)        | .525                    | 2.10 (.86)   | <b>31.35***</b> |
| Knowledge and skill about appropriate instruction methods for CSN           | 0.723     | <b>3.84 (.46)</b> | .670                    | 2.59 (.74)   | <b>31.17***</b> |
| Knowledge and skill about the classroom environment                         | 0.693     | 3.70 (.57)        | .744                    | 2.32 (.84)   | <b>31.15***</b> |
| Knowledge and skill about the usage of special equipment for/with CSN       | 0.596     | <b>3.80 (.55)</b> | .683                    | 2.14 (.97)   | <b>31.02***</b> |
| In-service training in needed areas of inclusion                            | 0.699     | 3.78 (.49)        | .702                    | 2.36 (.84)   | <b>30.84***</b> |
| Appropriate materials for CSN                                               | 0.617     | 3.69 (.69)        | .622                    | 2.14 (.82)   | <b>30.04***</b> |
| Contact with professionals for cooperation and supervision at the preschool | 0.777     | 3.76 (.54)        | .722                    | 2.25 (.89)   | 29.65***        |
| Regular meetings with families and specialists about CSN                    | 0.774     | 3.68 (.60)        | .752                    | 2.26 (.87)   | 29.32***        |
| Knowledge about the child's disability/illness                              | 0.448     | <b>3.82 (.49)</b> | .505                    | 2.63 (.78)   | 29.26***        |
| Reduced class size                                                          | 0.702     | <b>3.86 (.49)</b> | .612                    | 2.28 (1.06)  | 28.70***        |
| Knowledge and skill to assess the development of CSN                        | 0.591     | 3.76 (.58)        | .620                    | 2.53 (.78)   | 28.73***        |
| Knowledge and skill in curriculum adaptation and implementation             | 0.799     | 3.65 (.61)        | .766                    | 2.36 (.82)   | 27.84***        |
| Knowledge and skill to identify appropriate educational goals for CSN       | 0.673     | 3.69 (.64)        | .632                    | 2.47 (.79)   | 27.08***        |
| Written information on needed areas                                         | 0.716     | 3.67 (.61)        | .754                    | 2.34 (.88)   | 26.96***        |
| Opportunities to attend meetings, conferences, etc.                         | 0.655     | 3.65 (.68)        | .627                    | 2.36 (.89)   | 26.48***        |
| Knowledge and skill about how to adapt/use toys/materials for CSN           | 0.700     | 3.75 (.52)        | .783                    | 2.52 (.88)   | 25.85***        |
| Training for the school personnel fostering positive attitudes              | 0.676     | 3.66 (.58)        | .644                    | 2.46 (.88)   | 25.39***        |
| Extra time for collaboration with professionals/ personnel/ families        | 0.548     | 3.68 (.57)        | .704                    | 2.53 (.87)   | 24.57***        |

| Technological equipment to support the education of CSN                   | 0.576     | 3.35 (.82)        | .595                    | 1.99 (.91)        | 24.29***         |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|-------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Factors                                                                   | Necessity |                   | Availability of Support |                   | t (df)           |
| Items                                                                     | $\beta$   | $M(SD)$           | $\beta$                 | $M(SD)$           |                  |
| Volunteers in classroom                                                   | 0.527     | 3.47 (.76)        | .375                    | 2.09 (1.05)       | 24.17***         |
| Regular meetings with families and specialists about CSN                  | 0.534     | <b>3.85 (.45)</b> | .592                    | <b>2.86 (.82)</b> | 23.70***         |
| Support from school principals for CSN                                    | 0.538     | <b>3.84 (.42)</b> | .610                    | 2.75 (.92)        | 23.28***         |
| Knowledge and skill in behaviour management                               | 0.694     | 3.72 (.55)        | .668                    | 2.74 (.85)        | 22.32***         |
| Positive attitudes of families of typically developing children           | 0.657     | 3.69 (.52)        | .590                    | 2.78 (.74)        | 22.25***         |
| Knowledge and skill in communicating with families                        | 0.668     | 3.73 (.55)        | .607                    | <b>2.81 (.79)</b> | 21.80***         |
| Knowledge about laws and regulations concerning inclusion                 | 0.629     | 3.42 (.75)        | .675                    | 2.30 (.85)        | 21.77***         |
| Knowledge and skill in promoting positive interactions among all children | 0.600     | <b>3.80 (.47)</b> | .634                    | <b>2.89 (.82)</b> | 21.70***         |
| Appreciation of others in the workplace                                   | 0.607     | 3.60 (.62)        | .577                    | 2.66 (.85)        | 19.49***         |
| Positive attitudes of school personnel toward inclusion                   | 0.613     | 3.68 (.54)        | .546                    | <b>2.90 (.81)</b> | 18.84***         |
| Peer social acceptance of CSN                                             | 0.494     | 3.76 (.52)        | .578                    | <b>3.12 (.73)</b> | 17.87***         |
| Appreciation of others outside the workplace                              | 0.479     | 3.52 (.70)        | .566                    | <b>2.90 (.87)</b> | 13.23***         |
| $M(SD)$                                                                   |           | <b>3.74 (.33)</b> |                         | <b>2.45 (.53)</b> | <b>34.80 ***</b> |
| Eigenvalue (Common variance)                                              |           | 13.989 (41.11%)   |                         | 13.773 (40.508%)  |                  |

Legend: CSN – child with special needs;  $M$  – arithmetic mean;  $SD$  – standard deviation;  $N$  – number of participants; t-test; \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$

The factor analysis revealed a one-factor structure in each dimension. The *Necessity* factor explains 41.11% of the common variance (eigenvalue = 13.989), and item saturations ranged from 0.777 to 0.396. The *Availability of Support* dimension explains 40.508% of the common variance (eigenvalue = 13.773), with item saturations ranging from 0.783 to 0.375.

The total score on the *Necessity* dimension was 121.18, with an arithmetic mean of 3.74 and a low standard deviation of 0.33, which indicates that teachers largely agree in assessing the factors necessary for successful inclusion. Almost all of the items (except one) were ranked as completely necessary for successful inclusion in ECEC. The total score on the *Availability of Support* dimension was 83.38 ( $SD = 18.38$ ), with an arithmetic mean of 2.45 (Min = 1.06; Max = 3.88), a standard deviation of 0.54 and items ranging from 1.91 to 3.12, indicating a medium level of available support for successful inclusion.

From the teachers' point of view, the seven most necessary factors for

successful inclusion are reduced class size, regular meetings with families and a specialist about CSN, support from school principals for CSN, knowledge and skill about appropriate instruction methods for CSN, child's disability/illness, usage of special equipment for/with CSN, and promotion of positive interactions among all children.

The most available support for teachers in providing successful inclusion in ECEC institutions in the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County comprises peer social acceptance of CSN, appreciation of others outside the workplace, positive attitudes of school personnel toward inclusion, knowledge and skill about promoting positive interaction among all children, regular meetings with families and specialist about CSN, and knowledge and skill about communicating with families.

A significant difference was established using the t-test for dependent groups between the factors on the dimensions *Necessity* and *Availability of Support*. The average mean is statistically significantly higher in teachers' perceptions of the necessary factors for successful inclusion than in available support, indicating that teachers require a higher level of support than is available. Moreover, differences were found in the arithmetic means between all pairs of items in the perception of the necessary and available support. More significant differences were found in teachers' perceptions of opportunities to observe other teachers in inclusive education, followed by collaboration with professionals outside the preschool, additional personnel in the classroom or school, classroom/school's physical environment adapted for CSN, knowledge and skill about appropriate instruction methods for CSN, knowledge and skill about the classroom environment, knowledge and skill about the usage of special equipment for/with CSN, in-service training in needed areas of inclusion, and appropriate materials for CSN. These factors present higher barriers to the successful inclusion of children with SEN (Küçüker et al., 2006).

The facilitators of successful inclusion include appreciation of others outside and in the workplace, peer social acceptance of CSN, positive attitudes of school personnel toward inclusion and families of typically developing children, knowledge and skill about promoting positive interaction among all children and communicating with families, and knowledge about laws and regulations concerning inclusion.

*Factor Correlation With Teachers' Demographic Data, Attitudes Towards Inclusive Education and Perceived Competencies for Inclusive Teaching*

The second aim was to determine the correlation between the preschool teachers' perceptions of available and necessary support for preschool inclusion

and their sociodemographic characteristics, their attitudes towards inclusive education and their perceived competencies for inclusive teaching. The obtained results on attitudes towards inclusive education and competencies for inclusive teaching, presented in Table 1, indicate preschool teachers' tendency to have a positive attitude towards preschool inclusion ( $M = 3.67$ ), as they recognise the advantages it offers. However, the preschool teachers of this sample are uncertain of their own competencies for teaching children with SEN ( $M = 3.02$ ) in inclusive settings (Skočić Mihić & Sekušek Galešev, 2016).

No correlation was found between the teachers' perceptions of necessary factors and available support for successful inclusion, on the one hand, and their age, years of experience, and workplace (regular or special settings), on the other.

Correlation coefficients between the dimensions of the Supports Scale with attitudes towards inclusive education and competencies for inclusive teaching are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Correlation between the dimensions of the Supports Scale for Preschool Inclusion and the teachers' demographic data, attitudes towards inclusive education and perceived competencies for inclusive teaching*

|                                                                    | Factors   |         |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|---------|
|                                                                    | Necessity | Support |
| Teachers' statement that they:                                     |           |         |
| – provided an IEP for a child with SEN                             | .031      | .211*** |
| – received support from professional staff                         | .0384     | .130*   |
| – attended a course on inclusive education during PTT <sup>1</sup> | .634      | .113*   |
| Teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education                    | .180***   | .309*** |
| Teachers' competencies for inclusive teaching                      | .054      | .445*** |

<sup>1</sup>PTT: pre-service teacher training ( $z = .574$ ;  $p < 0.005$ )

A weak statistically significant positive correlation was found between teachers' perception of available support for successful inclusion and their pro-inclusive behaviour towards the provision of an IEP for a child with SEN, the perceived support from a professional and prior participation in a course on inclusive education. Moreover, a moderate correlation was established between the perception of a higher level of necessary factors for successful inclusion and a positive attitude towards preschool inclusion.

A moderate statistically significant positive correlation was found

between teachers' perceptions of available support for successful inclusion and teachers' positive attitudes towards inclusive education and perceived competencies for inclusive teaching.

Teachers with a more positive attitude towards inclusive education perceived a higher level of the necessary factors for successful inclusion and a higher level of available support. Similarly, teachers with a higher level of perceived competencies for inclusive teaching perceived a higher level of available support for successful inclusion.

Interestingly, while the teachers' age, years of experience and workplace (regular or special settings) do not correlate with their perception of available support, these factors do correlate with the provision of an IEP, the perception of available professional support and pre-service training in inclusive education. Teachers who stated that they had prior experience with developing an IEP for a child with SEN, had received support from a SEN specialist and had participated in a course on inclusive education (IE) during their pre-service training (the majority of the teachers had in fact been enrolled in study programmes that included a course on inclusive education) perceived a statistically significantly higher level of provided support than teachers who had not received similar support or reported participation in a course on IE. Furthermore, the perception of the necessary and available support is independent of teachers' stated age, years of experience and workplace in regular or special settings.

## Discussion

Teachers' perceptions of the facilitators and barriers to including children with special educational needs (SEN) in preschool settings were measured using the Support Scale for Preschool Inclusion (Küçüker et al., 2006), revealing two key dimensions. Each dimension, represented by 34 items, highlights essential factors and available support crucial for successful preschool inclusion, including: 1) teachers' knowledge and skills for inclusive teaching, such as assessment methods, understanding disabilities, implementing strategies, fostering cooperation, utilising special equipment, and receiving adequate training; 2) subjective factors linked to positive attitudes among various stakeholders in education, support from management, workplace respect, and external recognition; 3) professional support and collaboration with various stakeholders, additional staffing, and volunteer involvement; and 4) spatial and material conditions, encompassing adaptations to physical space, equipment, didactic materials and toys.

Aligned with the social model's principles, which emphasise

environmental factors in equalising opportunities for individuals with disabilities, preschool teachers perceive quality preschool inclusion as a unified dimension that combines various resources into a comprehensive array of interconnected elements, including teachers' competencies and additional material and personnel support to address the diverse needs of children with SEN.

Among the 34 items indicating successful preschool inclusion, 33 were deemed fully necessary. Notably, the most crucial factor for successful preschool inclusion is reduced class size. This aligns with national legislation, where the enrolment of a child with SEN in a regular educational group leads to a reduction in class size (Narodne novine: Službeni list Republike Hrvatske, 2008, Art. 22). A decrease in the number of enrolled children is expected to enhance the quality of teaching, particularly through individualised approaches to diverse educational needs.

Moreover, knowledge and skills related to appropriate instructional methods for children with SEN, understanding the child's disability/illness, using special equipment, and fostering positive interaction among all children are perceived as the most essential factors. Teachers' knowledge stands out as a significant barrier to effective inclusion, which is consistent with previous research findings (e.g., Avramidis et al., 2000; Florian, 2009; Ginja & Chen, 2021; Pijl, 2010). Competencies for inclusive teaching encompass a broad range of skills needed in inclusive classrooms, including positive attitudes towards inclusive education, understanding diverse learners, implementing effective teaching strategies, and translating acquired knowledge into educational practice (Skočić Mihić et al., 2022a, p. 447).

According to the teachers' ratings, additional teacher training is especially needed in acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills for appropriate instruction methods for CSN, the features and factors of functioning related to a child's disability/illness, usage of special equipment for/with CSN, and the promotion of positive interaction among all children. Additionally, family participation and support from a specialist about SEN and the support provided to teachers from preschool management for working with children with SEN are highlighted as necessary elements that facilitate successful inclusion. Teachers recognise the importance of collaboration between experts with diverse professional backgrounds (Fukink & van Verseveld, 2019) and providing support to parents of a child with SEN. Teachers' emphasis on the need for regular meetings with families and specialists about children with SEN aligns with the premise that ECEC services should provide an integrated approach to children and their families, especially those at risk of social exclusion. The child's optimal development depends on the partnership built between the teacher and the parents, and on quality

communication (e.g., Skočić Mihić et al., 2022a; Skočić Mihić et al., 2018).

Technical equipment and volunteer support are perceived as the least necessary forms of assistance in preschool inclusion for children with disabilities, probably due to the limited utilisation of such resources in teachers' daily routines or insufficient availability and training. Conversely, teachers highly value support related to fostering positive attitudes, peer acceptance, and creating a supportive work climate both within and outside the classroom.

Furthermore, teachers express a need for physically adapted spaces and collaboration with outside professionals such as trained preschool teachers, doctors and psychologists, emphasising the importance of environmental accessibility and interdisciplinary cooperation in facilitating inclusive practices. The provision of support services is recognised as crucial for establishing successful inclusive classrooms (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003), with physical adaptations to spaces, particularly for children with mobility impairments, serving as key indicators of inclusion support.

In line with the first hypothesis, a lower level of available support for successful inclusion than needed was determined. This finding indicates that, from the teachers' point of view, an insufficient degree of support is made available to teachers in implementing inclusive legislation. The obtained results are consistent with the original research by Küçükler et al. (2006). Croatian teachers ( $M = 3.73$ ) perceived a slightly higher level of support needed for successful inclusion than their Turkish peers ( $M = 3.55$ ) and a higher level of available support ( $M = 2.08$ ). Küçükler et al. (2006) pointed out that the success of implementing inclusion can be determined by comparing the required and available support levels in the overall result. A more significant gap in the mean value indicates insufficiently provided support, while the interpretation of certain forms of support indicates either facilitators or barriers to successful inclusion.

Starting from the premise that each factor contributes to successful inclusion, it is vital to closely examine teachers' assessments of the most and least necessary factors and available support for successful inclusion. Among these factors, the most needed but least available resource is the opportunity for teachers to observe colleagues engaged in inclusive practices, facilitating experiential learning and collaboration with other professionals. Collaboration between professional personnel and teachers is considered a cornerstone of high-quality inclusive care for young children with special educational needs (SEN) (e.g., Fukkink & van Verseveld, 2020; Schoyerer & van Santen, 2016). A gap between needed and implemented legislation in preschool inclusion is, from the teachers' perspective, reflected in insufficient opportunities for professional development, including learning from colleagues and professionals

outside the ECEC institution. Additional personnel in the classroom/school's physical environment, adaptation of the classroom environment for children with SEN, utilisation of special equipment for/with children with SEN, and in-service training in necessary areas of inclusion are also crucial components for achieving high-quality inclusive education.

The findings of the present research underscore the essential elements required in an educational environment to meet the diverse needs of every child. Despite inclusive education being a global educational agenda accompanied by inclusive policies aimed at promoting equality, access and high-quality education, its adequate implementation and success are not guaranteed. Ensuring quality inclusive education necessitates the involvement of all stakeholders in the educational process, recognising that the inclusion of children with SEN in regular settings goes beyond mere enrolment and attendance.

Findings that focus on available support to teachers in teaching children with SEN are relevant for all children from diverse backgrounds. Inclusive policies play a crucial role in shaping European educational frameworks by promoting equitable opportunities for all children, regardless of their ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds. These frameworks aim to foster democratic values and harmonious coexistence within an increasingly diverse society, with intercultural education integrated as a fundamental component (Skočić Mihić et al., 2020).

Although it may be anticipated that teachers will perceive a lower level of support than needed, such research offers a clear overview of the relationship between the types of support teachers require, their relevance and their availability. For policymakers and other key decision-makers, as well as researchers, this presents a unique opportunity to identify what is most lacking for preschool teachers, despite being deemed crucial. Based on the assumption that preschool teachers, as implementers of inclusive education policies, are in a unique position to confirm the relevance of theoretical concepts incorporated into policy documents, the present research provides a circular feedback loop, moving from a top-down approach to a bottom-up response from preschool teachers. Understanding the challenges teachers face can help develop strategies, resources and training programmes that effectively support inclusive education and enhance the learning environment for children with SEN. Such programmes may be prescribed in advance at the system level as the minimum criteria that ensure quality and equality in inclusion. Additionally, obligatory support provided to preschool teachers may enable quality, while the realisation of true inclusiveness is largely dependent on professional development respecting the individual autonomy of each preschool teacher in responding to the diverse needs of children, as well as

on ensuring an encouraging institutional climate.

Research into the barriers that preschool teachers perceive in including children with SEN is critical for improving the effectiveness of inclusive education. Identifying these challenges informs policy development and facilitates the design of targeted professional support and training, ensuring that preschool teachers are well equipped to meet diverse student needs. Additionally, addressing these barriers promotes greater educational equity by fostering more inclusive learning environments for all students. Thus, policymakers have the ability to create targeted, evidence-based forms of support that address the specific needs of teachers and children with SEN. This may include specially tailored professional development and emotional support to ensure that teachers feel equipped and confident in implementing inclusive education that fosters greater educational equity, thus ensuring that all children, regardless of their abilities, have access to high-quality education and are fully integrated into the classroom environment.

According to the second hypothesis, teachers' perceptions of available support are closely linked to their readiness to develop individualised education plans (IEPs) for children with special educational needs (SEN), their access to professional support and their pre-service education, rather than being solely based on their perception of necessary factors for successful inclusion. Furthermore, a higher level of self-perceived competencies for inclusion and positive teacher attitudes are associated with a greater perception of available support for implementing successful inclusion. Notably, teachers who perceive themselves as more educated and competent, and who possess positive attitudes, tend to perceive higher levels of available support. Additionally, teachers' perceptions of available support for successful inclusion correlate with their readiness to develop IEPs, their access to professional support and their participation in pre-service training on inclusion. Teachers with experience in IEP development, collaboration with experts and participation in inclusive education courses perceive significantly higher levels of provided support compared to their counterparts without such experiences.

The importance of enhancing teachers' professional competencies for inclusive teaching through both initial and continuous professional development is widely acknowledged (e.g., Skočić Mihić et al., 2014; Tatalović Vorkapić et al., 2018). However, variations in how teachers are prepared for inclusive teaching within and outside the EU suggest that extensive training in special education is not universally integrated into initial teacher education curricula. In the Republic of Croatia, for instance, an analysis of teacher education programmes revealed only one mandatory course on inclusive education (Skočić

Mihić, 2019). Hence, continuing professional development programmes should prioritise equipping teachers with the additional skills and competencies needed for inclusive practice (Čepić et al., 2015). Research consistently demonstrates a positive relationship between teachers' competencies for inclusive teaching, their attitudes, their confidence in working with children with special needs (Hornby, 1999; Siegel & Jausovec, 1994) and their professional development in this field (e.g., Avramidis et al., 2000; Tatalović Vorkapić et al., 2018).

In the present study, the preschool teachers who stated they had experience developing an IEP, had collaborated with experts and had stated that they participated in a course on inclusive education also perceived higher levels of available support for implementing successful inclusion. It is crucial to provide children with SEN with developmentally appropriate practices, that is, activities or approaches that are well-suited to their developmental stage, ability level and individual needs, and that aim to support the success of all children in ECE settings (Gestwicki, 2010). The findings of the present study therefore emphasise that teachers' professional development for inclusive teaching is fundamental to ensuring high-quality inclusive ECEC.

A higher level of self-perceived competencies for inclusion and a more positive teacher attitude are related to a higher level of perceived available support for implementing successful inclusion. The necessary support provided to preschool teachers is needed to facilitate a uniformly successful implementation of inclusive policies nationwide for children with SEN and other diverse needs. Every child should be guaranteed the same high level of support by well-trained staff in order to be able to appropriately respond to their diverse needs. This includes qualified preschool teachers as well as professional support from educational rehabilitators, speech and language therapists, and other professionals.

Recent legislative changes to the Croatian Preschool Education Act (Narodne novine: Službeni list Republike Hrvatske, 2022), aimed at improving ECEC access and quality, have not outlined how support structures for preschool teachers will be strengthened (Eurydice, 2024). The need for professional development opportunities is critical in order to attract and retain qualified personnel. At present, there is a shortage of qualified preschool teachers in the Republic of Croatia, prompting the government to invest in expanding the workforce by launching new ECEC programmes for part-time students and preparing lifelong learning programmes to retrain primary school teachers as ECEC teachers. There is also an ongoing shortage of educational rehabilitators, who play a vital role in supporting preschool teachers by assessing children's developmental potential, creating IEPs and suggesting support strategies. For example, the availability and quality of expert support can vary depending on

the size of the preschool institution, whether it is in an urban or rural area, and whether it is a public or private institution. Moreover, regional disparities in access to services highlight the need for more specific and actionable plans to support preschool teachers effectively. Furthermore, many ECEC professionals, particularly teaching assistants, face precarious employment conditions, including fixed-term contracts and low wages. This instability undermines the support system for preschool teachers, as it affects their ability to provide quality education and care (UNICEF, 2021).

One limitation of the present study is the use of teachers' perceptions in assessing available and needed support as a subjective measurement of the existing gap in the legislation. Its implementation reflects the conditions in which inclusive practice is realised. A second limitation is that the representative sample is drawn from only one Croatian county. Future research should include a broader region of Croatian preschool teachers. Given that preschool teachers play a crucial role in implementing inclusive education policy, it would be interesting to explore in future research their perceptions of the supportive factors and barriers in Croatian ECEC institutions in the context of an objective measurement of environmental factors and the degree to which teachers' subjective perceptions are a reflection of objective factors.

## Conclusions

The present paper underscores the critical role of available support for teachers in achieving the core tenets of inclusive education, equality, accessibility and high quality. Teachers play a central role in implementing inclusive practices, and their perceptions reveal significant gaps between prescribed support and what is actually available in preschool settings.

The findings obtained highlight the multifaceted nature of support needed for successful preschool inclusion, encompassing factors such as teachers' knowledge and skills, positive attitudes, collaboration with stakeholders, and spatial and material conditions. However, there is a clear discrepancy between the support deemed necessary by teachers and what is accessible to them, which poses significant barriers to effective inclusion, as it impacts teachers' confidence, competency and ability to meet the diverse needs of children with SEN. Adequate support is essential for fostering positive attitudes, promoting collaboration, ensuring equitable access to resources and, ultimately, enhancing student success and wellbeing.

Addressing the present gap requires concerted efforts to provide teachers with the necessary resources, training and support networks to effectively

implement inclusive practices. Additionally, there is a need for policymakers to bridge the divide between prescribed legislation and the actual provision of support in preschool settings in order to fully realise the vision of inclusive education and to ensure that all children, regardless of their abilities, have equal opportunities to learn, grow and thrive in preschool environments.

## Ethical Statement

The research study was approved by the University of Zagreb Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences Ethical Research Committee.

## Dislosure Statement

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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## Biographical note

**SANJA SKOČIĆ MIHIĆ**, PhD, is a full professor in the field of inclusive education at the Faculty of Education at the University of Rijeka, Croatia. Her research interests include teachers' competences for inclusive teaching, counseling skills, bibliotherapy, and gifted education.

**MATEA BUTKOVIĆ**, PhD, is an assistant professor in the field of EFL teaching at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Rijeka, Croatia. Her main areas of research include inclusive and intercultural education, intercultural competence, and representation of diversity in EFL teaching materials.

**SNJEŽANA SEKUŠAK-GALEŠEV**, PhD, is a retired associate professor in the field of inclusive education and rehabilitation at the Faculty for Education and Rehabilitation Sciences at the University of Zagreb, Croatia. She is also the Director of the Psychological Centre Sekušak-Galešev. Her research interests focus on the professional development of teachers for inclusive education, developmental disabilities, applied psychology, and mental health.

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Sami Timimi, *V iskanju normalnosti: Nov pristop k razumevanju duševnega zdravja, stiske in nevroraznolikosti* [*Searching for Normal: A New Approach to Understanding Mental Health, Distress and Neurodiversity*], Chiara, 2025; 408 pp.: ISBN: 978-961-720-558-9

Reviewed by BOJAN DEKLEVA<sup>1</sup>

The book was published in English in 2025 and has so far also been translated and published in Slovenian and Spanish, while editions in other languages are in preparation. The author is a child and adolescent psychiatrist and psychotherapist with several decades of clinical practice in a wide range of institutional settings, and he has an extensive professional bibliography. His book is critical of existing (Western) psychiatry, both as a practice and as what he at times calls a “(pseudo)science”. The author draws much of his argument from the work of other prominent authors who have, in recent decades, critically examined psychiatric doctrines and ideologies – figures such as Robert Whitaker, Peter Gøtzsche and Joanna Moncrieff. His book is characterised by a warm and compassionate tone, an evident concern for the wellbeing of the children and adolescents who sought help from him or whom he personally knew and treated, and by insights drawn from his many years of clinical experience working with children, adolescents and their caregivers.

In the first part of the book, the author addresses the basic assumptions or conceptual premises underlying today’s dominant, strongly biomedically oriented psychiatry. He asks what mental health is, what normality is, and indeed what psychological experience itself even is. In his view, all these concepts



<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia; [bojan.dekleva@guest.arnes.si](mailto:bojan.dekleva@guest.arnes.si).

and their definitions are markedly subjective and culturally relative, leading him to conclude that “when it comes to mental health or illness/disorder, we actually don’t know what we’re talking about at all” (p. 43). Psychiatric diagnoses, along with their classifications and descriptions of the conditions they denote, proceed from the assumption that mental states can be clearly delineated, yet psychiatry has no objective criteria available for determining them. Because of this lack of knowledge – and even more so because of the complexity of human beings and their embeddedness in the social world – diagnoses also tell us nothing about the causation of the states diagnosed, which leads the author to conclude that “there is no such thing as a psychiatric diagnosis” (p. 50), by which he of course means diagnoses that are supposed to represent an objective determination of a condition and an understanding of its causation that would enable meaningful treatment. Related to this state of affairs is the finding that psychiatry has been unable to develop evidence-based treatment methods, which is one of the key requirements of modern medicine. Nevertheless, psychiatry legitimises itself through the language of science and by upholding concepts that lack sufficient scientific grounding – something the author calls psychiatric scientism (p. 55). A consequence of this, and also a reason for well-founded doubts about psychiatry, are research findings showing that the actual effectiveness of core mental health services is worrying as almost all indicators of collective mental health have moved in the wrong direction, even though access to mental-health services has improved considerably.

The author draws attention to the remarkably rapid increase in the scope of certain psychiatric diagnoses, which he links to the “stretching of concepts” of (ab)normality – both vertically and horizontally – that is, through the establishment of new diagnostic categories and the broadening of criteria for existing ones. He connects this development to the process of commodification of illness or mental distress and of the solutions offered for it – in other words, to the introduction and intensification of market mechanisms in diagnosing and offering (marketing) solutions such as medications and other forms of treatment. He notes that even trauma (p. 77) and other forms of distress can be marketed, and that diagnoses (whose validity he otherwise does not recognise) have become psychiatric brands (p. 79). As the field of (ab)normality expands and becomes commodified, a “positive feedback loop” (p. 81) emerges: the spread of pathology concepts, together with public campaigns urging people to watch for symptoms in themselves and to seek professional help for their psychological distress, further increases the scale of that (diagnosed) distress.

In the book’s middle section, the author focuses specifically on the diagnoses of ADHD and autism. He uses developments surrounding these two

diagnoses to illustrate the observations and theses set out in the first part of the book – namely, theses about the lack of grounding and reliability of diagnoses, their commodification, and the emergence of a positive feedback loop. He describes in detail the historical development of these two concepts/diagnoses, analyses gender and age differences, the search for new target populations, “mutations of diagnoses” (p. 103), and their promotion. In assessing whether the concepts of these two disorders are supported by evidence in the sense of biological markers, he focuses particularly on twin studies, genome studies and brain-imaging research. In all of these, he finds no evidence for the biological basis of either so-called ‘disorder’. In the case of ADHD, he warns of the harm caused by pharmacological therapy, which is being prescribed en masse worldwide and is rapidly increasing. Regarding autism, he describes how what was initially an extremely rare disorder/diagnosis has been reshaped into a spectrum and has become an increasingly popular consumer product as well as a global phenomenon and a brand. As with these two diagnoses, the author also examines the trend towards the view that treatment of mental health problems should begin as early as possible.

The final part of the book is devoted to the socio-cultural and political context of the phenomena described above. Here he moves away from the internal problems of psychiatry as a science and turns instead to cultural and cross-cultural considerations, and above all to an analysis of the neoliberal political and economic system, which brings strong individualisation, competitiveness, globalisation, consumerism and the commodification of happiness, as well as the privatisation and monopolisation of services and products. He introduces all of this through the concept of the “mental health industrial complex” (p. 207), which links the new (TikTok) culture of self-diagnosis with a particular “merging” of pharmaceutical giants with professional associations, academic authorities and state regulatory bodies – a process aided by the cultivation of various professional/scientific myths (for example, the myth of chemical imbalance as the cause of mental disorders) and by propaganda about mental health and the need for systematic, institutionalised care for it. In a separate chapter, he discusses the colonial dimension of psychiatry, which exports its new products – diagnoses (e.g. depression) and forms of treatment (primarily pharmacological) — to less developed countries of the so-called Third World, as well as to the transition countries of Eastern Europe. A key aspect of all this is that psychiatry strictly individualises mental problems and disorders, attributing them to individual weaknesses, illnesses, deficits, and insufficient personal effort and self-care, while implicitly denying any causal role played by narrower or broader social factors – not least the neoliberal system itself.

Although the author's central attention is devoted to pharmacological approaches to treating mental 'disorders' (Timimi mentions that psychiatric practice there was in his experience simply a conveyor belt of giving, changing and adding medications, until the patient was at the very edge of the permitted number of drugs a psychiatrist is allowed to prescribe), he also devotes some explicit attention to psychotherapies. These, too, are becoming brands and market commodities, and he singles out cognitive behavioural therapy in particular as the "queen of brands" (p. 194) among psychotherapies, with its pronounced message that a person – through their own negativistic thoughts – is somehow to blame for their own distress, or that they can overcome it simply by changing the way they think. Although the author notes that research shows "no therapy is better than any other ... while actual real-life effects remain sadly small" (p. 205), he has considerably more praise for systemic approaches and systemic philosophy, which incorporate to a greater extent the social context and the relationships within a person's immediate social environment. Within this philosophy, he advocates for a narrative approach – that is, for building a relationship between the therapist and the person in distress, which, according to the findings of many studies, contributes the largest share of therapeutic success (the so-called "common factors" of psychotherapy; p. 190). Such an inclusive approach to people is meant to move beyond the consumer model of help, which often pushes a person in distress into the role of patient, turns their experiences into symptoms, and, through the accumulation of diagnoses, potentially into a psychiatric career. Conversation, within a good relationship, should provide a framework for creating meaning that can encompass optimism, faith in resilience and development, and trust in the possibility of change.

The author begins most chapters of his book by describing one of his own cases, followed by a conceptual discussion of problematic aspects of contemporary psychiatry. At the end of each chapter, he then explains how the treatment of these cases (that is, of the children or adolescents concerned) developed and concluded under his care, without recourse to diagnoses or other conventional psychiatric concepts and treatments. This adds value to the book and conveys the message that the author's reflections and proposals are applicable, achievable and beneficial.

The book makes an important contribution to the search for alternatives to the current functioning of the mental health system, which many consider to have reached a dead end. It will be relevant to professionals working in the field of mental health, as well as to anyone concerned about the rapid growth in the scope of diagnosed mental disorders and the polemical and conflicting views on how the field of mental health should develop in future.

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