

Educating and Reflecting for Resilient, Critically Aware Societies

Edited by Anna Odrowąż-Coates & Maria Cecilia Zsögön
UNESCO/Janusz Korczak Chair Book Series



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Foreword

Anna Odrowąż-Coates & Maria Cecilia Zsögön

This volume emerges from the ESA RN10 Mid-term Conference “Young Researcher Academy for Methodological Advancements in Sociological Research and Education – Resilience and Well-being in Academic Endeavours.” The conference brought together early-career scholars from a wide range of disciplines to engage in dialogue on the evolving landscape of sociological inquiry and educational research. Organized in collaboration with the Doctoral Students’ Union of the Maria Grzegorzewska University, the event served as a platform where young academics could connect across institutional, disciplinary, and national borders.

More than an academic meeting, the conference functioned as a collaborative space where emerging researchers shared ideas, confronted challenges, and built supportive networks. Participants explored methodological innovations, reflected on the pressures and uncertainties shaping contemporary academic life, and discussed strategies to strengthen resilience and well-being within research environments.

The contributions in this volume reflect the wide thematic diversity and methodological plurality of the discussions. Together, they reveal how young scholars navigate, critique, and reshape the academic world while advancing our understanding of the sociology of education.

SECTION I: Teacher Well-Being and Professional Contexts

The opening chapter, “**Why context matters in teachers’ emotions. A mixed method study**” by Michalis Christodoulou, Konstantina Feggou and Maria Pekopoulou, highlights teachers’ emotional experiences, such as frustration, anger, and well-being, and how these are shaped by relational and institutional contexts. Using an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design, the authors illuminate the contextual mechanisms through which teachers’ emotions develop in primary school environments.

The section continues with “**Promoting Teacher Wellbeing in Initial Education Programs: Perspectives from Albanian Universities**,” in which Ledia Kashahu, Jetmira Basha and Fjoralba Satka examine the views of university

lecturers on improving teacher education in Albania. Their qualitative study identifies the need for better integration of practical experience, emotional preparedness, reflective practice, and competencies related to resilience and stress management.

In **“Relationships with students as an element of building the well-being of academic teachers,”** Patrycja Mika and Joanna Łukasiewicz-Wieleba investigate how student attitudes, behaviours, and diverse relational encounters shape the well-being of academic teachers. The authors identify several key areas influencing well-being, from assessment practices and student engagement to institutional and organisational conditions.

The final contribution to this section, **“School Pedagogue in an Unstable Reality – Methods of Building Resilience,”** by Mariusz Garbiec, examines the skills and personal resources required for school pedagogues to support students’ holistic development. The chapter underscores the need for pedagogues to foster intellectual, emotional, psychological, social, physical, and spiritual growth while also attending to the influences of family and local community contexts.

SECTION II: Students, Youth, and Marginalised Groups

This section begins with **“Positive dimensions of well-being of young adult LGBTQ+ individuals in Poland – pilot study,”** by Szymon Barczyński, Joanna Łukasiewicz-Wieleba and Marcin Gierczyk, shifts the focus toward minority well-being. The authors explore positive psychological functioning, coping strategies, and satisfaction among LGBTQ+ youth, while acknowledging the ongoing presence of stigma despite evolving social attitudes.

In **“Internalisation of Suffering: Youth, Self-Destructive Culture, and the Educational Challenge of Critical Engagement with Music and Media,”** Zuzanna Chałubińska examines music and media as informal educational environments where young people construct meanings around suffering, identity, and belonging. The study highlights the educational challenge of cultivating critical, reflective engagement with digital culture.

The following contribution, **“Understanding the social needs of young academics through the lens of nicotine use,”** by Paulina Kryńska explores the social dynamics surrounding substance use among university students and early-career academics. By analysing the social mechanisms behind nicotine use, the chapter offers insights into stress, peer dynamics, and cultural influences within academic environments.

In **“Ongoing qualitative research on the embodied effects of childhood sexual abuse (CSA), by a survivor, with survivors: a presentation of initial findings,”** Korinna McRobert offers a deeply reflexive account of research conducted with survivors of childhood sexual abuse. The contribution foregrounds embodiment, trauma, and methodological care while highlighting the complexities of survivor-led inquiry.

The section concludes with **“Seeking an Empowering Discourse: Reflections on Changing Language about Immigrants in Academic Literature,”** where Tatiana Kanasz analyses the evolution of terminology used to describe migrants in scholarly literature. By examining linguistic shifts toward more inclusive narratives, she reflects on the role of language in empowering individuals with migration experiences.

SECTION III: Digital, Social, and Global Challenges in Education

This section begins with **“Digital Transformation in Vietnamese Higher Education: Educational Reforms and Emerging Challenges,”** by Truong Thi Lan Nhi and Joanna Madalińska-Michalak, which examines the rapid digitalisation of teacher education in Vietnam. The authors analyse the challenges in developing digital competencies among teacher educators, offering insights that may guide policy development and future research on educational digital transformation.

The next chapter, **“Building Cyber-Resilient Schools: Integrating AI Security and Digital Hygiene in Education,”** by Zofia Rudnicka and Agnieszka Pregowska, addresses the growing importance of cybersecurity and AI literacy in contemporary schooling. The chapter outlines frameworks and practical approaches for fostering cyber-resilience among students and educators.

In **“Fentanyl Panic in Polish Press Discourse. Well-being in the Post-Truth World,”** Kacper Lechicki analyses media narratives surrounding fentanyl in Poland. The chapter illuminates how sensationalist discourse shapes public fears, contributes to misinformation, and influences perceptions of social well-being in an era of post-truth dynamics.

The chapter, **“Designing Resilience Through Language Mentoring: Reflections on Training Student Mentors for Migrant Integration in Romania,”** by Daniela Popa, explores how language mentoring can support migrant integration. The contribution reflects on training processes that help student

mentors build intercultural competence, pedagogical awareness, and resilience while contributing to more inclusive educational environments.

The section concludes with **“Education in Service of Genocides: Axiological Analysis,”** by Beata Król, who offers a critical examination of the ways educational systems can become instruments of genocidal ideologies. By comparing the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide, the author identifies recurring mechanisms such as pseudo-scientific narratives, anti-intellectualism, and the manipulation of values within oppressive regimes. The chapter leads to a very interesting part of the book, dedicated to methodologies. The discussion loops back to the genre of the opening paper to engage in philosophical approaches to conducting empirical studies.

SECTION IV: Research Methodology, Ethics, and Epistemology

The final section of the volume turns toward methodological, ethical, and epistemological questions that underpin contemporary educational and sociological research. It opens with **“Methodological Challenges and Dilemmas in Sociological Research in School Environments,”** in which Eleni Tsiknakou examines the complex realities researchers encounter when conducting studies in schools. The chapter sheds light on issues of access, positionality, and the dual role of schools as both sites of learning and research.

This is followed by **“Epistemological Tensions and Researcher Resilience in a Context of Coloniality: Navigating Between Neutrality and Engagement,”** by Pierre Michelot Jean Claude. This chapter reflects on the epistemological struggles researchers encounter when working within contexts marked by coloniality. The author interrogates the balance between neutrality, advocacy, and resilience in sociological practice.

The volume concludes with **“Reimagining Academic Journeys: Collaborative Autoethnography for Well-Being and Belonging,”** by Ewa Duda-Maciejewska, Jagoda Apanasewicz-Burcon, Jan Gierzyński, Patrycja Mika, Magdalena Pietrzak, and Julia Zbróg. Through a collaborative autoethnographic approach, the authors explore how doctoral students’ well-being is shaped at intrapersonal, interpersonal, and systemic levels. They reflect on the pressures of academic productivity, funding precarity, and competitive individualism, as forces that influence doctoral experiences and mental health.

At a time when academia is undergoing profound transformation, this volume underscores the importance of creating spaces where younger gener-

ations of scholars can exchange ideas openly and collectively imagine more inclusive, reflexive, and resilient academic environments. We hope that the insights gathered here will resonate with researchers, educators, and policy-makers, offering not only analytical depth but also practical pathways for fostering equity, care, and critical engagement. May this volume serve both as a record of a meaningful academic encounter and as an invitation to continue the dialogue on methodological innovation, well-being, and the future of sociological research in education.

Above all, we hope it encourages the building of scholarly communities rooted in curiosity, solidarity, and the shared commitment to transforming education for the better.

SECTION I

Teacher Well-Being and Professional Contexts

Why context matters in teachers' emotions.

A mixed method study

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Abstract: This study examines how elementary school teachers experience anger, frustration, and well-being across different relational contexts, using an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design. Integration took place at two stages of the research design. First, by conducting initially the qual part, qual data analysis was the ground for the construction of the data collection tool we used in the subsequent quant part. In addition, we cross-checked qual data with quant data at the interpretation stage of the research. As far as the substantive results of the research are concerned, we emphasized that teachers' emotions are not isolated psychological states but arise through events embedded in their relationships with school administration, colleagues, students, and parents. By bringing to light how context triggers emotions through the use of Kemper's micro-sociological theory of emotions, we traced the social mechanisms through which anger, frustration and well-being occur in teachers' relationships with school administration (e.g., anti-institutional behavior) and with parents (e.g., socialization patterns conflicting with school culture). These findings point out that emotions, although embodied and cognitive constructs, their activation depends on the events connected to the relations with school admin, colleagues students and parents.

Introduction

The emotional state of teachers is a critical factor that affects not only the quality of teaching practice but also their overall professional trajectory and students' learning experience (Chang, 2009). According to the literature, teachers experience a range of emotions – both positive and negative – which are influenced by the school environment, interpersonal relationships, administrative support, and available resources (Ritchie et al., 2023; Collie et al., 2015). Chen (2016) finds that positive emotions such as joy and gratitude are associated with positive feedback and collaboration, whereas negative emotions such as anger and frustration arise in contexts of pressure and institutional deficiency. Particular importance is placed on the emotional experiences of novice teachers, who, with less than five years of experience, often face what is known as the “transition shock” – a clash between the theoretical expectations from their initial training and the realities of everyday school life (Al-Naimi et al., 2020). This period is marked by intense emotions, ambivalence, and “survival or exit” dilemmas, often resulting in high rates of professional attrition. In contrast, it has been observed that, over time, teachers' emotions are shaped by a sense of disenchantment, as their energy gradually diminishes and becomes redirected elsewhere when they enter what Huberman calls “serenity”, “complaint” or “disengagement” phase of their professional life course. If this is true, then one could hypothesize that the emotions of beginners (those with less than 8 years of teaching experience) and experienced teachers (those with more than 17 years of teaching experience) will be different as the years pass and teachers accumulate professional experience.

In this study, we compare beginners and experienced teachers in primary schools, in order to explore whether the emotions they experience in school contexts differ or not. In addition, emphasis is placed on the contexts in which the emotions of both groups emerge. In that sense, this is not a theory-testing research but rather an exploratory one since we used a sociological understanding of emotion as an exploratory framework in order to identify the reasons why specific contexts shape the activation of teachers' emotions. We have structured the article as follows. First, we review the empirical research which has been carried out in the field of elementary school teachers' emotions, by commenting on only research related to anger, frustration and well-being. Then, we present the theoretical background of the research by explaining the reasons why we focused only on these three emotions. Third, we provide meth-

odological details of the exploratory sequential research design we used and then we present the main findings from this mixed method study. Finally, we discuss the added value of using this research design by bringing to light the extent to which it extends our understanding of how teachers' emotions are formed in specific contexts in primary schools.

The theoretical background of the research

The theoretical framework of this research draws upon Kemper's (1978) sociological theorizing on emotions. Two main theoretical ideas constitute the core of his approach. First, it is argued that social relations are defined by two dimensions, power and status. All social actions – particularly those involving compliance with another's wishes, expectations, or demands – occur either through coercion or voluntarily. Power relations arise when one actor enforces compliance from another, especially when the latter resists or could potentially resist in the future. In this context, power is a form of social relationship characterized by unwilling compliance. In contrast, status relations are defined by recognition and a sense of belonging. These occur when one actor complies with another's request or command not out of coercion but voluntarily, as an expression of respect or esteem. The second theoretical idea is that emotional arousal is related to the degree of congruity or incongruity between self's expectations and experience in a situation. If there is an incongruity below expectations, then three primary emotions of fear, anger or frustration are activated. If there is an incongruence that exceeds expectation, then the primary emotion of satisfaction or happiness is stimulated. Finally, when expectations and experiences are congruent, then low levels of emotion are aroused. Although the theories of these three authors are more formal and complex than this brief sketch we provided, we used these theoretical assumptions for exploratory reasons.

In this study we focus only on anger, frustration and well-being, for the following reasons: first, anger and frustration are considered as two of the primary emotions according to these authors' sociological theory on emotions. 'Primary' means that anger and frustration affect the psychological functioning of the individual and the social and role relations in which they live their everyday life. In addition, given that in the literature on teachers' emotions there have not been developed theoretical explanations on the contexts shaping positive emotions, we wanted to pay attention to this class of emotions. For that reason, we decided to focus on teachers' wellbeing in so far as well-being is not

a pure psychological state, but it emerges out of their relational contexts, as the current definitions of well-being suggest. For instance, Soini et al. (2010) and Carroll (2020) argue that “pedagogical wellbeing”, as part of teachers’ professional well-being, is tied up with school administration, teacher workload and school resources and it is shaped through teachers’ relations with pupils’ parents, with their colleagues and with the wider school community. In that sense, we think that this definition of wellbeing fits the sociological and relational orientation of our theoretical background. However, given the various definitions that have been developed in the literature on wellbeing, we concluded that any operationalization of the term would not capture the variety and diversity of this term. For that reason, in the research design we refer to ‘positive emotions’ as a general term for the construction of the data collection tools.

Literature review

Research has shown that teachers’ work environment and their relation to the school community activate frustration and anger and affect their wellbeing. Insufficient administrative support, increased bureaucracy, standardization, strict accountability, and a sense of isolation have been linked to heightened levels of stress, professional dissatisfaction, and emotional exhaustion (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2019; Hong, 2012; Weiland, 2021). These issues are exacerbated when teachers feel they are neither recognized nor supported, nor trusted by their administrative supervisors. Such conditions are particularly burdensome for novice teachers, who must adapt to a complex environment characterized by role ambiguity and often conflicting administrative demands (Pillen et al., 2013; Dias-Lacy & Guirguis, 2017). The absence of guidance and support during the critical early years of their professional careers undermines their emotional well-being and compromises their sense of professional self-efficacy (Carroll, 2020; Soini et al., 2010; Weiland, 2021). The devaluation of the teaching profession through low salaries further intensifies frustration and reduces teachers’ motivation, negatively impacting performance and the overall quality of education (Esmaeili et al., 2019). In addition, financial insecurity, combined with limited influence over curriculum design, contributes to reduced professional satisfaction and an increased sense of helplessness. Continuous exposure to high professional demands without adequate resources can lead to exhaustion and reduce the quality of teaching (Dicke et al., 2018).

The quality of interpersonal relationships with colleagues has been shown to significantly impact teachers’ well-being, strengthening their sense of be-

longing, self-regulation, and emotional engagement (Aelterman et al., 2007; Aldrup et al., 2017; Carroll, 2020; Collie et al., 2016; Damásio et al., 2013; Dicke et al., 2018; Dreer, 2022; Dreer, 2024; McCallum et al., 2010; Nalipay et al., 2022; Roffey, 2012; Simbula, 2010; Soini et al., 2010; Weiland, 2021). Interaction with colleagues emerged as the second most frequently reported theme among novice teachers (Schmidt et al., 2021), highlighting the importance of the professional school environment and a culture of collaboration in daily teaching practice. A lack of collaboration or the presence of a competitive atmosphere within the teaching staff intensifies stress and isolation, with negative consequences for teachers' emotional well-being and self-efficacy (Lindqvist et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2022; Aelterman et al., 2007; Carroll, 2020; Soini et al., 2010; Simbula, 2010; Weiland, 2021).

Student behavior and the quality of teacher–student relationships are recognized in the international literature as critical factors influencing teachers' emotional state and professional well-being, especially for those in the early stages of their careers (Aelterman et al., 2007; Aldrup et al., 2017; Carroll, 2020; Collie et al., 2015; Damásio et al., 2013; Dreer, 2022; McCallum et al., 2010; Roffey, 2012; Soini et al., 2010; Weiland, 2021). Entering the teaching profession requires novice teachers to adapt to the complexity of the classroom, to build acceptance from students, to manage diverse learning needs, and to cope with the complex emotions that arise from teaching practice (Shoffner, 2011). The literature demonstrates that difficulties in enforcing discipline, classroom disruptions, and the absence of behavior management strategies generate intense feelings of frustration and anger, and, over time, lead to emotional exhaustion (Chen, 2016; Schmidt et al., 2021; Doyle et al., 2024).

An important dimension which emerged out of the review on teachers' emotions is that a) they rely either on quantitative-based methods or on qualitatively-based methods and b) the quantitative research draws upon psychological constructs such as anxiety, self-esteem or self-efficacy (e.g. Burić & Macuka, 2018; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2019; Stephanou & Oikonomou, 2018; Dreer 2024) whilst the qualitative oriented research draws upon a phenomenological or interpretivist framework for approaching resiliency. In other words, we did not find mixed method research (MMR) which is based on sociological framework for understanding teachers' emotions through a comparative design.

In particular Pillen et al.'s (2013) MMR is focused on teachers' emotional tensions leaving unexplored positive emotions. Within the MMR design they implemented, qualitative research had a secondary role in so far as it contributed to

the data construction tool while data analysis had been based only on statistical techniques. Yurtseven και Saraç' (2022) MMR explored classroom management from a psychological perspective without specifying the emotions which had been analyzed. Integration in the MMR design is not clear since data presentation relied on a traditional linear style (first the descriptives of the quantitative part and then the themes of the qualitative part) while theme construction was not transparent. Finally, Kokkinos και Stavropoulos's (2021) MMR examined teachers' pride and love in teachers' self-regulation. In this MMR design, qualitative research had a supportive role in the sense that it is used to check statistical results (for example, how teacher's emotions predict self-regulation).

To recapitulate, the contribution of our research concerns the following literature gaps we brought to light:

- There are few MMR examining both negative and positive emotions of elementary school teachers from a sociological point of view,
- The MMR design we implemented treats both parts equally during research design and data analysis
- Finally, we emphasize the comparative dimension of this topic by comparing the negative and positive emotions of novice teachers with those who are experienced.

Having this in mind, the research questions were the following:

1. Are there any differences between novice and experienced teachers regarding the contexts in which these three emotions have been felt? (quant component)
2. What are the social contexts within the school environment that shape novice and experienced teachers' feelings of frustration, anger, and well-being? (qual and quant component)
3. How do different school-related contexts shape teachers' emotional experiences of anger, frustration, and well-being? (qual component)

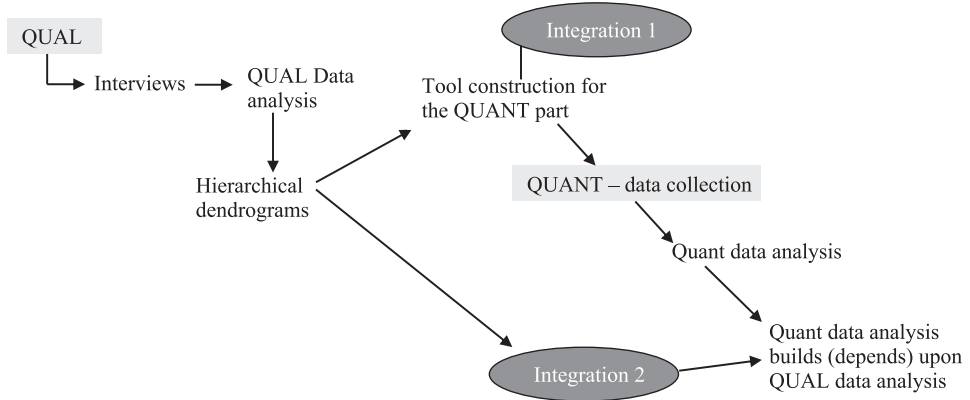
Methodology

Research design

To address these research questions, we employed an 'exploratory' sequential mixed methods research (MMR) design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). We were careful to avoid the common misconception that, in such designs, the qualitative phase merely serves as a preliminary step for the quantitative phase, which then dominates the analysis and interpretation. While we em-

phasize the sequential structure of this MMR design, we afford equal weight to the qualitative component (Bazeley, 2012). Specifically, the qualitative component contributes directly to explaining the research questions. In this respect, we emphasize only the sequential dimension of the MMR design, as the role of the qualitative phase – whether it serves to generate explanatory insights or to refine quantitative findings – ultimately depends on the methodological and epistemological orientations of the researcher(s). Following the standard procedure for the sequential design (Bazeley, 2018), the qualitative phase was conducted first and used to inform the development of questionnaire items for the subsequent quantitative phase. Importantly, the integration of methods extended beyond instrument development: quantitative data were cross-checked with the qualitative findings during the final stages of analysis. This allowed the quantitative results to be contextualized and interpreted in greater depth through the qualitative insights. In this way, integration informed not only the construction of the data collection instrument but also the analytical process. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the MMR design, and the following sections detail its individual components.

Figure 1. Visual presentation of the MMR design



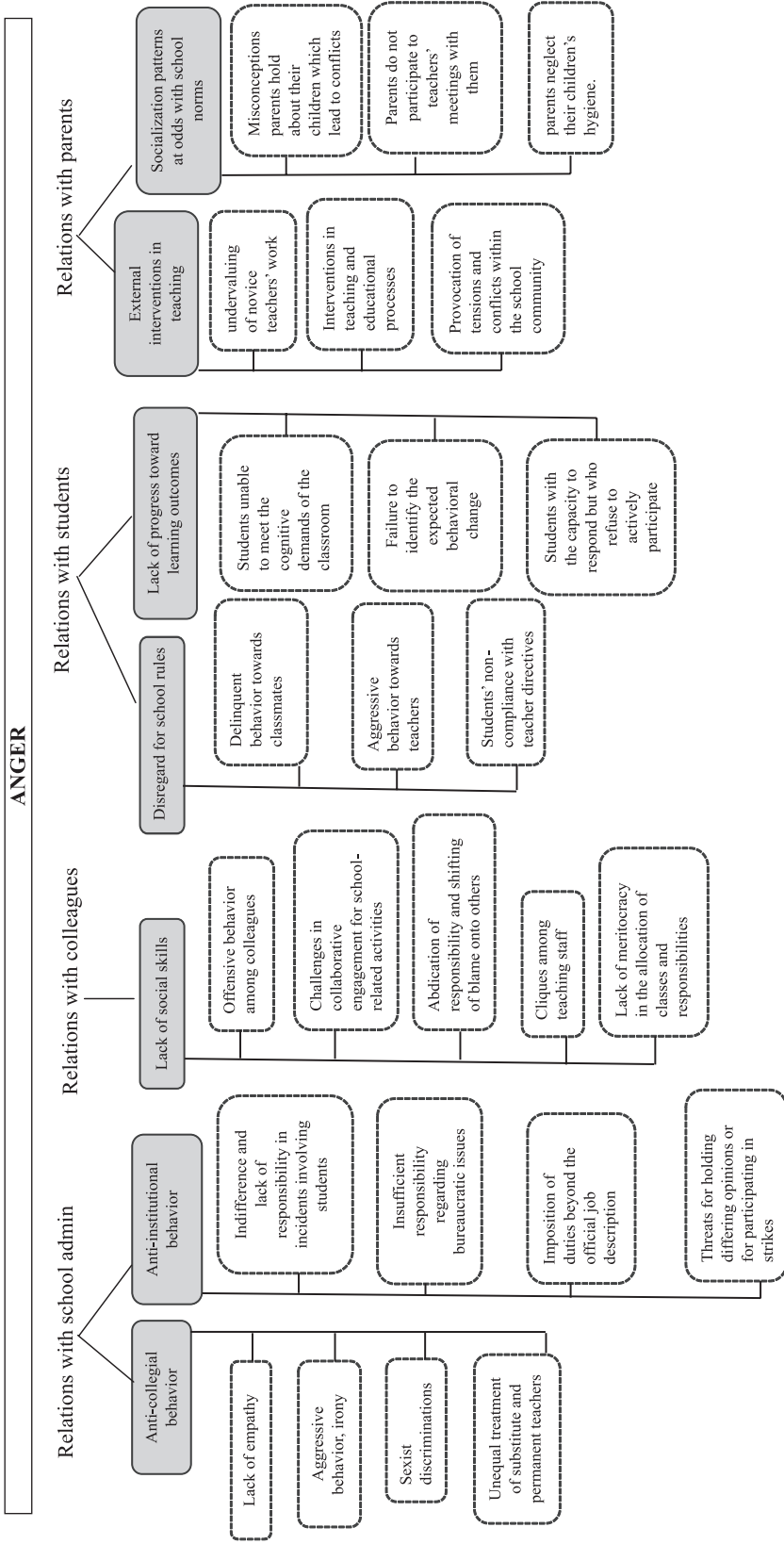
Sample

In line with the research questions, the study focused on two target populations: novice and experienced researchers who work as teachers in one of the largest prefectures in Greece, encompassing both major urban centers and rural areas. In this study, ‘novice’ teachers are defined as those with less than

seven years of teaching experience, while ‘experienced’ teachers are those with more than twenty years of service. Our objective was not to obtain a sample representative of the broader population, but rather to form two internally homogeneous groups suitable for comparison, through which explanatory hypotheses could be developed. To this end, we employed snowball sampling for the qualitative component of the research. Specifically, two of the authors, who are themselves elementary school teachers, initiated contact with novice and experienced teachers across the prefecture. These initial participants then referred additional novice and experienced colleagues, resulting in a total of 22 interviews (11 per group). All interviews were transcribed, and participants’ anonymity and informed consent were ensured in accordance with ethical research standards. For the quantitative component, we used a combination of cluster sampling and snowball sampling. Initially, we consulted administrative records listing all elementary schools in the prefecture and identified two distinct clusters: one consisting of schools located far from the prefecture’s capital (rural), and the other composed of schools situated nearby (urban). This clustering was motivated by two considerations: first, the differing working conditions in urban and rural settings were expected to influence teachers’ emotional experiences; and second, novice teachers were more likely to be assigned to rural areas, whereas experienced teachers were typically found in urban schools. Subsequently, we targeted specific schools within these clusters and, leveraging connections established during the qualitative phase, distributed the questionnaire to teachers both in person and via Google Forms. In total, we collected 173 completed questionnaires, of which 88 were from experienced teachers, and the remainder from novice teachers.

For both strands of the research, all necessary ethical requirements were observed. Specifically, in the qualitative strand, participants were informed about the details of the study prior to the interviews, and the interview guide was shared with them in advance. They provided informed consent, and pseudonyms were assigned to ensure confidentiality. After each interview, transcripts were returned to participants, allowing them to review the content and request any corrections related to confidentiality. Participants also had the right to withdraw at any point, in which case their transcripts were excluded from the analysis. Regarding the quantitative strand, participants were informed about the research objectives, and all questionnaires were completed anonymously.

Figure 2. Dendrogram on the contexts in which anger is



Data analysis of the qual part

While in the standard presentation of the parts of the methodology, data analysis follows the construction of data collection tool, in the sequential MMR design we implemented, data analysis of the qual part shaped the data collection tool for the quant part and for that reason we have to present it first. We applied a modified version of Template Analysis in which the transcribed interviews were coded by using as a coding framework the concepts of the research questions. Then we crosstabulated the three emotions and the ways of dealing with them with the informants while in the cells the codes of each informant were presented. As a result, we created two tables, one in which the three emotions were crosstabulated with the informants and one in which the ways of dealing with positive and negative emotions were crosstabulated with the informants. Finally, by reading horizontally each line of the tables, we constructed hierarchical dendrograms, each of which captures the diversity of the codes. The added value of this analytic procedure is that we brought to light the relational contexts in which various events occur and in which these three emotions are activated. Grey frames denote the events and in the frames with the dotted lines, we provide the most prominent codes which capture teachers' lived experiences. For reasons of illustration, in the next figure we provide the hierarchical dendrogram on anger.

Construction of the data collection tool

These hierarchical dendrograms formed the basis for developing the data collection tool used in the quantitative phase. We created five indexes corresponding to: (a) the three emotions and (b) the two ways of handling frustration and anger. Each index included items derived from the dotted-line frames in the dendrograms, designed to capture the four relational contexts identified during the qualitative data analysis. The following table presents the indexes for the three emotions, illustrating two items from each relational context due to space and word limitations. For the same reasons, we do not present findings from how sample participants dealt with frustration and anger.

As a result, we developed a research instrument consisting of (a) demographic variables (teachers' years of teaching experience and educational qualifications) and (b) the five indexes described above. The tool was piloted with thirty teachers to assess the time required for completion and to obtain feed-

Table 1. Sample questionnaire items as emerged from the qual strand

«I have experienced (in the last 5 years, in case that your teaching experience is more than 20 years) to a large extent anger/frustration/positive emotions with school headteacher/colleagues/students/parents... »				
	School headteacher	Colleagues	Students	Parents
Anger	Due to being assigned duties beyond my official responsibilities.	Due to unequal distribution of duties / responsibilities	Due to delinquent behavior (e.g. bullying)	Due to interference with my work (e.g. questioning or underestimating my work, interfering with teaching, etc.)
	Due to discriminatory behavior (gender, sexist, and discriminatory treatment in general).	Due to aggressive and offensive behavior towards me	Due to failure to follow classroom moral standards/ classroom norms.	Due to tensions and conflicts within the school community.
Frustration	Due to lack of teamwork and collaborative problem-solving.	Due to lack of cooperation.	Due to a lack of emotional connection with me.	Due to the limitation of their child's sociability, due to personal differences with other parents.
	Due to a lack of understanding about the workload.	Due to indifference and unwillingness to take office.	Due to inability to meet the requirements of the course and poor performance.	Due to selfish behavior and concern only for their own child.
Well-being	Due to the correct handling of critical situations with the students	Due to cooperation on school issues and a sign of professionalism.	Due to the expression of interest in the educational process and school life.	Because of the willingness to cooperate with the teacher.
	Due to the cultivation of a climate of cooperation and collective decision-making	Due to the demonstration of genuine care and respect for the students.	Because of an expression of practical love and respect for teachers.	Because they turned to me for advice (about their child and his school career).

1 = Never

2 = Rarely

3 = Repeatedl

back on the clarity of the items. Descriptive statistics, Pearson’s r, chi-square tests, and t-tests were the main statistical procedures applied for analyzing the quantitative data.

Results

With regard to Research Question 1, the analysis revealed no significant differences between novice and experienced teachers in terms of the contexts in which anger and frustration were experienced. The only statistically significant difference concerned positive emotions (Table 1).

Table 1. Mean differences of Well-being between experienced and novice teachers in relation to the four relational contexts.

	Teaching experience	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Well-being in relation to school headteacher	More than 20 years	88	97.53	8583.00
	Less than 8 years	85	76.09	6468.00
	Total	173		
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)			.004	
Well-being in relation to colleagues	More than 20 years	88	100.03	8802.50
	Less than 8 years	85	73.51	6248.50
	Total	173		
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)			< .001	
Well-being in relation to students	More than 20 years	88	94.62	8326.50
	Less than 8 years	85	79.11	6724.50
	Total	173		
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)			.022	
Well-being in relation to parents	More than 20 years	88	98.22	8643.50
	Less than 8 years	85	75.38	6407.50
	Total	173		
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)			.001	

Specifically, the Mann–Whitney test indicated that experienced teachers reported higher levels of well-being in their relationships with colleagues, the school headteacher, students, and parents compared to novice teachers. This finding suggests that well-being is more easily articulated and experienced

by experienced teachers than by their novice counterparts. Using Pearson's r to examine bivariate correlations, a distinct pattern emerged regarding the contexts in which anger, frustration, and well-being co-occurred. These relationships are presented in the following tables.

Table 2. Bivariate correlations of anger with the four conditions

Anger in relation to	School admin	Colleagues	Students	Parents
Anger in relation to				
School admin		$r = .583$ $p < .001$		$r = .369$ $p < .001$
Colleagues			$r = .322$ $p < .001$	$r = .488$ $p < .001$
Students				$r = .453$ $p < .001$

Table 3. Bivariate correlations of frustration with the four conditions

Frustration in relation to	School admin	Colleagues	Students	Parents
Frustration in relation to				
School admin		$r = .601$ $p < .001$	$r = .227$ $p < .001$	$r = .350$ $p < .001$
Colleagues			$r = .402$ $p < .001$	$r = .510$ $p < .001$
Students				$r = .612$ $p < .001$

Table 4. Bivariate correlations of well-being with the four conditions

well-being in relation to	School admin	Colleagues	Students	Parents
well-being in relation to				
School admin		$r = .483$ $p < .001$	$r = .227$ $p < .001$	$r = .350$ $p < .001$
Colleagues			$r = .402$ $p < .001$	$r = .512$ $p < .001$
Students				$r = .643$ $p < .001$

Across the three tables, it can be observed that anger, frustration, and well-being are experienced within the same relational contexts. Specifically, teachers' relationships with (a) school administration and colleagues, (b) colleagues and parents, and (c) students and parents appear to elicit all three types of emotional experiences – anger, frustration, and positive feelings.

To address the second research question, we juxtaposed the findings from the qualitative and quantitative components, as presented in Tables 5, 6, and 7, and in Figure 2.

Table 5. Manifest effect sizes for the contexts in which ANGER is produced

No of interviews – INSTANCES	Contexts in which ANGER is produced				Total
	Relations with school administration	Relations with colleagues	Relations with students	Relations with parents	
1	7	2	3	4	16
2	7	2	4	2	15
3	5	1	1	4	11
4	6	2	2	2	12
5	2	3	3	2	10
6	1	1	3	1	6
7	4	2	2	2	10
8	1	3	2	3	7
9	1	1	2	1	5
10	1	1	1	1	4
11	0	1	2	0	3
12	0	0	0	2	2
13	1	1	2	2	6
14	0	0	0	1	1
15	2	1	1	1	5
16	2	0	1	1	4
17	1	1	2	2	5
18	1	2	0	2	5
19	2	1	1	0	4
20	0	0	1	3	4
21	3	1	0	2	6
22	2	1	1	2	6
Total	45 (30.3%)	27 (18.6%)	34 (23.4%)	40 (27.5%)	145

Table 6. Manifest effect sizes for the contexts in which FRUSTRATION is produced

No of interviews – INSTANCES	Contexts in which FRUSTRATION is produced				Total
	Relations with school administration	Relations with colleagues	Relations with students	Relations with parents	
1	2	2	2	4	10
2	1	1	0	2	4
3	3	0	0	0	3
4	0	3	1	0	4
5	3	0	3	6	9
6	2	0	0	3	5
7	4	0	1	3	8
8	4	2	1	1	8
9	3	2	0	0	5
10	1	2	1	2	6
11	0	0	2	2	4
12	0	0	2	2	4
13	1	1	0	2	4
14	1	3	0	1	5
15	0	2	0	1	3
16	0	2	1	0	3
17	0	3	0	2	5
18	1	1	2	1	4
19	1	0	0	3	4
20	1	0	0	0	1
21	2	0	0	3	5
22	0	0	1	0	1
Total	30 (27.5%)	24 (22%)	17 (15.5%)	38 (34.8%)	109

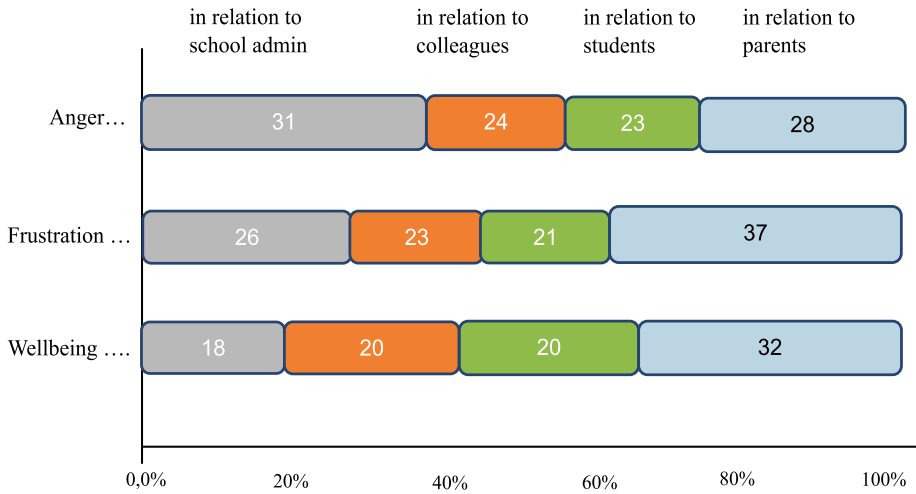
In the cells of the three tables, the number of codes corresponding to each theme per participant is presented. At the end of each column, the total number of codes for each theme within a given context is summed vertically in the final row. By calculating the frequency of each theme from the inter-respondent matrix, the prevalence rate of each theme can be determined. These frequencies also serve as manifest effect sizes (Onwuegbuzie & Hitchcock, 2020), that is, effect sizes referring to directly observable content.

Table 7. Manifest effect sizes for the contexts in which POSITIVE EMOTIONS are produced

No of interviews – INSTANCES	Contexts in which POSITIVE EMOTIONS are produced				
	Relations with school administration	Relations with colleagues	Relations with students	Relations with parents	Total
1	3	4	2	1	
2	2	4	2	3	
3	0	2	3	4	
4	0	2	3	2	
5	0	3	2	1	
6	1	2	2	1	
7	2	1	1	1	
8	1	0	4	2	
9	0	0	0	0	
10	2	0	0	2	
11	0	2	0	1	
12	2	0	0	1	
13	0	1	0	0	
14	2	1	0	1	
15	2	1	0	1	
16	0	1	1	0	
17	1	0	1	1	
18	0	1	0	0	
19	0	0	1	0	
20	1	0	1	0	
21	1	0	1	0	
22	0	1	0	1	
Total	20 (21.5%)	26 (28%)	24 (25.8%)	23 (24.7%)	93

An examination of Tables 5 and 6 indicates that the two contexts with the highest manifest effect sizes for anger and frustration are relations with school administration and relations with parents (30.3% and 27.5%, respectively, for anger – Table 5; and 27.5% and 34.8%, respectively, for frustration – Table 6). This pattern appears to be mirrored in the distribution of anger and frustration across the four relational contexts, as illustrated in the descriptive statistics derived from the quantitative data analysis (Figure 2).

Figure 3. Quantitative distribution of the negative emotions across the four relational contexts



This distribution indicates that anger and frustration tend to be activated repeatedly and more frequently in teachers' relationships with school administrators and parents. In contrast, the manifest effect sizes for well-being suggest a more uniform activation across the four relational contexts (Table 7), a pattern that is also partially reflected in Figure 2. The percentages corresponding to the three relational contexts that promote teachers' well-being are relatively close to one another, with the exception of well-being in relation to parents.

Although the integration of qualitative and quantitative data appears to corroborate the findings across both components, a more detailed and in-depth understanding of how the four relational contexts shape teachers' experiences of anger, frustration, and well-being requires further exploration. To address this question, we conducted a thematic analysis from which hierarchical dendrograms (such as that presented in Figure 1) were generated. Each dendrogram illuminates not only the four relational contexts in which anger, frustration, and well-being are experienced by teachers but also the specific events through which these emotions are activated. Table 8 summarizes this multifaceted information.

Table 8. Events in which anger, frustration and wellbeing are produced, in relation to the four conditions

	Relations with school admin	Relations with colleagues	Relations with students	Relations with parents
Events in which anger occurs	Uncollegial behaviour	Lack of social skills	Disregard for school rules	External interventions in teaching
	Anti-institutional behaviour		Lack of progress toward learning outcomes	Socialization patterns at odds with school norms
Events in which frustration occurs	Uncollegial behaviour	Lack of professionalism and collaboration	Disengagement from academic tasks	Lack of respectful and cooperative behavior
	Inability to manage school discipline		Lack of teacher–student emotional rapport	Inadequate student socialization
Events in which wellbeing occurs	Moral recognition of the teacher’s work	Collaborative and professional behavior toward colleagues	Engagement in the academic and social life of the classroom	Recognition of the teacher’s work and collaboration with them
	Fostering supportive school climate	Interest in students and in school life		

The following excerpts present an illustration of how we coded the interview material. Interviewee 17, when asked to narrate contexts of anger in school, recalled the following incidents:

Regarding the issue of teacher evaluation in the school, the school head didn’t even ask us what our position was. The teachers’ council is the one that decides on such matters. When we held a council meeting and I personally refused to participate in the Ministry’s evaluation process, she started making threats and using intimidation tactics, telling us: “Are you aware of the consequences of your actions?” I replied, “Yes, we are very well aware of them.” She said, “You will face disciplinary action, and there may be salary cuts.”

Once, in my classroom, a colleague reprimanded me in front of the students, saying in a tone: “Ms. ..., I would kindly ask you to lower your voice, because you are disturbing the lesson.”

I remember a time when I wanted to change a student’s seat because he was talking and making noise with a classmate. I had warned them several

times, but they wouldn't stop. I told him to move to the front desk, and he refused, saying to me, "No, I won't sit there." I explained the reason, but he still refused and said, "Who are you to tell me what to do?" At that point, I lost my temper and slammed my hand on the desk.

One time, when two girls had a fight, the father of one of them verbally attacked me and insulted me, threatening me. I reported it to the principal and was ready to call the police.

All these narrative fragments were coded as 'anger in relation with the admin', 'anger in relation with colleagues', 'anger in relation with the students' and 'anger in relation with parents', respectively, while in each of these codes a brief comment as to why anger happened was added. Table 8 provides a detailed account of why negative emotions – anger and frustration – are produced within specific relational contexts. For example, in their relationships with the school headteacher, teachers' anger is triggered either by uncollegial behaviors (e.g., lack of empathy or sexist discrimination) or by anti-institutional behaviors (e.g., insufficient attention to bureaucratic responsibilities). Similarly, teachers experience anger in relation to parents when parents interfere with teaching or exhibit socialization patterns that conflict with school norms. Frustration with colleagues is particularly intense when colleagues display a lack of professionalism or fail to collaborate effectively. In this way, the analysis highlights the complexity of emotional experiences by revealing the multiple causal pathways through which anger and frustration emerge. The same principle applies to well-being. For instance, teachers' well-being is enhanced when their work is recognized by parents and when they can collaborate positively with them.

These findings can be interpreted through the theoretical framework underpinning our research. Within this framework, power is conceptualized as a form of social relationship characterized by unwilling compliance, whereas status relations are defined by recognition and a sense of belonging. Status relations occur when one actor complies with another's request or command voluntarily, as an expression of respect or esteem, rather than through coercion. We argue that teachers' negative emotions arise when power is exercised over them by members of the school administration (e.g., school headteachers or principals) in ways that are unexpected or perceived as disrespectful, such as imposing irrelevant duties through hierarchical authority. In contrast, teachers' relationships with colleagues, students, and parents are predominantly status relations. Accordingly, anger often emerges when teachers feel that

their work is not respected (in relations with students and parents) or that they do not belong to a community (in relations with colleagues). Similarly, frustration arises when power relations are unexpectedly invoked in interactions with school administration or when teachers perceive that their status is undermined in interactions with colleagues, students, or parents. The opposite reasoning applies to well-being, which is enhanced when status relations are recognized and respected. By applying this theoretical framework, we provide a micro-sociological explanation of emotion activation, revealing the specific social mechanisms that generate emotions while preserving the causal complexity of how emotions are shaped within school contexts.

Discussion

This study sought to explore how primary school teachers experience anger, frustration, and well-being across different relational contexts, comparing novice and experienced teachers through an exploratory sequential mixed methods design. The findings advance existing literature by illuminating how these emotions are socially embedded rather than solely psychological, and by demonstrating that emotional experiences in schools are conditioned by relational and institutional contexts.

Whereas earlier work emphasized the impact of inadequate administrative support or poor collegial collaboration on stress and burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2019; Lindqvist et al., 2022), our analysis reveals a more intricate relational pattern: anger, frustration, and well-being emerge within the same relational contexts, suggesting that the emotional tone of school life is produced through ongoing interactions rather than discrete situational triggers. The co-occurrence of positive and negative emotions within identical contexts points to the relational ambivalence of teachers' professional lives – a dimension rarely addressed in prior studies that tend to treat emotions as isolated psychological outcomes.

Moreover, the finding that experienced teachers report higher levels of well-being across all relational contexts nuances existing claims that professional longevity is associated with emotional exhaustion and cynicism (Huberman, 1993; Hong, 2012). Instead, the present results suggest that experience may foster emotional regulation and social competence, allowing teachers to transform potentially negative encounters into manageable or even positive experiences. This aligns with the view that emotional well-being is not a static

trait but a relational achievement sustained through accumulated social capital within the school community.

The study's novelty lies not only in its findings but also in its methodological and theoretical framing. Unlike most mixed methods studies in the field (e.g., Pillen et al., 2013; Kokkinos & Stavropoulos, 2021; Yurtseven & Saraç, 2022), where qualitative data serve a secondary or confirmatory role, the present design integrates both strands in a genuinely reciprocal manner. The qualitative findings directly informed the construction of the quantitative instrument, while the quantitative results were re-contextualized through qualitative interpretation. This integrative strategy allowed for the identification of the causal configurations underlying emotional activation – something unattainable through either approach alone.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample, while diverse in teaching experience, was limited to a specific regional and cultural context, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings. Teacher emotions are known to be shaped by broader institutional and policy environments, and future research should therefore examine cross-regional or international comparisons to capture how structural factors influence emotional dynamics. Second, although the mixed methods design provided depth and complementarity, the cross-sectional nature of the data restricts the ability to explore emotional change over time. Longitudinal or ethnographic studies could further illuminate how teachers' emotional patterns evolve across different stages of their careers. Third, while this study focused on anger, frustration, and well-being, other emotions such as hope, pride, or compassion could enrich future analyses of the emotional ecology of teaching.

Declarations

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Promoting teacher wellbeing in initial education programs: perspectives from Albanian universities

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Abstract. This study explores the perceptions and recommendations of university lecturers from four Albanian public universities regarding the improvement of teacher education programs in primary and preschool education. The focus is placed on fostering student teachers’ resilience, stress awareness, and strategies for burnout prevention. Adopting a qualitative exploratory design, focus groups were conducted with 35 lecturers from the universities of Durrës, Korça, Shkodra, and Vlora. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis using an inductive approach, revealing key themes across institutions. The findings highlight a broad consensus on the need to balance theoretical content with practical experience, strengthen reflective and emotional skills, and incorporate modules on emotional intelligence and stress management. The study also identifies a lack of systematic approaches in the development of students’ emotional and professional preparedness, emphasizing the need to train resilient and self-aware future teachers. These results have direct implications for the redesign of teacher education curricula and the development of higher education policies that promote sustainable teacher well-being and professional growth.

Introduction

The teaching profession in Albania has undergone profound transformation over the past three decades, shaped by far-reaching political, social, and technological changes. The transition from a one-party system to a democratic society, coupled with rapid developments in technology and globalization, has directly influenced both public expectations of schools and the evolving role of teachers (Kashahu, Zenelaga-Shehu, & Sotirofski, 2020). Within this new landscape, teaching extends far beyond its traditional boundaries. Today, Albanian teachers are expected not only to impart knowledge but also to assume a pivotal role in the emotional and social education of students. Initiatives such as UNICEF's Social-Emotional Learning program and the Early Warning System exemplify ongoing efforts to prepare teachers to meet these expanded responsibilities (UNICEF Albania, 2023). Similarly, recent scholarship highlights the urgent need to strengthen the competencies of early childhood educators in order to support the socio-emotional development of young children (Plakolli, 2024).

The role of teachers in Albania has thus shifted significantly, encompassing both the transmission of knowledge and the provision of emotional and social support to students. This transformation necessitates deeper preparation and stronger coping capacities, which remain insufficiently embedded in initial teacher education. Studies by Kashahu, Petani, and Ntalla (2021), Hoti and Kafia (2024), and Plakolli (2024) underscore persistent gaps in the psychological preparation of teacher candidates, particularly regarding socio-emotional competence. These findings highlight the imperative to integrate modules on resilience, stress management, and emotional development into teacher education curricula. In the same vein, research by Kashahu, Beshiri, and Sotirofski (2024) demonstrates that the absence of mental health knowledge among pre-service teachers negatively affects their well-being, pointing to yet another dimension insufficiently addressed in professional preparation.

Faculties of Education in Albania, as the primary agents of initial teacher formation, bear a critical responsibility in equipping future teachers to navigate the demanding realities of their profession. While efforts have been made over the years to enhance the quality of study programs, analyses consistently reveal that psychological preparedness, resilience-building, and structured strategies for coping with stress remain marginal in existing curricula (Kashahu, Petani, & Ntalla, 2021). This omission constitutes a serious gap, particularly given the

robust body of international literature that demonstrates how the inclusion of modules focused on self-efficacy and coping skills contributes to the prevention of burnout and strengthens teachers' readiness for the emotionally demanding nature of contemporary classrooms (Mariani et al., 2020; Ricafrente & Derelo, 2023). Furthermore, international frameworks—such as the European curriculum initiatives promoting resilience—stress the importance of embedding psychosocial competences in pre-service teacher education (Cavioni et al., 2023).

In the Albanian context, recent studies have equally emphasized the role of educational psychology in mitigating anxiety and enhancing the emotional well-being of young people, underscoring the decisive role teachers can play provided they receive adequate preparation (Telhaj & Çaçi, 2024). Within this perspective, the activation of coping strategies and emotional self-regulation emerges as essential for fostering learning effectiveness and preparing prospective teachers for the multifaceted challenges of modern classrooms. Taken together, these findings call for a profound curricular re-examination, ensuring that initial teacher education provides not only pedagogical knowledge but also systematic support for the development of emotional resilience and coping competences among future educators.

Literature Review

Professional resilience in Teaching is increasingly recognized as a crucial factor for sustaining long-term engagement in the teaching profession, particularly during crises or in contexts of social and economic strain (Diab & Green, 2024; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Le Cornu, 2013). Resilience enables teachers to adapt positively to challenges, maintain well-being, and safeguard their motivation in demanding circumstances. Recent scholarship emphasizes that teacher self-efficacy and resilience are negatively correlated with burnout, while emotional regulation exerts indirect positive effects through resilience (Li et al., 2023). These findings confirm that resilience is not merely an individual trait but a professional competence that can and should be cultivated through structured preparation.

The initial teacher education (ITE) period is widely viewed as decisive for establishing both pedagogical expertise and emotional capacities. Scholars argue that resilience, emotional regulation, and coping strategies should be systematically embedded in this formative stage (Beltman, 2021; Mansfield, Papatraianou, McDonough, & King, 2018). Evidence indicates that reflective

practices, mental health modules, and emotional awareness training during ITE significantly reduce vulnerability to stress and burnout in the early years of teaching (Arvidsson et al., 2021; Salmela-Aro et al., 2022). Mansfield et al. (2016) propose a framework for cultivating resilience through explicit training, while Acton and Glasgow (2015) show that programs integrating stress management and emotional awareness enhance teacher persistence.

Global research consistently demonstrates that preparedness for stress management and psychosocial well-being is a decisive predictor of professional longevity (Karnovsky & Beltman, 2025; Turner et al., 2022). Programs that integrate resilience-building, emotional regulation, and social support have been shown to lower burnout rates and improve retention (Cavioni et al., 2023; Mariani et al., 2020; Derelo & Ricafrente, 2023). International organizations, such as the OECD and UNICEF, also stress the importance of equipping teachers with the skills to manage complex socio-emotional demands in rapidly changing classrooms (UNICEF Albania, 2023; OECD, 2021).

In Albania, legislative reforms (Law No. 69/2012; Law No. 80/2015) and ongoing curricular adjustments have aimed to align teacher education with European standards. However, empirical evidence shows that preparation for the emotional demands of teaching remains inconsistent and fragmented (Kashahu-Xhelilaj, Petani, & Ntalla, 2021). Faculties of Education have not yet fully integrated resilience training or stress management modules into ITE programs. Furthermore, Albania, together with Cyprus and Belarus, is among the few Bologna Process countries that have not implemented full learning-outcomes-based reforms in higher education (European Commission, 2018).

The challenges are further compounded by high societal expectations of teachers, limited institutional support (Day & Hong, 2022), and external stressors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, economic crises, and youth emigration pressures (OECD, 2021). These contextual factors heighten the urgency of curricular reform to strengthen resilience capacities and well-being strategies among future teachers. While international research provides robust frameworks for integrating resilience and emotional well-being in teacher education, the Albanian context lacks systematic implementation. There is limited empirical evidence on how local Faculties of Education conceptualize and address resilience, stress management, and burnout prevention in their curricula. This study therefore seeks to analyze the perspectives of lecturers from four Albanian public universities (Durrës, Korça, Shkodra, and Vlora) regarding general improvements to teacher education programs

and the specific preparation of students to be resilient, stress-aware, and capable of applying effective coping strategies.

Methodology

Research Approach

This study used a descriptive qualitative design, informed by a narrative research approach, which is appropriate for uncovering the complex experiences and perceptions of lecturers regarding teacher education programs in Albania. Qualitative research emphasizes depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization, thus illuminating how participants construct meaning within their professional contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Tisdell, Merriam & Stuckey-Peyrot, 2025). This approach was particularly appropriate given the limited studies addressing initial teacher education in Albania, particularly with regard to the holistic evaluation of pre-primary and primary teacher education programs and the extent to which these programs prepare future teachers with resilience and stress management skills to successfully face the challenges of the profession.

Instruments and Data Collection

Data were collected through four focus group discussions, with one focus group conducted at each participating university (Universities of Durrës, Korça, Shkodra, and Vlora). Focus groups were selected as the primary data collection method due to their ability to facilitate collective meaning-making and generate dialogic insights that extend beyond those typically obtained through individual interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

The focus group discussions were structured around two guiding questions addressed to lecturers in the BA/MA and Preschool Education programs: (1) How do you evaluate the BA/MA and Preschool Education programs in terms of their contribution to the preparation of future teachers? (1a) What shortcomings have you identified? (1b) What suggestions do you have for improving these programs? (2) To what extent do these curricula prepare students to develop resilience, recognize stress, and prevent burnout?

A semi-structured discussion protocol, informed by international literature, ensured consistency and comparability across all focus group sessions while allowing space for the inductive exploration of emerging issues.

Participants and Procedure

The study included 35 lecturers (28 female, 7 male) from the Universities of Durrës, Korça, Shkodra, and Vlora, all teaching in the Primary and Preschool Education programs (see Table 1). Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Patton, 2015; Tisdell, Merriam & Stuckey-Peyrot, 2025) to ensure direct engagement with the phenomena under investigation. Data collection took place between April and June within the faculties of education, with each focus group lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. Sessions were audio-recorded with participants’ informed consent, following approval by the department leadership and in accordance with ethical research standards.

Table 1. Sample Composition of Lecturers by University and Gender

University	Female Lecturers	Male Lecturers	Total Lecturers
Durrës	6	1	7
Korçë	7	2	9
Shkodër	6	3	9
Vlorë	9	1	10
Total	28	7	35

Data Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process entailed iterative familiarization, open coding, theme construction, and refinement to ensure coherence across the dataset (Nowell et al., 2017). To enhance trustworthiness, multiple strategies were employed: peer debriefing within the research team to cross-validate codes, careful documentation of analytic decisions to ensure auditability, and triangulation across universities to capture contextual variation. These measures enhanced the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of findings, thereby strengthening the robustness of the qualitative insights presented.

Findings and Discussion

Lecturers Perspectives on Program Quality and Suggested Improvements

The analysis of focus groups with academic staff from “Aleksandër Moisiu” University (Durrës), “Fan S. Noli” University (Korça), “Luigj Gurakuqi”

University (Shkodra), and “Ismail Qemali” University (Vlora) revealed consistent concerns regarding the design and effectiveness of Bachelor programs in Primary and Pre-School Education, highlighting opportunities for improvement.

Balance Between Theory and Practice

Balance Between Theory and Practice Across all four institutions, lecturers emphasized the persistent challenge of bridging theoretical knowledge with practical application:

- **Durrës:** *“Students are well-prepared theoretically, but when they encounter real situations, they feel unprepared to manage the class, emotions, and complex dynamics.”* – (Lecturer, Durrës)
- **Korça:** *“Programs need restructuring to be more functional for today’s school realities.”* – (Lecturer, Korça)
- **Shkodra:** *“In theory, students understand concepts well, but in practice, they feel insecure. We need to strengthen practical components.”* – (Didactics Lecturer, Shkodra)
- **Vlora:** *“Teachers graduate with substantial theoretical knowledge, but lack practical experience and do not know how to respond in challenging situations.”* – (Primary Education Lecturer, Vlora)

These findings align with international literature emphasizing the importance of integrating theory and practice in teacher education programs, ensuring students develop not only cognitive knowledge but also applied pedagogical skills (Berry, Depaepe & Van Driel, 2016). The consistency of these concerns across institutions suggests a systemic issue in Albanian teacher education programs, where theoretical preparation dominates over experiential learning.

Reflective Practice and Formative Feedback

Lecturers highlighted the critical role of Reflective Practice and Formative Feedback in professional development:

- **Durrës:** *“Students should learn to reflect on experiences, receive feedback, and consciously improve.”* – (Lecturer, UAMD)
- **Korça:** *“Reflective activities and mentorship were suggested to help students confront challenges constructively.”* – (Lecturer, Korça)
- **Shkodra:** *“Emphasis was placed on developing emotional and communicative skills to enhance classroom readiness.”* – (Lecturer, Shkodra)

- **Vlora:** “*Extended practice opportunities and mentorship are crucial, as are strong communication and language skills for effective teaching.*” – (Pre-School Education Lecturer, Vlora)

These insights are consistent with the literature on reflective teaching and formative assessment, highlighting the need for structured opportunities for students to critically evaluate their practice and receive constructive guidance (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Tack & Vanderlinde, 2014). By embedding reflection and feedback into curricula, programs can foster a culture of continuous professional learning.

Continuous Professional Development of Lecturers

Lecturers emphasized that their own professional growth is essential for improving program quality and integrating research-based approaches into teaching:

- **Durrës:** “As lecturers, we need more professional development opportunities to integrate research experiences with teaching.” – (Lecturer, UAMD)

Professional development is supported by literature as a mechanism for enhancing teaching quality and incorporating innovative pedagogical strategies (Tack & Vanderlinde, 2014). This underscores the dual focus required: developing both student competencies and instructor capabilities.

Lecturers’ Recommendations for General Program Improvement

Some of the lecturers’ recommendations for the overall improvement of teacher education programs at the Universities of Durrës, Korçë, Shkodër, and Vlorë include:

- Increase practical training through case-based learning, simulations, and extended field placements.
- Incorporate structured reflective modules and mentorship programs to support experiential learning.
- Strengthen professional development opportunities for lecturers to integrate contemporary and research-informed pedagogical practices.

Lecturer Perspectives on Curricular Efficacy for Resilience, Stress, and Burnout Management

Focus group discussions across all universities (Universities of Durrës, Korça, Shkodra, and Vlora) highlighted gaps in the preparation of students to recognize and manage stress, develop resilience, and prevent burnout, echo-

ing concerns reported in international studies on teacher well-being (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Vallés & Clarà, 2023).

Awareness of Stress and Burnout Indicators

Students frequently demonstrated limited awareness of early warning signs of emotional fatigue and burnout:

- **Durrës:** “Students are often unaware that repeated emotional fatigue is a sign of burnout and the need for support.” – (Lecturer, UAMD)
- **Korça:** “We do not prepare students for stress and the emotional difficulties they face in the field. This is a serious gap in their training.” – (Lecturer, Korçë)
- **Shkodra:** “Continuous training and mentorship were identified as essential for sustaining teacher motivation and managing stress”. – (Lecturer, Shkodra)
- **Vlorë:** “Teachers must have opportunities to develop stress management skills, not only during their studies but throughout their careers.” – (Pre-School Education Lecturer, Vlora)

These findings emphasize the importance of integrating socio-emotional learning and stress management strategies into teacher education, consistent with research on socio-emotional competence as a prerequisite for effective teaching (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Strategies for Building Resilience.

Lecturers suggested practical, reflective, and mentorship-based strategies to foster resilience:

- Durrës: “Students can develop resilience if placed in real situations with sufficient support and guided reflection.” – (Lecturer, UAMD)
- Korçë: Integration of reflective activities and mentor support can enhance students’ ability to cope with challenging classroom situations.
- Shkodër: Ongoing mentorship was highlighted as a mechanism to maintain engagement and motivation while managing professional stress.
- Vlorë: “Resilience and emotional regulation develop when students engage in guided practical experiences supported by reflection and mentorship.” – (Primary Education Lecturer, Vlorë)

Lecturers of Universities of Durrës, Korça, Shkodra, and Vlora recommendations for Enhancing Resilience and Stress Management:

- Introduce structured modules addressing stress, emotional well-being, and burnout prevention within practical teaching contexts.
- Embed reflective practices and mentorship to strengthen students' resilience and socio-emotional competencies.
- Develop supportive networks and learning environments that encourage guided reflection and the sharing of coping strategies.

Convergence of Findings Across All Four Albanian Universities for Overall Program Improvement

Analysis of the data from all four universities (Durrës, Korçë, Shkodër, and Vlorë) reveals consistent themes and suggestions for the improvement of teacher education programs across the Albanian context:

1. **Practical Preparation:** While theoretical instruction is strong, students frequently lack hands-on experience, limiting their readiness to navigate complex classroom dynamics.
2. **Reflective and Emotional Competencies:** Programs underutilize reflective practice, formative feedback, and socio-emotional skill development, which are critical for professional growth and student resilience.
3. **Faculty Development:** The quality of instruction is closely linked to the professional development opportunities available to lecturers, reinforcing the need for sustained training and research engagement.
4. **Resilience and Stress Management:** Integrating structured strategies to foster resilience, recognize stress, and prevent burnout is essential for preparing teachers capable of maintaining well-being and professional effectiveness.

Overall, these findings reinforce the global literature emphasizing the integration of practical experiences, reflective practices, and socio-emotional skill development in teacher education programs to produce competent, resilient, and adaptable educators (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Berry, Depaepe & Van Driel, 2016; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Vallés & Clarà, 2023).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the results of focus groups conducted with lecturers from Bachelor programs in Primary and Pre-school Education at the Department of Pedagogy, Aleksandër Moisiu University of Durrës (UAMD), the Department of Education at the University of Korçë, and the Departments of Teacher Edu-

cation at the Universities of Shkodër and Vlorë, a coherent picture emerges regarding both the strengths and areas for improvement of current teacher education programs. Lecturers across all four universities have developed a clear vision of graduate profiles aligned with national teacher standards, reflecting a strong commitment to program quality and alignment with professional expectations. Internal evaluation processes related to accreditation have further heightened awareness of program quality and the rigor of assessment practices, enhancing reflective practices within the academic staff.

Lecturers reported that, despite the modest initial competencies of some students, they are making exceptional efforts to motivate learners and engage them in meaningful and results-oriented educational experiences. The inclusion of students in research tasks is widely recognized as a critical component for achieving the expected program outcomes, while interactive teaching methods are increasingly employed to enhance student participation and engagement. Across all institutions, pedagogical practice—particularly active, reflective, and discussion-based practice—is viewed as the pinnacle of program achievement. At UAMD, diploma defenses also serve as important reflective moments, fostering continuous improvement through in-depth discussion and analysis of program results.

Despite these strengths, a recurring theme across all focus groups is the gap between theoretical foundations and practical application. Curricula provide solid theoretical knowledge but fail to systematically link it with the daily realities of teaching. Structured modules on stress management and burnout prevention are largely absent, exposing prospective teachers to higher risk in contexts of high professional demand (Hascher, Beltman, & Mansfield, 2021). Recent literature confirms that teacher burnout levels are significant—particularly during and following periods of crisis—and that organizational factors and the absence of social or paraprofessional support are primary determinants (Ozamiz-Etxebarria, Legorburu Fernández, Lipnicki, Idoiaga Mondragón, & Santabárbara, 2023).

To address these challenges, an integrative approach is recommended, combining individual-level training in emotional self-regulation and cognitive-behavioral techniques, group-level interventions such as peer support and mentoring, and organizational-level adjustments including workload management and structured practicum experiences (Haidusek-Niazy, Huyler, & Carpenter, 2023; Zhang & Luo, 2023). Practically, it is advised that all four universities harmonize a minimal intervention package that includes: a standardized module

on Teacher Mental Health and Stress Management, a case-based practicum to link theory with practice, and a hybrid mentorship/peer-support system incorporating both in-person and online components. The effects of these interventions should be measured using validated instruments for teacher well-being and burnout, with results reported transparently to inform the wider adoption of best practices.

By implementing these evidence-based, multi-level interventions, teacher education programs can enhance graduates' resilience, emotional competence, and practical readiness, ultimately contributing to sustainable improvements in teacher well-being, professional retention, and the quality of educational outcomes (Hascher et al., 2021; Kong, 2021; Mijakoski et al., 2022). Such integrated reforms are critical to ensuring that future teachers are well-equipped to meet the complex demands of contemporary classrooms while maintaining personal and professional health.

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Relationships with students as an element of building the well-being of academic teachers

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Abstract. The aim of this article is explore how students attitudes, situations, and relational contexts with students affect the well-being of academic teachers employed at the Maria Grzegorzewska University in Warsaw. The research was qualitative and two research techniques were used: the projective technique and autoethnography. A total of 27 descriptions of situations related to the relationships between students and academic teachers that are important for their well-being were analyzed. The teachers surveyed identified several main areas that affect their well-being both positively and negatively. These are: the assessment and evaluation process, the attitude and commitment of teachers, the attitudes and behavior of students, the special educational needs of students, and organizational conditions. The research highlights the significance of social and instructional situations, as well as institutional conditions, that affect the well-being of academic teachers. Student behavior and relationships with students can both reinforce positive experiences and generate negative ones that disturb their psychological balance.

Introduction

Well-being is a general state of subjective happiness and satisfaction with life. A sense of well-being is the degree to which a person feels that their life is going well (Diener, Oishi, & Tay, 2018).

Due to the nature of their work (intellectual workload, constant contact with people, many areas of activity, demands and social pressure), academic teachers are a group particularly vulnerable to stress, burnout, and exhaustion (Ilczuk, Mykowska, & Ziętek, 2025; Piotrowski, et al., 2024), due to the high academic

demands placed on them, expectations of teaching excellence, and a range of administrative responsibilities. Their well-being is particularly important both for their mental health and for the quality of their work, including the educational outcomes of students (Halat, Soltani, Dalli, Alsarraj, & Malki, 2023).

In international literature (Carvajal & Guedea, 2021; Naidoo-Chetty & du Plessis, 2021; Watts & Robertson, 2011; Jayman, Glazzard, & Rose, 2022; Dreer, 2023; Laundon & Grant-Smith, 2023; Rahman, et al., 2024) the factors that are important for the well-being of academic staff mainly include: job satisfaction, stress levels, the need to combine multiple roles, job stability and security, mental health, institutional support, and relationships with students.

The academic community is an integral whole in which all groups are interrelated, and the well-being and quality of life of staff is linked to the well-being and quality of life of students, and vice versa. Positive interactions and relationships between students and teachers can promote the well-being of both teachers and students (Riva, et al., 2020). Teaching situations trigger positive and negative emotions in teachers (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014).

Aim of the study and research problem

This study aimed to identify the key factors influencing academic teachers well-being in the context of their interactions with students. The research problem was defined as follows: how do students attitudes, situations, and relational contexts with students affect the level of well-being of academic teachers employed at the Maria Grzegorzewska University in Warsaw.

Research methodology

Two research techniques were used in the study: projective technique and autoethnography. Academic teachers employed at the Maria Grzegorzewska University in Warsaw were asked to describe situations in which it was clear that the well-being, relationships, and behavior of students had an impact on their well-being, self-esteem, and well-being. Responses were collected using an online form (Google Forms) from June to July 2025. A total of 12 situations, described by 9 anonymous participants, were collected and analyzed¹. The participants professional experience in academia ranged from 2 to 21 years.

¹ To increase clarity in the analysis, participants were assigned random pseudonyms.

The second technique used in the study was autoethnographic research by both authors of the article. Taking into account the different contexts and experiences of both authors extends and complements the statements obtained online. Joanna is a university professor with 23 years of experience, and Patrycja is a second-year doctoral student with two years of experience as an academic teacher. The autoethnographic statements yielded 15 descriptions of various situations that, according to the authors, are important for their well-being.

A total of 27 descriptions of situations were collected and subjected to qualitative analysis. The material was coded and categorized, identifying five main categories of academic teachers experiences that, in the opinion of the respondents, had an impact on their well-being. These include: the assessment and evaluation process, the attitude and commitment of teachers, the attitudes and behaviors of students, the special educational needs of students, and organizational conditions. In each category, a distinction was made between situations that enhance the well-being of academic teachers and those that disrupt it.

Results

The presentation of results refers to the main categories identified in the analysis process.

Assessment and evaluation

Within the category of assessment and evaluation, two subcategories were distinguished: the process of assessing students and the assessment of teachers work. In the student assessment process subcategory, the factors that enhance well-being include, above all, thesis defenses, acceptance of diverse grades, clear assessment criteria, the creation of an assessment contract, the possibility of negotiating and improving grades, and support from senior teachers. On the other hand, factors that disrupt well-being included students entitlement attitude towards passing, cheating on exams, the teacher's inability to differentiate grades, unclear assessment criteria, feedback from graduates, and ethical dilemmas.

In the subcategory of teacher performance evaluation, factors enhancing well-being included gestures and words of appreciation, such as personal thanks, humorous gifts, applause after class or the awarding of prizes, direct contact after class, and providing feedback in surveys. Among the factors disrupting well-being, non-substantive evaluation of teachers work was identified.

As Dominika emphasized, “student assessment issues are complex and emotionally engaging [...] and have a significant impact on the well-being and sense of purpose of academic teachers.” The theme of the impact of having or lacking the skills to formulate clear assessment rules and criteria on their well-being was repeated in the statements. Patrycja pointed out that in her first year of teaching, she was unable to differentiate grades skillfully and treated students who did not put in the effort to pass the course too leniently, which led her to believe that she was “doing a disservice to the more ambitious students.” Gaining knowledge about methods and strategies for assessing students gave the young teacher a sense of confidence. Acceptance and flexibility towards the differentiation of final grades, combined with the teachers open attitude towards the possibility of negotiation and improvement of grades by students, strengthens the sense of well-being, reduces pressure, and gives a sense of agency to both teachers and students. This is indicated by Iwona’s statement: “Thanks to the opportunity to discuss the final grade they received, [...] students were not only genuinely engaged and saw the meaning in their work, but were also able to express their opinions honestly, even those that were difficult – contrary to my opinions as the teacher. This [...] strengthened my sense of purpose [...] and strengthened the personal courage of the students.”

Joanna pointed out that participating in thesis defenses was a satisfying experience, filling her with pride and joy. Although the road to the defense was sometimes “painful,” the opportunity for students to present the results of their long-term work evoked positive feelings in the teacher. This can be interpreted as a feeling of professional satisfaction, a sense of meaning and fulfillment.

A recurring factor disrupting well-being in the area of assessment was the students demanding attitude towards passing. The respondents emphasized that the demanding tone of the students, their expectation of more lenient treatment due to their situation or due to the teacher’s short tenure and academic degree and cheating were situations that were “deeply moving,” “stressful,” “unpleasant, and demotivating”.

The second subcategory is the evaluation of teachers work. The respondents indicate the value of gestures, words of appreciation, and official awards given to them by students. Felicja mentioned: “Receiving the Academic Owl² made me feel that what I do is meaningful. [...] It gave me energy to continue my work. I felt great satisfaction and encouragement to act.” Receiving the

² An award granted by students of a given program to academic teachers.

award was a source of motivation, satisfaction, and a sense of purpose in her work. Students appreciation and trust in teachers is also a strong incentive to continue working. Gabriela emphasized that: “[...] if a student approaches me privately to ask something related to their personal dilemmas, it is also an honor for me,” and in another response, Hanna emphasized that positive comments even several years after the end of classes motivate teachers to continue their work and activities. Several responses repeated the importance of feedback obtained by teachers in end-of-semester surveys completed by students, which can be a source of motivation. Anna highlighted a situation in which students recalled the value of the integration classes she had conducted two years earlier, which confirmed for her that she had done a good job and was a source of satisfaction.

Joanna also refers to a situation where students provide feedback after classes on the way classes are conducted and knowledge is conveyed, both directly and in the form of surveys: “I really appreciate the comments in the student surveys. [...] I read the comments carefully because they confirm that I have done a good job.” Similar feelings are conveyed by the feedback received from graduates years later.

Patrycja’s self-reflection includes the theme of students’ appreciation of academic teachers in three aspects: gestures, direct contact, and opinions in USOS system surveys. Individual contact with students and asking questions about the practical side of studying, exams, or sharing professional dilemmas gave her a sense of rapport with her students and was interpreted as a sign of their trust in her. An unusual situation was pointed out that had a positive impact on the lecturers well-being in a stressful situation. After the class ended, “the group spontaneously began to applaud and give thumbs up.” Opinions in online evaluation surveys had a similar effect on the young teacher. Patrycja points out that when “I read in the comments on the course I was teaching that students remembered specific issues we discussed during the classes, I felt that I had chosen the right topics and materials for the classes.” At least three pieces of information can be gleaned from this statement: student opinions are important to young teachers, positive comments strengthen their motivation and confidence as educators, but equally importantly, they provide them with information on whether they are heading in the right direction in developing their teaching skills.

Positive behavior and comments from students are perceived by lecturers as a compliment, a distinction that gives them a sense of satisfaction and moti-

vation for their teaching work, and are particularly reinforcing in difficult moments. At the same time, the feeling that the knowledge imparted by the teacher has been remembered and is a source of inspiration has a positive impact on professional well-being, giving a sense of fulfillment and meaning to the work.

Teacher attitude and commitment

An analysis of statements concerning the impact of teachers attitudes and commitment on their well-being showed that positive behavior towards students has a real impact on student behavior, which in turn leads to an increased sense of well-being among teachers. Three subcategories have been identified within this category and codes have been assigned to them. In the subcategory of student support, factors that enhance well-being include activities such as motivating students and believing in their abilities. The subcategory of teaching activities includes preparing teaching aids, relying on one's own research, and the active involvement of the teacher during classes. In the subcategory of partnership relations with students, sharing responsibility for the teaching process and giving initiative to students were considered to enhance well-being.

The teachers pointed to situations where the hierarchical model of knowledge transfer was abandoned in favor of partnership, relationality, and giving initiative to students. The following example illustrates Iwona's statement: "Co-creating educational experiences allows for shared responsibility, which promotes well-being and enhances the simple joy of learning for all learners, including the teacher." The partnership between teachers and students is also reflected in another statement by Iwona, which shows that creating space for students to take the initiative gives both sides of the teaching process a sense of "reciprocity and genuine shared responsibility," and filling this space brings "joy and satisfaction stemming from the sense of co-creating [...] our meetings."

The respondents also pointed out that their high level of commitment during classes, as well as their preparation for classes (e.g., making teaching aids), affects the attitudes of students, who are lively and curious, which in turn affects the teachers sense of satisfaction with their work and encourages them to continue.

As Ewa notes, "referring to [...] reliable scientific research conducted by me influenced students to conduct their own research and made them curious about the results obtained," which indicates the important motivating role of the teacher in relation to students, while at the same time mobilizing

teachers to continue their work. Teachers belief in their students' abilities and their capacity to instill confidence in them are also factors that support teachers' well-being.

Student attitudes and behaviors

The category of student attitudes and behaviors includes a number of codes that both enhance and disrupt teachers well-being, assigned to three subcategories: engagement in the teaching process, developmental and intellectual resources, and personal culture.

Student behavior and attitudes are important for teachers well-being and give them satisfaction and a sense of fulfillment. Teachers notice a connection between their own engagement and student activity – the more a teacher is engaged in the teaching process, the more active students are during class, which has a positive effect on the teachers well-being. This is indicated by Gabriela's statements: "I usually put a lot of energy into teaching, and I can see that the students are lively and interested after class. Yes, I feel satisfied then," and Ewa's: "The classes not only motivate me to conduct further research and share the results, but I have also noticed great curiosity among the students and their motivation to take action."

Teachers perceive the students initiative and participation in the process of planning and conducting classes and establishing assessment rules as beneficial. Moving away from the hierarchical treatment of student-teacher relations creates space for partnership-based relations, which in turn lead to a sense of meaning in one's work and agency for both parties.

Joanna points to the use of above-average abilities, awareness of goals, intellectual curiosity, and internal motivation of students to participate in classes as giving "satisfaction from work and the value of the knowledge transferred." Important aspects that were also highlighted included personal culture (e.g., respect for others), compliance with social norms, and truthfulness.

Among the behaviors that disrupted their well-being, teachers pointed to dishonest behavior and a lack of commitment on the part of students, such as not completing tasks or not applying themselves to them. Most of the comments concerned a lack of personal culture on the part of students. Teachers pointed to the demanding, entitled tone of students, which significantly affected their sense of balance, increased stress, and disrupted their well-being, as illustrated by Dominika's statement: "(the student) wrote to me repeatedly, in an entitled tone [...]. I was deeply emotionally affected by this."

Patrycja cited an example of being disparaged as a teacher because of her short teaching experience, pointing to disrespectful behavior on the part of students, such as being late, talking loudly, and using phones in class. As she emphasized, this made her feel demotivated and upset, even though these were isolated incidents.

Teachers with longer experience pointed to the negative effects on their well-being of student behavior such as disrespect for teachers free time, e.g., texting in the morning or at night, expecting immediate responses, or burdening them with personal problems.

Special needs of students

During the analysis of the responses received, a category concerning the special needs of students was identified, which includes three subcategories: students with disabilities (taking advantage of their situation), students with limited competences (especially social and intellectual), and students in mental crisis – all of these factors were identified as disrupting well-being.

Joanna's experiences focus on students who had various types of disabilities (mobility, hearing) and used them to manipulate and be treated differently from the rest of the group, e.g., when passing a course or during classes (taking notes, actively participating in classes). Such situations are uncomfortable and can be a source of internal tension, as "there is a discrepancy between the need to care for a weaker person [...] and my need to implement the curriculum of a given subject and not succumb to the manipulation of these people." Such internal dilemmas concerning the desire to care for students with special needs and the need to enforce knowledge and prepare students for the teaching profession are perceived as a source of stress for teachers.

Another issue highlighted in the statements is the perceived lack of social or intellectual competence among students. It is particularly concerning that students with deficiencies in key skills required for working with people end up in teacher education programs.

In the category of students with special needs, Joanna mentions a stressful situation involving a student in a mental health crisis who expected help from the teacher that went beyond the teaching relationship between student and lecturer. The lack of clear procedures and systemic support in crisis situations for students caused Joanna to feel "helpless, surprised, inadequate (why did someone come to me, a teacher, not a psychologist or therapist, with such a problem...)".

The responses provided by teachers also include a description of a situation in which a student tried to take advantage of her difficult health situation in order to ease the conditions for passing the course. Crossing the boundaries of the accepted teacher-student relationship deeply affected Dominika, who had to seek supervision in order to “regain her balance.”

The lack of competence of students, the exploitation of their specific situation, e.g., related to their disability, manipulation and cheating in order to pass a course, and situations related to expectations of teachers and educators to help in serious mental crises are perceived by them as a heavy psychological burden. Difficult interactions between students and teachers can be a source of frustration, helplessness, tension, and lead to a long-term decline in well-being.

Organizational conditions

The last category identified from the collected statements is organizational conditions. Two subcategories were identified, including the organization and logistics of the education process and the aspect of institutional support. Although these factors are not directly related to the relationship between teachers and students, the teachers statements indicate that they perceive the limitations and shortcomings in the organization of the university’s activities as having a negative impact on their well-being.

The respondents pointed out the limited time available for classes, which prevents them from fully individualizing the educational process and recognizing students who stand out positively. They also indicated an increasing sense of stress when they do not know the specifics of the student group with which they will be teaching. Frequent changes in the location of computer classes and the resulting need to work on different equipment with non-standardized software are also stressful. These situations cause discomfort for both teachers and students.

Joanna pointed out the lack of official and clear rules and tools allowing for the rejection of candidates who objectively do not have the predisposition to perform the specific profession of educator and teacher (those who do not communicate, are in mental crisis, have behavioral disorders, etc.). The lack of procedures in this regard places the responsibility on teachers, which, in Joanna’s opinion, is somewhat burdensome. Patrycja, a teacher with limited experience in working with students, points to the stressful nature of the lack of top-down institutional support for early-career teachers in the area of student assessment. This also leads to stress and strain. In the statements, the lack of

institutional support for students in need and in mental crisis also proved to be a source of well-being disorders.

The above examples show that not only aspects related to students and the teaching process are important for the well-being of teachers, but their well-being also depends on the extent to which the university supports them and students in various areas, which indirectly also relates to the quality of interactions between teachers and students. The lack of clear procedures and rules increases stress, a sense of responsibility and helplessness, while access to tools and clear procedures promotes a sense of relief, security, and organization.

Discussion

The aim of the article was to identify the factors influencing the well-being of academic teachers in the context of their interactions with students. The most frequently mentioned situations were those related to relationships and interactions with students, both in terms of student behavior and their own behavior towards students. Among the positive situations that enhance well-being, teachers mentioned, among other things, gestures and words of appreciation from students, feedback on the substantive value of classes, student engagement and activity, intellectual curiosity, and personal culture. In addition, they pointed to the positive impact of institutional support and mentoring from more experienced academic teachers. Teachers appreciated their own actions towards students, such as motivating them, believing in their abilities, and giving them initiative and responsibility. These results highlight the positive emotions, such as passion and enthusiasm, that accompany working with students, leading to a belief in the value of the academic teaching profession (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014).

Among the situations and behaviors of students that have a negative impact on well-being, teachers pointed out, among others: demanding attitudes, cheating, failure to complete tasks, taking advantage of specific situations to achieve goals, lack of respect for rules, and lack of personal culture. Teachers reported stressful and difficult experiences related to situations involving students with special needs, such as students burdening them with their personal problems, e.g., during a mental health crisis.

Teachers also emphasized the lack of institutional support and organizational and logistical difficulties as factors that cause frustration, stress, and discouragement.

The data obtained suggest that the well-being of academic teachers is shaped by multidimensional factors and situations. Positive, partnership based relationships help to build an environment conducive to the well-being of both parties, as confirmed by international research (Thornberg, Forsberg, Hammar Chiriac, & Bjereld, 2020) and even the smallest gestures can support this process.

Institutional support and the university environment are also important factors. Solidarity among academics, collegial behavior, and community building among academic teachers foster a sense of belonging (Laundon & Grant-Smith, 2023) which is particularly important for young teachers at the beginning of their careers, as well as for more experienced teachers who can serve as mentors.

The teachers statements revealed that they used strategies to cope with stress, frustration, and powerlessness. These strategies included supervision, self-reflection, adhering to clearly defined rules, and asking older colleagues for help. Active problem solving and the use of techniques to restore well-being have a positive effect on the overall functioning of teachers compared to passivity (Piotrowski, et al., 2024, p. 30). Their personal resources, including the ability to build relationships with others and mental resilience, also remain important (Mansfield, Beltman, Broadley, & Weatherby-Fell, 2016).

Conclusions

The research highlights the importance of social situations, teaching and institutional conditions that are significant for the well-being of academic teachers. Student behavior and relationships with students can both reinforce positive experiences and lead to negative ones that disrupt their mental balance (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). The study showed that teachers identify several main areas that affect their well-being both positively and negatively.

Based on the presented research, conclusions can be drawn about supporting the well-being of academic teachers. First, there is a need to create quality and partnership based relationships between students and teachers. The statements indicated that some situations, despite the passage of time, remain in the teachers memory and have had an impact on them. Awareness of the value of seemingly small gestures has far-reaching consequences, not only in terms of the well-being of those involved in the teaching process, but also in terms of building a safe and open educational environment.

Institutional support is important for both experienced and early-career teachers. Clearly defined criteria and regulations that reduce the individual burden of responsibility, as well as training and mentoring opportunities for novice teachers, can be particularly beneficial.

The results obtained encourage further research on a larger scale and the inclusion of students experiences in the context of building their well-being and comparing them with the experiences of teachers.

Research limitations

Although the results obtained from the research are qualitative in nature, they cover a small sample and refer to teachers at one university. The results of the research represent a snapshot of academic reality, characteristic of the social sciences environment, and in particular pedagogy, and therefore cannot be generalized to the entire academic environment. The dual role of the authors of the article (both as researchers and subjects) may be a source of excessive subjectivity in the interpretation of the responses obtained.

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School pedagogue in an unstable reality– methods of building resilience

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Abstract. Actions undertaken in schools today should foster the stimulation and optimisation of students' comprehensive individual development across intellectual, emotional, psychological, social, physical and spiritual dimensions. Therefore, it should be assumed that the evolving tasks and demands now also placed on school pedagogues are invariably linked to transformations in the school as an institution. The complexity and scope of activities undertaken indicate that serving in the role of a school pedagogue in the present day is a difficult and demanding profession. Teachers performing this role must possess a broad range of knowledge not only in pedagogy, but also in special education, psychology, social work, and family and criminal law. It should also be emphasised that in fulfilling the school pedagogue's professional duties, not only learned abilities but also personal resources play an important role. The author of this study has therefore attempted to highlight the factors determining the work of school pedagogues that result from the variability and instability observed today, as well as the methods they use to build their resilience.

Introduction

Actions undertaken in schools today should foster the stimulation and optimisation of students' holistic individual development across intellectual, emotional, psychological, social, physical and spiritual dimensions. In carrying out these activities, the school should take into account the students' developmental capabilities and needs, and cooperate with the family environment and the local community. Therefore, it should be assumed that the changing tasks and requirements currently placed on school pedagogues are always tied to changes in the school as an institution. Significance should also be attributed to the social and cultural transformations taking place. The successive school reforms implemented, social diversification, changes in the role of the family, the development of modern technologies, and increasing social threats (includ-

ing traditional and behavioural addictions, peer and domestic violence, crime, disintegration of family life, the COVID-19 pandemic, and migration) are presenting school pedagogues with new challenges. The complexity and scope of the activities undertaken indicate that serving in the role of a school pedagogue today is a difficult and demanding profession. Teachers performing this role must possess a broad range of knowledge not only in pedagogy, but also in special education, psychology, social work, and family and criminal law. It should also be emphasised that in the practice of the school pedagogue's profession, not only learned skills but also personal resources are significant. The impetus for the considerations presented in this study was the author's research interests, as well as his professional experience – for he works as a school pedagogue in a primary school in Opole. He thus attempted to demonstrate the types of factors that determine the work of school pedagogues, which stem from the variability and instability observed today, as well as the methods employed that allow them to build their resilience.

Outline of the Genesis of the School Pedagogue Position

The school pedagogue is a position that was introduced primarily in primary schools in the 1973/1974 school year, in accordance with the provisions of an instruction which constituted an annex to the Ordinance of the Minister of Education and Upbringing of 1 February 1973 on the organisation of education and upbringing in the 1973/1974 school year (Annex to the Ordinance of the Minister of Education and Upbringing of 1 February 1973). In this way, it became a permanent part of the structure of Polish education. It was assumed that the school pedagogue's task would be "... the organisation and coordination of the school's activities in the area of care and educational assistance for the child, as well as raising the level of pedagogical culture among parents" (Annex to the Ordinance of the Minister of Education and Upbringing of 1 February 1973). By virtue of the aforementioned ordinance, school pedagogues were experimentally appointed in 100 urban schools that had more than 600 students. The introduction of this "new staff member" to schools was a solution arising from the decision to close small schools and establish large consolidated schools, as well as a response to the growing number of various kinds of school failures, behavioural difficulties, and signs of social maladjustment stemming from the rising level of social pathology. It also stemmed from the need to provide assistance to children and families in difficult life situations (Badora, Czeredrecka, Marzec, 2001, p. 137). The position

of school pedagogue was created immediately after the completion of work on the education report in the Polish People's Republic and the decision to implement an education reform. However, long before this, observers had pointed out—recognising the complexity of student problems—the need to employ a highly qualified staff member in the school whose sole task would be to handle care and educational issues. Here one should cite Kamiński, who in 1962 advocated employing in schools “full-time social guardians or socio-educational workers who would deal with resolving individual students’ problems” (see: Kamiński, 1962, pp. 2–7). A model concept of the school pedagogue, broadly encompassing the scope of his activities, was presented by Muszyński. In considering the model of the school pedagogue profession, taking into account the needs of the school, he indicated a broad scope of tasks. He proposed three professional profiles for the school pedagogue in order to avoid an excessive number of tasks being carried out:

- **An employee focusing on individual cases** (counselling, diagnostics, therapy, upbringing).
- **Coordinator of individualised care and educational activities** (attending individually to each student, not only those with behavioural difficulties; this is a task for all teachers, with the pedagogue only organising and coordinating the actions taken).
- **Organizer of the entirety of care and upbringing in the school and its environment, with the pedagogue having to be part of the school management** (Muszyński, 1977, p. 69).

The Ordinance of the Minister of Education and Upbringing of 1 February 1973 on the organisation of education and upbringing in the 1973/1974 school year specified the educational qualifications required to practice as a school pedagogue. These were a higher (Master's level) degree in pedagogy or another field of study, provided that the person had a three-year professional tenure in a school or other educational institution (Annex to the Ordinance of the Minister of Education and Upbringing of 1 February 1973). It should be emphasised that in this initial period, the role of school pedagogue was most often undertaken by teachers who were distinguished by their experience and, above all, by outstanding results in their educational work (Jundziłł, 1993, p. 533). The Ministry of Education and Upbringing defined the school pedagogue's tasks and duties very broadly, while indicating that the work should be concentrated on the student and their specific needs. In response to the significant variation in the interpretation of the pedagogue's tasks and duties and his place in the school structure, on 7 November 1975 the Ministry of Education and

Upbringing issued an ordinance on the work of teachers – school pedagogues, in which the profession was for the first time included in the official register. Meanwhile, in December 1975 an annex to that ordinance, which contained guidelines specifying the detailed tasks of the school pedagogue, grouped these tasks into five problem categories:

- **In the area of general educational tasks:** [...].
- **In the area of preventive education:** [...].
- **In the area of corrective and remedial work:** [...].
- **In the area of individual pedagogical-psychological care:** [...].
- **In the area of material assistance:** [...] (see: Official Journal of the Ministry of Education and Upbringing 1975, No. 11, item 112).

Recognising the importance of issues related to the interpretation of the existing legal provisions, in 1976 the Ministry of Education and Upbringing introduced a document titled “Outline of the Model of the Teacher–School Pedagogue,” which highlighted the role of the pedagogue as “an initiator and co-organisier of educational and caregiving work within the school, and a co-coordinator and representative of the school and its students’ affairs in contacts with out-of-school institutions” (Wołczyk, 1977, p. 74). In creating the position of school pedagogue, further attempts were made to develop the concept of the professional profile (see: Jundziłł, 1980). After the education system reform of 1999, the position of pedagogue was envisaged at every level of education, i.e. in primary schools, middle schools and upper secondary schools. In practice, however, schools often did not appoint pedagogues to these positions or eliminated those already established, justifying such decisions by delegating the tasks to the so-called “new educator,” who was supposed to take over their functions (Dudzikowa, 1999, p. 11). The scope of tasks assigned to the school pedagogue was the subject of further work undertaken by the Ministry of Education and Upbringing, and in later years by the Ministry of National Education. Over the years, from 1975 up to 2017, eight legal documents were created aimed at fairly detailed regulation of the tasks performed by the school pedagogue. However, it must be stressed that these regulations remain too general, and practice – along with the author’s own experience – indicates that the actual scope goes significantly beyond the limits outlined in the ministerial legal acts. It is also important to point out that the rapid pace of change makes it nearly impossible to keep these regulations up to date – for example, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 or the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022.

In order to supplement the considerations in this subsection, it is necessary to recall the definition of a school pedagogue, who is viewed as: “a person employed in a school in order to complement, deepen, and extend the didactic-educational and caregiving activities carried out by teachers” (Jundziłł, 1993, p. 533). The school pedagogue is defined as “a teaching position appointed to provide care and upbringing for the students of a given school and to cooperate with their parents, as well as out-of-school educational and care institutions, including psychological counselling centres and educational-career counselling centres” (Kupisiewicz, Kupisiewicz, 2009, p. 132), with the stipulation that “... particular emphasis in the work of a school pedagogue should be placed on fulfilling the functions of upbringing, care, and diagnostic-advisory work” (Matyjas, 2005, p. 85). Meanwhile, in the approach proposed by Śliwerski, a pedagogue should be a person who has been specially prepared to direct socialisation, educational and care processes, mainly in out-of-school activities, but also in school. The underlying premise is that every teacher should have a pedagogical background, but not every pedagogue is a teacher (Śliwerski, 2010, p. 38). The aforementioned author also emphasises that pedagogues belong to a broadly conceived social profession, which is prepared to undertake actions to help its charges form interpersonal relationships that activate their inclusion into social life (Śliwerski, 2008, p. 176). Analysis of the above definitions allows us to conclude that the school pedagogue organises and carries out tasks of an upbringing, care, diagnostic, and advisory nature. Meanwhile, the execution of these tasks is based on cooperation with other teachers and specialists, as well as with students’ parents and representatives of out-of-school institutions.

The Changing Tasks of the School Pedagogue

The scope of tasks carried out by schools is constantly expanding or being modified. As a consequence, the range of tasks performed by the teaching staff in schools is also changing and evolving. This necessitates constant adaptation to changes and continuous updating of knowledge and qualifications. An excellent example of the ongoing “indeterminacy” of tasks is the position of the school pedagogue. In the research studies analysed, one can observe both narrower and broader understandings of the role of the pedagogue. Previous studies relate to individual, practical experiences in pedagogical work; they also delineate the significance of the pedagogue’s functioning against the back-

ground of adopted socio-cultural categories, which describe the situation and the social contexts of his work in various types of environments, mainly the family and the school (see: Forma, 2010, pp. 263–271). Currently, the work of the school pedagogue and the scope of their duties is regulated by the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 9 August 2017 on the principles of organisation and provision of psychological and pedagogical assistance in public preschools, schools and institutions. Thus, these duties include undertaking actions in the following areas:

- 1) “conducting research and diagnostic activities on students, including diagnosing individual developmental and educational needs and students’ psychophysical abilities, in order to determine their strengths, predispositions, interests and talents, as well as the causes of educational failures or difficulties in students’ functioning, including barriers and limitations that hinder a student’s functioning and participation in the life of the preschool, school and institution;
- 2) “diagnosing educational situations in the preschool, school or institution in order to solve educational problems that create barriers and limit the active and full participation of the student in the life of the preschool, school and institution;
- 3) “providing students with psychological and pedagogical assistance in forms appropriate to the identified needs;
- 4) “undertaking activities in the field of prevention of addictions and other problems among children and youth;
- 5) “minimising the effects of developmental disorders, preventing behavioural disorders, and initiating various forms of assistance in the preschool, school and out-of-school environment of students;
- 6) “initiating and conducting mediation and intervention activities in crisis situations;
- 7) “assisting parents and teachers in recognizing and developing students’ individual abilities, predispositions and talents” (Journal of Laws 2017, item 1591, as amended, § 24).

The set of tasks presented above, which were included in the regulation, is general in nature. Therefore, it is reasonable to present them in more detail, which includes: – conducting observations, conversations, interviews, sociometric and survey studies, and analysing the results obtained; – designing and implementing intervention measures for students who require them; – conducting individual conversations with students who present behavioural

difficulties and/or struggle with emotional problems; – providing material assistance to students; – participating in interdisciplinary teams (e.g. representing the school at a meeting regarding a Blue Card issued for a student's family); participating in meetings at a psychological-pedagogical counselling centre; – monitoring the fulfilment of students' compulsory schooling obligation; – providing opinions on students' cases at the request of family and juvenile courts, the police, or social welfare centres; – preparing submissions to family and juvenile courts, for example for an inquiry into a student's family situation or due to behaviours indicative of a minor's demoralisation; – proposing that a student be referred to a specialist clinic; – requesting the allocation of psychological-pedagogical support classes for a student; – consulting on individual cases with external specialists; – assisting in resolving problematic situations in classes; – providing substantive and methodological support to teachers – giving advice on interpreting the behaviours of students who exhibit adjustment difficulties and proposing educational methods; – indicating recommended forms and methods of adapting educational requirements to the individual psychophysical and educational needs and abilities of a child, based on recommendations formulated in a psychological-pedagogical counselling centre's opinion; – cooperating with the school nurse; – providing parents with advice on child-rearing matters; – conducting training sessions and workshops on topics related to prevention and upbringing. A pedagogue who has additional qualifications also conducts specialist classes, for example corrective-compensatory classes, classes developing emotional-social competences, or career counselling classes. School pedagogues also often substitute for other teachers in their absence, conducting preventive activities in classes. They also carry out these activities on their own initiative as part of the school's educational-preventive programme, of which they are largely the authors. School pedagogues are also coordinators of many preventive projects at the local, regional or national level that are carried out in schools (e.g. *Archipelag skarbów* ["Treasure Archipelago"], *Spójrz inaczej* ["Look Differently"], *Godzina dla Młodych Główn* ["Hour for Young Minds"]). As part of these, they conduct activities, but also organise meetings with external specialists. Some pedagogues also serve as supervisors for university students during their teaching practice, offering advice and sharing their knowledge and experience. In addition to the tasks presented, the pedagogue must also carry out those assigned by the headteacher (Lewandowska-Kidoń, Kalinowska-Witek, 2016, p. 23). The scope of tasks performed by the school pedagogue is very broad. The implementa-

tion of these tasks is conditioned by factors such as the number of students in a given school; the type of environment in which the school operates; the level of cooperation with teachers and members of the psychological-pedagogical team (psychologist, special pedagogue); the engagement of parents in cooperation; and the support received from the school management. The intention of the author of this study is to emphasise that in recent years school pedagogues in Poland have been facing a number of new challenges resulting from the changing needs of students and the dynamic socio-cultural situation. Among the most important are: the integration of children with migration experience (particularly refugees from Ukraine and other countries); concern for the mental health of children and adolescents and counteracting the negative effects of social media – including the phenomena of hate speech and cyberbullying. As a result of global migrations and armed conflicts, especially after the outbreak of war in Ukraine, Polish schools have admitted hundreds of thousands of new foreign students. According to data as of 1 September 2025, over 200,000 children from Ukraine were studying in Polish institutions (Centrum Edukacji Obywatelskiej, 2025), and this number continues to grow. The sudden influx of so many students with war experience, and at the same time non-Polish-speaking, revealed the necessity for actions by school pedagogues in addition to the systemic measures undertaken by the Ministry of National Education. These actions included mitigating the effects related to the language barrier, the lack of familiarity with school routines among the students and their parents, differing mental frameworks, and traumatic war experiences. It was important to intensify integrative activities; to undertake interventions to resolve difficult, conflict situations; and to advocate for the need to conduct psychological-pedagogical evaluations in view of symptoms of behavioural disorders or disabilities. The mental health crisis among children and teenagers has become one of the most serious challenges in recent years that Polish education is experiencing. Analysed research results and reports raise the alarm about the growing incidence of depression, anxiety disorders, and suicidal behaviours in this age group. The causes of this situation can be traced to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Isolation and remote learning deepened the problems; young people experienced loneliness, stress and dysfunction in social relationships. Consequently, schools are observing an increasing occurrence of students' emotional crises, low mood, self-aggression (e.g. self-harm), heightened aggression or, conversely, withdrawal. The pressure to achieve the best possible results and the pursuit of competition also negatively affect students' well-being. School

pedagogues are often the first witnesses of these troubling phenomena; it is to them that students seeking help turn, or they receive signals from concerned form tutors and parents. This necessitates undertaking a range of activities aimed at raising awareness of what mental health is and how to care for one's well-being. Pedagogues conduct group sessions; hold individual conversations; and, together with form tutors, implement programmes aimed at counteracting the deteriorating mental condition of children and youth. Easy access to smartphones and the use of social media have not only provided new possibilities for communication, but have also created serious dangers. For several years, school pedagogues have observed increasing negative effects of excessive and improper use of the Internet. The most common problems include cyberbullying, hate speech, addiction to social media, exposure to inappropriate content, as well as phenomena such as FOMO (fear of missing out) and lowered self-esteem resulting from comparing oneself with the curated online images of others. The phenomenon of Internet violence has become widespread; it is not an incidental fringe issue, but a daily reality for many children and adolescents. Hate, blackmail, the publication of intimate materials or aggressive comments have real psychological consequences, causing victims to feel less secure, lowering self-esteem, and even leading to serious psychological crises. Therefore, school pedagogues must actively engage in prevention, respond to threats coming from the Internet, and provide support to those students who have experienced this kind of violence.

Building Resilience in School Pedagogues

The above-presented scope of tasks carried out by school pedagogues leads to the conclusion that resilience is essential for performing their duties professionally, because it allows them to face difficult situations, deal with them and resolve them. In the context of the considerations undertaken, it is necessary to refer to the resilience of teachers and pedagogues, as social groups who, by virtue of their profession, face challenges and changing conditions on a daily basis and are exposed to unrelenting stress. This can lead, among other things, to occupational burnout, the appearance of somatic symptoms, and the development of dysfunctional professional and family relationships. Konaszewski distinguishes three different concepts of resilience – understood as a trait, as a process, and as an outcome. Resilience perceived as a trait is “a multidimensional construct that encompasses individual variables, such as temperament

and personality, as well as variables related to behaviours, competencies and abilities – specific skills that allow individuals to cope with tasks. In this approach, we also take into account the features of various environments and broader social contexts of functioning” (Konaszewski, 2020, p. 25). Resilience understood as a process is described as a dynamic, adaptive mechanism that can commence at any moment in life. It is “the effective mobilisation of internal and external resources” when an individual faces challenges and, by adapting, regains strength (Konaszewski, 2020, p. 27). Resilience conceived as an outcome “highlights the importance of the characteristics of the individual and the environment, which influence each other, and resilience is understood as the result of this reciprocity” (Konaszewski, 2020, p. 28). It is also necessary to outline what teacher resilience is. In the approach proposed by Beltman, it can be considered on three levels: as an ability that an individual possesses; as an ongoing process of mutual interactions between the individual and the environment in which they function; and as an outcome of one’s own development and well-being. She emphasises that teachers who draw on resilience cope very well with the adversities they encounter, but above all, they maintain a consistently high level of job satisfaction and engagement in their work (Beltman, 2015, p. 22). The author also stated that a teacher’s resilience consists in using the ability to draw on available resources in order to cope with difficult situations encountered. These resources should be sought in the individual themselves – this could be a sense of self-efficacy – or in the environment in which the teacher functions, such as drawing on support from colleagues. Resilience can be seen as a process in which individual and contextual factors interact and, through this, support the individual in positive adaptation (Beltman, 2015, p. 23). In the context of the above considerations, it should be assumed that the ability of teachers and pedagogues to cope with stress and daily challenges is of key importance for the actions they undertake, their professional development and their well-being.

Resilience, understood as the skills of building psychological resilience and adapting to a changing environment, is a particularly important skill for the modern school pedagogue. It is the kind of skill that allows one to return to a state of equilibrium after difficult professional experiences. Resilience consists of a set of qualities possessed by the pedagogue, such as: – motivation to acquire knowledge, learning; – resilience, endurance; – strength of character, mindfulness, self-belief; – inner strength to fight against adversity; – calmness, control over emotions and fear; – overcoming tension, anxiety and stress; – mo-

bilising oneself in crisis conditions; – adaptation to threats and traumatic experiences; – adaptation to difficult operating conditions; – energy, dynamism in action, motivation; – vitality, good physical and mental condition; – ability to regain lost strength; – resistance to the effects of harmful factors. It should be noted that certain individuals have already acquired a high level of resilience; however, resilience is a skill like any other and can be learned.

Developing strong resilience in oneself can be compared to building a kind of protective layer around oneself: the harder it is, the better it will shield against “shocks,” “falls” or other obstacles that a pedagogue may encounter along the way. The participation of the author of this study in supervision group meetings for school pedagogues and psychologists, which are organised at a psychological-pedagogical counselling centre, prompts reflection on building one’s own resilience. In the work of a school pedagogue, developing the skills of adaptation to changes and maintaining a positive attitude must be considered key. These include:

- 1) **Personal development and self-confidence.** This involves becoming aware of one’s strengths and making use of one’s talents, qualifications and skills that help in the everyday performance of professional duties. It is worth recalling these in difficult moments to reinforce one’s sense of self-worth. It is also important to notice and celebrate small successes in order to gain confirmation that one is a valuable employee. Meanwhile, learning to adapt will allow one to adjust to functioning in changing circumstances and to cope with adversity.
- 2) **Taking care of oneself and one’s mental health.** Paying attention to physical activity through regular exercise is an effective way to reduce stress and improve well-being, which has a beneficial impact on mental health. It is also important to get an appropriate amount of rest. In everyday life, one should focus on the small positive events and situations one experiences, in order to strengthen oneself. One should develop a positive attitude by conjuring up more positive thoughts as opposed to negative ones. Learning relaxation techniques is also considered important. Introducing breathing exercises or mindfulness meditation into one’s daily routine will allow one to concentrate on the present moment.
- 3) **Managing stress and emotions.** It is important to focus on what can be controlled. Therefore, one should direct their attention to what can be changed, rather than to what cannot. This will help maintain calm and take rational action. A change in narrative is also necessary, achieved by

learning to look at one's life from a different, more positive perspective. Simply avoiding fear will not make the factors that cause it disappear; one must face one's fears. It is also important to allow oneself and others time to reflect during communication. An atmosphere should be created in which experimentation is acceptable, and mistakes are perceived as a natural part of the learning process.

- 4) **Social relationships.** Building social relationships can be achieved by maintaining and nurturing contacts with people who are empathetic, understanding and trustworthy. Nurturing social connections is key to resilience in the face of adversity. It is also important to collaborate with other pedagogues by sharing ideas, materials and providing mutual support in difficult situations. The ability to seek help should be considered crucial. One should not hesitate to ask colleagues, friends or professionals for assistance. This is a sign of strength and responsibility, and is not seen as a sign of weakness.

All the factors that school pedagogues experience in their daily work point to an enormous need to develop a strategy that would support them in building their own resilience. This would help them cope with all the demands placed on them and the constantly occurring changes that determine the functioning of the contemporary education system.

Conclusion

The practice of the school pedagogue's profession should be seen as a process of continuous becoming and learning in order to meet the conditions for practising the profession. It should be emphasised that it is currently one of the professions of public trust. The tasks performed by the pedagogue and his role in organising and providing psychological-pedagogical assistance, the position he holds in the school, the extent of working time and the related number of students, the required qualifications and competencies, as well as the scope of additional activities carried out, are all subjects of broad discussion still being undertaken at the level of the Ministry of National Education and educational institutions. The initiation of this discussion stems from the fact that many school pedagogues currently carry out duties that go far beyond the scope of tasks defined by the Ministry of National Education. This leads to their continual "indeterminacy"; they are modified depending on the current needs of the school and students, which confronts the pedagogue

with new tasks, thus necessitating unceasing updates of knowledge and skills. It is therefore not possible to be fully and definitively prepared for the work of a pedagogue or teacher. One should therefore accept Kwaśnica's supposition that full professional preparation can be spoken of in the case of those professions which consist of performing relatively repetitive and predictable tasks and which require technical competencies. In the case of the teaching profession, the assumption of full professional preparation is at odds with the essence of teaching work [...] the competencies it requires are by their nature never ready, constantly insufficient and continuously in motion, in development, always requiring change (Kwaśnica, 2004, pp. 293–298).

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SECTION II

Students, Youth, and Marginalised Groups

Positive dimensions of well-being of young adult LGBTQ+ individuals in Poland – pilot study

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Abstract: This pilot qualitative research investigates the well-being of young adult LGBTQ+ individuals in Poland, deliberately focusing on positive emotional experiences, satisfaction, and coping strategies, thereby shifting focus from previous studies emphasizing suffering. Based on non-structured interviews with three individuals, the findings show that the essence of positive emotions lies in positive social relationships with close friends, family, and partners. Well-being is supported by acceptance, security, freedom, agency, developing interests, and the fulfilment of needs like self-actualization. Satisfaction is achieved through life tasks such as high study results, financial independence, and pursuing goals. Individuals cope by obtaining support and acceptance from close persons, taking care of mental health, and working on themselves. Challenges emphasized in the Polish context include a low level of tolerance for otherness (affecting readiness to establish acquaintances), family religiosity, difficulty finding suitable work, and limited access to psychologists. The research is significant for identifying factors that build well-being, but its pilot nature requires extension to a larger group of respondents. Given the very small qualitative sample ($n = 3$) and snowball sampling, this study does not claim representativeness. However, the findings may inform future research and the development of supportive practices for young LGBTQ+ adults in Poland.

Introduction

Well-being can be defined as an intellectual and emotional evaluation of one's life. The self-evaluation covers both emotional reactions regarding an event, as it does with intellectual dilemmas on satisfaction and happiness. Therefore, well-being is a broad term that takes experiencing pleasant emotions, a low level of negative emotional states and great life satisfaction into consideration. Positive experiences built on a high level of well-being are key terms used in positive psychology, because they make life meaningful (Czapliński, 1994). Well-being understood in a context of the hedonistic conception is searching for pleasure, avoiding suffering. In other words, it's a different positive psychological state described in dimensions of life satisfaction, positive and negative feelings, that can be achieved, if one is characterized by high life satisfaction, as well as great level of positive and a low level of negative feelings. (Carr, 2009).

The pillars of mental well-being include: self-acceptance – a positive attitude towards one's own self, based on awareness of one's own positive and negative traits; a sense of meaning in life – the ability to find meaning and direction in life, as well as the ability to formulate and accomplish life tasks; personal development – the ability to constantly use one's talent and potential, as well as to develop new abilities; environmental mastery – the ability to cope with the surrounding world; it is an active form of adapting to the environment through action, self-initiative, and personal effort; autonomy – the ability to act according to one's own principles and to be guided by one's beliefs, it is related to independent decision-making, fulfilling one's needs, and autonomous thinking, understood as opposition to succumbing to external influences and pressures; good relationships with others – the capability to form and sustain enduring connections with others, as well as the capacity to derive satisfaction from intimate interactions; the ability to experience empathy, compassion, and a sense of closeness in interactions with another individual. (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryff & Singer, 2008).

Few studies have directly addressed both positive and negative emotional experiences of LGBTQ adolescents. Often, experiences of specific emotions are compared with measures of distress (e.g., the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale) (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card & Russell, 2010). One study specifically examining the experience of happiness among sexually expansive youth aged 13–17 (e.g., identifying as transgender, genderqueer,

agender, or other gender identities) was conducted by the Human Rights Campaign (Baum et al., 2012) and found that only 4% of gender minority youth in a sample of 925 students reported feeling very happy, compared to 27% of heterosexual young men of the same age. Although the sense of being very unhappy was low across all gender groups, sexually expansive youth most frequently reported being ‘very unhappy’ (9%). Research on the emotional experiences of LGBTQ youth has largely focused on symptoms of distress or psychopathology (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar & Azrael, 2009; Hatzenbuehler, 2011; Hatzenbuehler, Birkett, Van Wagenen & Meyer, 2014; Rosario, 1997). These studies have prompted many necessary initiatives (e.g., anti-discrimination and anti-bullying policies, health education regarding same-sex individuals, implementation of alliances for gay, heterosexual, and transgender individuals) (Black, Fedewa & Gonzalez, 2012; Heck, Poteat & Goodenow, 2016). Although these efforts have been helpful, we argue that it is essential to broaden research on emotional experiences and thus assess daily positive emotions, as positive emotions in school are associated with higher levels of student engagement (Reschly, Huebner, & Appleton, 2008) and positive school functioning (Weber, 2016). The LGBTQ+ group can be considered a minority group, similar to non-dominant ethnic or religious groups in each country. Minority stress among the LGBTQ+ group has a significantly negative impact on the well-being of these individuals. In connection with the aforementioned actions, such as alliances and non-discrimination policies, greater self-awareness regarding the question “Who am I?” can be observed compared to LGBTQ+ individuals who grew up with the perception that it was best to hide (influenced by the lack of the aforementioned policies). Self-esteem positively correlates with overall mental well-being (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Comparing the LGBTQ+ group to cisgender and heterosexual “peers,” their well-being and self-esteem are statistically lower (King et al., 2008; Plöderl & Tremblay, 2015).

Discrimination based on belonging to the LGBTQ+ community during childhood or adolescence most often results in some form of mental health symptoms (reduced self-esteem, depression, anxiety) in adulthood (DeLay, Harnish, Zhang & Martin, 2017; Wang et al., 2018). Protective factors against the potential development of mental illness or disorder due to experienced homophobia can be categorized as individual, interpersonal, and societal (Kaysen et al., 2014).

Individual protective factors are a personal set of traits and values that a person follows, including self-acceptance, resilience, insight into one’s own emo-

tions, optimism, hope, and well-being. Interpersonal factors include a supportive and positively influencing environment (family, friends), while social factors encompass a school or workplace that ensures safety (including anti-discrimination policies), inclusion, access to mental health professionals (including sexology clinics), and collectivism within LGBT+ groups (Rivas-Koehla et al., 2021).

In the Polish context of experienced homophobia, researchers report increased rates of anxiety and depressive symptoms, lower feelings of safety and community (family, school) (Stańczykiewicz & Senczyszyn, 2024), which may be related to cultural and religious traditions, political messages, and social attitudes (Kardasz, Gerymski & Parker, 2023).

Method

The aim of the research was to understand and describe the factors (including personal and environmental resources) that enable young LGBTQ+ people to experience psychological well-being. The research problem was formulated as follows: how and to what extent do young LGBTQ+ adults experience: a) positive emotional states, b) satisfaction from fulfilling their own needs, c) satisfaction from accomplishing life tasks, d) coping with solving life problems in the context of difficulties arising from Polish cultural conditions? The categories of the main dimensions of psychological well-being were adopted from the concept of Carol Ryff (1989).

An unstructured interview was employed as a research method, along with thematic analysis for the interpretation of results.

The sample selection was purposive. Participants were recruited via snowball sampling. Inclusion criteria were a minimum age of 18 years, self-identification as LGBTQ+, and residence in Poland. Unstructured interviews were conducted with three individuals, following a prepared interview guide. The participants were:

Doris – a bisexual woman who studied in the United Kingdom, grew up without a father, experiences mental health disorders, attends therapy, is undergoing pharmacological treatment, and spent most of her adolescence experiencing negative emotions and self-criticism;

Mateusz – a man in a homosexual relationship (he identifies as gay or bisexual), from a small town, raised in a Catholic family, studying medicine in a large city, undergoing treatment for mental disorders, fascinated by psychiatry and planning his career in this field;

Maria – a demiwoman in a relationship with a woman, studying special education pedagogy, a musician with a completed second-level music school education, currently under the care of a psychologist.

A positive opinion from the ethics committee was obtained, as well as the consent of the respondents to participate in the study. The research was conducted between March and May 2024, online, using borrowed communication tools (MS Teams). Transcriptions were made; the results were developed based on coding and then categorized according to the main categories outlined in the research problem.

The study is of a pilot nature and is part of a larger project related to the well-being of young adults in Poland.

The study received approval from the Maria Grzegorzewska University Ethics Committee (no. 197/2024). Participants provided informed consent before participation and were informed about voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time without consequences. They could decline to answer any question or pause/stop the interview at any point. Identifying information was removed from transcripts and pseudonyms were used. Audio files and transcripts were stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team. In case of distress, participants were offered information on available psychological support services.

Results

The respondents willingly and in detail described their lives and experiences related to building relationships with others, experiencing emotions, personal development, needs, and limitations in their actions. Their statements were grouped according to the main categories of mental well-being.

Experiencing Positive Emotions

Positive emotions accompany the participants when they feel they are building and maintaining good relationships with others. They value spending time with people, engaging in conversations with those they like, including friends, family, and partners. Acceptance, as well as a calming and constructive dialogue, is important, as it “allows one to broaden their perspective to that of someone else, and it always helps to calm down a little” (Mateusz). Positive emotions are also triggered by a sense of self-fulfilment

through the development of interests, hobbies, and skills, which contributes to strengthened self-confidence and a sense of agency, “finding peace in this [...] realizing myself, seeing that I can do something enjoyable” (Maria). The respondents pointed out that they experience not only positive emotions, but in difficult situations, they strive to “take care of themselves” (Maria). Activities aimed at calming down and self-care include resting, getting sufficient sleep, taking naps during the day, practicing relaxation techniques, being in a safe environment (home, apartment, with a partner, with a cat), influencing one’s appearance (tattoo, nose piercing, hair color), indulging in “small pleasures,” and building a sense of security and stability. The respondents also openly stated that pharmacology helps them maintain good mental health by alleviating anxiety, stress and worries.

Experiencing satisfaction from fulfilling one’s own needs

Spending time with others and maintaining close relationships, as well as being engaged in relationships (e.g., in friendships or family), provides not only positive emotions but also life satisfaction. Equally important in contributing to this satisfaction is receiving acceptance from family and fulfilling the need for closeness. Satisfaction also stems from self-actualization, including having dreams and goals, as well as acquiring or developing personal skills and passions, such as learning to play a musical instruments, learning foreign languages, or caring for pets or plants. Learning provides a sense of security and peace: “It is very important for me to grow, and at this moment I have the time for it. And I think I am taking advantage of it” (Maria). Respondents emphasize that they also find it rewarding to take care of themselves, including engaging in relaxing activities—spending time with people, watching movies, playing games, or having conversations. Additionally, they find satisfaction in resting (sleeping), fulfilling their sexual needs, and going shopping. Living in a city where everything is nearby and easily accessible contributes to their well-being. An important aspect of experiencing well-being is the sense of freedom, independence, and influence over certain dimensions of life, as well as the ability to seek support from others. Equally important is the skill of allowing oneself to distance oneself from tasks that can be postponed and from toxic individuals. Utilizing the assistance of a psychologist or psychiatrist is helpful for functioning well and living a life with a sense of satisfaction.

Experiencing satisfaction from the accomplishment of life tasks

The young adults noted that the way they approach life tasks associated with adulthood also brings them satisfaction. They mentioned, among other things, the opportunity to study a self-selected field of education, achieving high academic performance (scholarship), possessing financial independence or the ability to support their own budget through work, and setting further life goals (e.g., choosing a specialization in a medical field).

Experiencing coping with life problems

In interviews, the participants also spoke about situations and experiences that were or still are difficult for them. In this context, it was important for them to emphasize overcoming difficulties and finding ways to face their fears or failures. In this respect, they pointed to situations such as studying despite the anxiety and stress associated with failing an exam, obtaining support and acceptance from family appropriate to their needs (e.g., gaining family acceptance for their relationship with a partner), finding an environment, friends, or people who would accept the participant regardless of their sexual orientation or lifestyle, and building and maintaining a good relationship with a partner despite emerging conflicts. Their success lies in the ability to recognize their own weaknesses and to involve specialists for assistance, as well as in acknowledging of the effects of implemented pharmacological treatment. Caring for one's own mental health also involves accepting one's illness and vulnerabilities, recognizing the necessity of therapy and/or taking medications, and seeking the help of a psychologist in order to properly take care of oneself "so as not to get lost in all that is happening" (Maria). Equally satisfying is the acceptance of oneself: appearance, orientation, choices, readiness for change, relationships with others, place of residence, as well as working on oneself in various aspects: relational, personal development, and related to one's field of study.

Life in Poland

Surveyed individuals noted that there is a low level of tolerance for diversity in Poland, including toward homosexual individuals. This raises concerns among respondents about forming new, close relationships, as they never know how new acquaintances will react to their relationship: 'I can-

not walk with my boyfriend, hold his hand, because people are immediately surprised' (Mateusz). Additionally, family religiosity, particularly among the older generation (grandparents), is associated with a lack of acceptance of homosexual relationships, evaluating them in moral terms. The lack of acceptance from family is linked to experiencing psychological difficulties and the need to seek safety in a different environment: 'I receive that acceptance and what I need simply in other places' (Maria). Another issue is related to the difficulty of finding employment in areas that match one's interests and competencies, which necessitates compromises in order to maintain financial stability. Additionally, living in a large city can be overwhelming (concrete, limited greenery), although it simultaneously provides access to services and cultural opportunities. The final aspect highlighted by the respondents is the limited access to psychologists under insurance coverage – the waiting time is very long, while the need for an appointment is sometimes urgent.

Discussion

The analyses focused on those dimensions of psychological well-being that pertain to the positive experience of life by young adults. For the three surveyed LGBTQ+ individuals, the most important dimension of well-being is relationships with others—positive relationships either with family, a partner, or friends (or with all of them simultaneously)—as well as the ability to distance oneself from or avoid 'toxic' or non-accepting people. Also significant is the sense of influence over one's own life, choices, studies, work, appearance, the opportunity for self-realization in studying and working, independent financial support, as well as engaging in hobbies and passions, learning new things, and a sense of agency. Given that two of the respondents are undergoing treatment for depression, it is equally important to undertake medical treatment and consistently adhere to prescribed medications under a physician's supervision. Individuals from sexual minorities experience challenges that disrupt their sense of psychological well-being. A significant aspect of their functioning includes belonging to a minority group, low self-esteem, and a lack of security (Bridge, Smith & Rimes, 2019; Stańczykiewicz & Senczyszyn, 2024). The results obtained highlight the importance of positive close relationships with partners and family. Although social attitudes are currently much more liberal than in previous generations, young people still encounter stigmatization (Meslay, Dorri & Russell, 2025); therefore, they carefully choose the individuals with whom they enter close, friendly relationships and employ strat-

egies of concealment to prevent stigmatization (Krzemiński, 2008). Acceptance from their family is important to them, especially since revealing one's gender identity in the context of parental reactions has implications for the mental health of LGBTQ+ youth (Puckett, Woodward et al., 2015; Russell & Dorri, 2023), while the social network and its size play protective roles for their well-being (Fredriksen-Goldse et al., 2013) and allow them to frame life in terms of positive values. A sense of stability and security can also be fostered by autonomy, self-determination, and financial independence, as indicated by the respondents. Attending to one's health, including the diagnosis and treatment of depression, contributes to the overall better functioning of the participants, although it should be emphasized that depression and mental health difficulties represent a significant phenomenon among LGBTQ+ individuals (Winiewski & Świder, 2021).

The conducted pilot study indicates the factors that allow young LGBTQ+ individuals to maintain their mental well-being in the context of their sense of being a minority or growing up in a community with low tolerance for diversity.

Limitations

This pilot qualitative study used purposive sampling; therefore, statistical generalization is not intended. The picture that emerges from the analyses is necessarily fragmentary and reflects the perspectives of only three respondents ($n = 3$). Consequently, the findings are not representative of the broader population of young LGBTQ+ adults in Poland and should be interpreted as exploratory; they may inform transferability to similar contexts rather than universal claims (Shenton, 2004).

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Internalisation of suffering: youth, self-destructive culture, and the educational challenge of critical engagement with music and media

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Abstract. Contemporary youth are growing up in a culture saturated with narratives of suffering and self-destruction, which they encounter mainly through music and social media. Although these narratives have their roots in destructive aesthetics, they provide a space where young people learn about emotions, identity and relationships. This article offers a theoretical and conceptual analysis of how these narratives are internalised by young people, drawing mainly on Bandura's social learning theory (1977) as well as perspectives on cultural theory and critical pedagogy. Music and digital media function not only as forms of entertainment, but also as informal educational environments in which young people discover their identity and emotional experiences through narratives of pain and death. Cultural texts not only reflect existing social tensions, but also actively participate in constructing meanings related to suffering, belonging and the search for purpose. The article emphasizes the educational challenge of developing critical media literacy skills that enable young people to reflect on self-destructive cultural content while consciously participating in digital culture.

Introduction – The culture of self-destruction and the aesthetics of suffering

Contemporary sources of culture, the Internet, and social media have become spaces that provide constant entertainment once available only through cinemas or live concerts. The way people build and maintain relationships has also changed: today, just a few clicks are enough to stay in touch, whereas in the past it required face-to-face meetings, phone calls, or handwritten letters. Platforms such as YouTube, Spotify, Facebook, Instagram, and many others now serve as primary sources of both entertainment and communication. The current generation of adolescents is growing up in

a world where their parents are already active users of digital technologies. As a result, young people do not know the pre-Internet era and time without constant connectivity, smartphones, or social media. Consequently, they are continuously exposed to a wide range of online content, including messages and imagery that do not always have a positive impact on their emotional well-being or mental development.

Some adolescents use social media as a space to intensively expose themselves and their lives. A study conducted among Generation Z in 2022–2023 revealed that young people seek acceptance and emotional support and pointed to FOMO – the fear of missing out on important information on social media (Susilo et al., 2025). Excessive self-disclosure on the Internet may stem from this phenomenon, often referred to as ‘oversharing’.

Luo and Hancock (2020) point out that this process is twofold: on the one hand, self-exposure can have a positive effect on an individual’s mental well-being, while on the other, the current mental state shapes both the manner and motivation for revealing personal content online. The authors identify four main mechanisms that promote mental well-being: social connection, social support, capitalization of experiences, and space for the real self. Research has also shown that people experiencing anxiety and depression are more likely to share sad or emotionally charged content, a practice referred to as ‘sadfishing’ (ibid., 2020, p. 110–112). Some researchers argue that this phenomenon serves to elicit compassion and attention from other users by posting details of one’s life characterized by emotional difficulties, feelings of misunderstanding, and interpersonal struggles (Shabahang et al., 2023, p. 2).

Other researchers describe a phenomenon known as ‘Sad Culture’ (Bagas Al Fajri et al., 2023). This is a cybercultural phenomenon shaped within the space of social media, in which users express their emotional and mental struggles through humorous narratives and memes. Behind the ironic portrayal of sadness and suffering lies a form of identification with content related to anxiety and depression.

Frederika Thelandersson (2023) takes a broader look at this phenomenon, paying particular attention to young women. She describes it as ‘Sad Girl Culture’, emphasizing that sadness is no longer merely an emotional experience but also a means of self-expression. The author points out that girls learn emotional sensitivity by observing media role models – from singer Lana Del Rey, who has become an icon of the ‘sad girl’ aesthetic, to Instagram memes that romanticize melancholy. In this context, sadness becomes a form of emotional

capital – a tool for self-identification and a way of belonging to certain social groups (Thelandersson, 2023).

In 2022, researchers from the University of Prof. Dr. Moestopo in Indonesia examined the phenomenon of sadfishing on TikTok in a study that aimed to explore the motivations and methods behind publishing content with narratives of sadness. The results indicate that sadfishing is often driven by a desire for attention, likes, and followers, with creators sharing deeply personal and emotional experiences. TikTok's algorithm reinforces this tendency by promoting short, viral videos and recommending similar content, which can further normalize the public display of emotional suffering (Ramadhani et al., 2022).

In the analysis of musical messages, one can find numerous examples of songs dealing with the themes of sadness, self-destruction, and even suicide, whose audience is most often young people. In the 1980s and 1990s, the musical genre that was particularly characterised by both its lyrics and its overall atmosphere was Black Metal and its subgenres. The authors of 'Lords of Chaos', a publication that analyses the black metal scene of the last century in detail, pointed to the aura of death and self-destruction surrounding it (Moynihan, Söderlin, 2003). The black metal scene was characterised by mechanisms of escalating violent behaviour and antisocial attitudes, including the murder of the guitarist of the band Mayhem by Varg Vikernes and the suicide of this band's vocalist. The vocalist of Mayhem had previously exhibited self-destructive behaviour, including self-harm on stage (ibid., 2003). Vikernes (2004) criticised Moynihan and Söderlin's publication, claiming that the authors deliberately criticised the black metal scene in order to induce lies in the young generation of metal fans and strengthen Christianity in Norway. Vikernes, the most recognisable figure among black metal fans, was convicted of murder and three church arson attacks. In one article, the author attempted to analyze the emotional experiences of listeners of the black metal subgenre. He describes how users of one internet forum, Reddit, who identify themselves as fans of depressive suicide black metal music, talk about their experiences with self-aggressive behaviour, self-harm and rumination. Some describe experiencing catharsis and relief after listening to music with self-destructive themes. (Gospodarek, 2023).

Another example of musical content referring to sadness and resignation are easily accessible playlists on Spotify related to, among others, the Midwest emo genre. One such playlist is Ghostly's (n.d.) A Midwestern Suicide, which features Youth Fountain, a Canadian group performing music on the emo and pop punk borderline. An example of a song containing lyrics suggesting a state

of resignation is 'Deadlocked'. An excerpt from the lyrics of this song directly highlights the emotional condition of the songwriter:

'I'm sick of hating this person that I've become, and I'm sick of always feeling like I'm all that I've got. I'm so tired of singing the same old songs, so tired of feeling so alone. [...] These days, I can't stop wishing my life away. Is there anybody out there that could fix me?' (Youth Fountain, 2019)

Algorithmic recommendation systems intensify this process by repeatedly suggesting similar content, which can reduce emotional diversity and deepen identification with self-destructive narratives. Even though Internet algorithms are designed to detect and filter content that may idealise suicide in the media (Abdulsalam & Alhothali, 2022), users are still able to publish such material. This content, varying in its degree of potential harm, often reaches young audiences who are in the process of shaping their worldview. On the Spotify platform, these algorithms do not effectively identify content that may incite suicidal behaviour; consequently, a direct search for the term 'suicide' in the application redirects users to playlists containing songs that explicitly address themes of self-destruction and suicide.

Despite the growing presence of self-destructive narratives in music aimed at young people and social media, little attention has focused on how these cultural texts function as informal educational environments and how young people internalise a topic of suffering. This article offers a theoretical and conceptual analysis of internalisation processes in digital culture, with particular emphasis on their implications for critical pedagogy and media education.

The Process of Internalisation – Music and the Internet as Informal Educational Environments

For a better understanding of the subject matter of this article, it is key to take an interdisciplinary perspective to explain how narratives of suffering present in music and digital media can be internalised by young people. This section explains the concept of internalisation, then refers to social learning theory, and places these processes in the context of contemporary digital and emotional culture. Integrating these perspectives makes it possible to view internalisation not only as a psychological phenomenon, but also as an informal educational process.

Internalisation refers to the process through which individuals adopt and integrate learned sets of values, norms, attitudes, and beliefs into their own cognitive and behavioural frameworks (Okoń, 2001, p. 146). A child who ab-

sorbs these external elements initially learns them from their parents, followed by their peer group (ibid., 2001). Subsequently, upon entering various social environments, the child observes others and begins to identify with individuals who serve as authority figures.

Corsini (1999) points out that internalisation in psychoanalytic theory is the process of forming the superego (the personality structure responsible for morality, social attitudes and impulse control). Theorists point out that early internalisation in a child may constitute an assessment of their moral values in the future.

Albert Bandura's (1977) social learning theory posits that individuals acquire behaviours, attitudes, and emotions by observing others and modelling their actions, rather than solely through direct experience. This process operates through the mechanisms of imitation, reinforcement, and identification, which enable individuals to internalise patterns present within their social and cultural environment.

In the context of digital culture, this process is intensified by algorithms that efficiently curate and deliver content based on users' prior interactions. These same algorithms contribute to the so-called 'echo chamber effect', whereby personalized content creates a "digital bubble" that exposes users primarily to material reinforcing their existing views and emotions (Dhulipala, 2023). Recurrent themes of suffering, loneliness, and self-destruction may thus become internalized as part of the emotional landscape of young audiences.

This mechanism suggests that music and social media not only reflect the emotions of young people but also actively shape their emotional identity, reinforcing specific ways of experiencing and interpreting pain. A study conducted in 2023 examined music shared on social media by individuals who reported being diagnosed with depression. The results indicated that these users more frequently selected melancholic musical content with introspective lyrics, which tended to intensify negative emotional states (Wang et al., 2024). The authors of the study therefore highlighted the aforementioned 'Echo chamber effect' as a phenomenon that may not only mirror users' emotions but also contribute to the deepening of depressive symptoms.

"Learning does not happen by design. It happens through encounters, through what touches us, what moves us. That is the beautiful risk." (Biesta, 2013, p. 15). A person's emotional involvement in the learning process creates a space for informal education. Such a didactic process cannot always be planned, as it is often prompted by feelings, emotions, and personal experiences. One definition of informal education describes it as the process of acquiring

knowledge, skills, and attitudes in a spontaneous manner, independent of formal educational institutions. It is a form of learning that arises from everyday experiences and social interactions, taking place outside of curricula and not leading to formal certification (Marsick & Watkins, 2001; Eraut, 2004). In this context, the Internet and music function as micro-environments for identity formation and emotional education, rather than serving merely as sources of entertainment. Within the framework of self-destructive culture (e.g., depressive suicidal black metal, emo music), one can therefore speak of emotional education in the aesthetics of suffering. Young people learn how to articulate sadness, loneliness, or crisis by drawing upon the musical and textual spaces present in their social environment.

Małgorzata Sawicka (2015) offers an insightful interpretation of the phenomenon of emotions in culture through her concept of emotional culture, understood as a set of socially established patterns of experiencing and expressing emotions that become part of cultural capital. She argues that emotions are not solely the result of internal experiences but also constitute a form of social performance, in which individuals learn to express their feelings in ways consistent with prevailing norms and conventions—much like actors on a stage (Sawicka, 2015, pp. 184–185). From this perspective, emotions cease to be purely private experiences and become social messages, transmitted and imitated by others. Content shared on social media—often saturated with expressions of sadness, suffering, or self-destruction—is thus socially normalised and incorporated into cultural circulation. Consequently, such content encourages the internalisation of these emotional patterns, particularly among children and young people, who are the most active participants in the digital environment.

Extending this reflection, one may refer to the concept of emotional capitalism described by Eva Illouz in *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (2007). Illouz discusses the transformation of emotions into commodities and economic as well as cultural resources. This phenomenon can be understood today as the commodification of sadness – an emotion that becomes marketable online, with advertising companies paying influencers to produce content centred on suffering. Young people, seeking authenticity and intensity of experience, purchase narratives of sadness, pain, or self-destruction as a means of truly experiencing themselves. Simultaneously, they learn these emotional expressions by observing the content created by their favourite online personalities. In this sense, the responsibility for shaping young people's

understanding of reality and their processes of internalisation increasingly rests with digital content creators.

Henry Jenkins' (2006) concept of participatory culture is particularly relevant in describing this process of internalisation. In his work *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Jenkins explores the phenomenon of blurring boundaries between the producers and consumers of popular culture. The audience no longer merely consumes content but becomes an active participant who comments, evaluates, and assigns meaning, thereby constructing their own experiential framework. Two decades ago, Jenkins drew attention to the rapid development of digital media, emphasising the need to reconsider the objectives of media education. He observed that parents were being taught how to program a television in their child's room to limit screen time, rather than how to prepare their child to be a responsible consumer of media content (Jenkins, 2006, p. 250). This raises a pressing question: who is responsible today for how young people process and internalise the content they encounter online?

Critical Pedagogy Towards the Culture of Self-Destruction

David Buckingham, in his research on media education, emphasised that media should be subject to critical reflection, particularly when analysing the content directed at young audiences. He pointed out the importance of teaching young people responsibility and critical awareness in their media use (Buckingham, 2003).

Another idea highly relevant to the present day is that of Paulo Freire. In the 1970s, Freire underscored the need to overcome contradictions and generational conflicts between students and teachers to foster mutual exchange of experiences (Freire, 1970). Combining both perspectives suggests that any attempt to understand young people's engagement with self-destructive content must be grounded in communication that genuinely reaches them and resonates with their lived experiences.

Contemporary educators face the challenge of analysing difficult and often disturbing content, while presenting it in ways that acquire meaning and relevance within broader cultural and social contexts. The Polish educational system, with its rigidly defined curriculum, often lacks the flexibility to address the diverse needs of all students. An additional difficulty lies in ethical concerns and the insufficient preparation of teachers to work with challenging or emotionally charged materials. This raises important questions about how to reconcile sys-

temic limitations with the need to understand the complex, often troubling realities experienced by young people, and how to teach them a reflective and critical approach toward self-destructive content in media and music.

Instead of focusing only on censorship or protection, critical media education should get young people involved in thinking about song lyrics, online narratives, and algorithmic recommendations. This lets teachers see the emotional significance of these cultural texts while developing critical awareness and interpretation skills.

Conclusion and Suggestions

The contemporary cultural space encompassing social media and music shapes the emotions and identities of young people in ways that traditional schooling and pedagogy often struggle to interpret or keep pace with. Self-destructive content, the sharing of music in which artists express personal suffering and suicidal thoughts, as well as memes related to death, are not merely forms of self-expression. They also constitute modes of communication within communities where young people seek understanding and support from others who experience similar emotions. Gaining insight into these youth environments from within is therefore essential to understanding their needs and developing effective educational approaches to sensitive and difficult topics.

This article discusses critical pedagogy and media education, proposing that self-destructive cultural narratives be viewed as informal educational environments and highlighting the role of internalisation in the ways young people engage with digital culture.

The role of educators should not be limited to asking how children and adolescents can be protected from harmful content produced by popular culture. Rather, it should focus on understanding these spaces deeply enough to teach young people critical awareness and the skills necessary for safe and conscious navigation of the media landscape. Eliminating harmful content from the Internet or banning music that contains self-destructive messages is virtually impossible. Even before the digital era, there existed subcultures, such as the black metal scene or the emo and scene movements, that were characterised by suicidal and depressive themes. Today, these phenomena manifest as ‘Sad Culture’ or ‘sadfishing’, associated with the TikTok era and the virality of emotionally charged content. Attempts to suppress one trend merely give rise to another that finds its own audience.

Collaborative analysis, open discussion, and reflection on the consequences of digital phenomena, along with the creation of safe spaces where young people can express their experiences and attitudes toward suffering, loss, or death, may constitute one of the key tasks of contemporary pedagogy. Although researchers continue to explore the motivations and factors shaping the online behaviors of young people, there remains a shortage of in-depth studies examining what ‘Sad Culture’ truly signifies for youth and how identity formation around the culture of self-destruction and suffering functions within today’s digital environment.

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Understanding the social needs of young academics through the lens of nicotine use

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Abstract. The following article deals with the consequences of a phenomenon identified by me as “nicotine culture” in Polish universities. Through Antonina Kłoskowska’s theory on culture creation I described the three major components of nicotine use in young students. Following is a reflection on my research, giving a deeper understanding into the reasons for engaging in substance use, as well as the cultural and societal mechanisms influencing the youth into the route of addiction.

Introduction

The young generation of today has lived through turbulent times, marked by rapid technological advancement, the rise of individualism and post-pandemic trauma. In search of human connections, their abilities to form meaningful relationships is damaged, which pushes them into behaviours they wouldn’t otherwise engage in – such as using addictive substances, be it nicotine, alcohol or narcotics. Engaging in substance use can be a coping mechanism for unaddressed problems, which the youths have many. A growing number of teenagers and young adults entering the academic world report having issues with social anxiety and other mental health problems, intensified by the experience of COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns (Zarowski et al., 2024). Combined with weak ties to their peers and a gradual move of human interactions into cyberspace, the simple task of “making friends at uni” morphs into a herculean achievement.

With years of personal experience observing how students at different universities or even different cities exhibited the same behaviours while smoking and following my research into nicotine influence on the institution of higher education in Poland, I came to the conclusion that there is some overarching narrative in the way of thinking and behaving of smoking students. A unifying force which presented itself in certain actions, language and even rituals with

a diverse set of tools for maintaining social order and giving a way out to negative emotions, many of which accumulate in young people during their first years into university and adulthood as a whole. I named this phenomenon “nicotine culture”, whose impact on youth and the way they cope with stress and loneliness I hope to bring forward into the wider scientific community. I find the social mechanisms of entering nicotine addiction not explored enough, notably at the intersection of ongoing changes in society, which also influence the younger generation and their ability to prosper in the future.

Background

The nicotine culture at universities is an autotelic phenomenon – a self-sustaining, self-fulfilling presage. People participating in the smoking culture are able to identify aspects that define and differentiate it as a separate culture. It has developed a language of communication that’s specific to its members. It possesses a symbolic system embedded in the social structure of the younger generation, characterised by defined patterns of behaviour and attitudes towards those who participate and do not participate in a given culture, as well as towards the individual, which are then replicated across diverse communities, organising various areas of the cultural and social life of young students around themselves. This type of culture creation was characterized by Antonina Kłoskowska as follows: “However, it is assumed here, as a hypothesis, that it regulates and organises various areas of its members’ cultural life in a specific way. [...] certain forms of cultural life organisation occur in all local communities, although they may vary in complexity and intensity, while others are specific to certain types of communities [...] Even within a small local community, it is not entirely uniform, as it is the product of people’s choices and active selection” (Kłoskowska, 1972)(*author’s translation*). From this I identified three major components of this nicotine culture, as it pertains to social needs of students.

- Adaptation – mechanisms involved in formal and informal entry allow individuals to feel part of a specific attractive group characterized by maturity, knowledge and enjoying special privileges in higher education institutions.
- Integration – nicotine divides the student community into smokers and non-smokers (us versus them). This division is characterized by non-smokers becoming smokers, rarely the other way around

- Identification – among young people, there is a strong identification with the community of student-smokers. Smoking itself as an activity, as well as individual methods of nicotine use, carry behavioural labels that extend beyond the university community into wider society.

In my initial studies into this topic (Kryńska, 2025), I used qualitative and quantitative research methods to deepen my understanding of this phenomenon. Looking into the statistics of my research, the number of responses does not allow for a far reaching conclusions – I still find that it visualises ideas about smoking permeating the group consciousness of Polish students. The results of the survey (85 respondents) – with questions pertaining to the popularity of smoking – were similar to responses I received in focus group interviews (15 participants). Smoking was an exceedingly prominent action, with an upward trend as students furthered their education – and with that more responsibilities, more stress and less options for making connections with other peers, as a sizable portion of them drops out in the first years. Students which I interviewed provided me with extremely similar stories, while having no other connecting factors between them other than being actively a student. The city they lived in, age, gender or field of their studies had no major impact on their experiences with smoking. This to me signaled there were other factors at play that influenced their way of thinking and behaviours.

Table 1. *Socio-demographic characteristics of survey respondents (N = 85)*

Nicotine use	
Yes	58%
No	42%
Perceived acceptance of smoking	
Acceptable	46%
Neutral	49%
Unacceptable	5%
Perceived popularity of smoking	
Very popular	65%
Moderately popular	34%
Not very popular	1%

Source: Based on data from authors own research (Kryńska, 2025)

Division and connection

By combining a survey questionnaire with focus group interviews two perspectives came into view – the loudest answers in the survey came from non-smokers and my interviews were dominated by smoking students. This showed a clear issue with how smoking is perceived at universities. The anonymity of the survey helped in expressing “more niche” views, such as that smoking is a major problem, smokers are being treated preferentially in the eye of law and non-smokers feel like a disadvantaged group, with smokers encroaching on every community space, unconcerned with the health risks they impose on others. In my interviews with smokers, they downplayed the health risk associated with smoking, focusing more on individual freedom to decide what they want to do – with non-smokers being the instigators of conflict (especially in online and anonymous student forums), trying to take away whatever little pleasures they had left in their lives. The sample size of my study doesn’t allow for a generalisation on the whole scope of polish universities, but both parties noticed a growing trend in smoking – something that has been on the downward in larger polish society (CBOS, 2019).

Without combining my research methods I would never had the chance to hear those voices, as non-smokers would often refuse to participate, not wanting to be “put on the spot” and “confronting smokers”, which would (from their perspective) deepen the conflict between these groups and isolate them from the larger student community. Even though these two groups seem at odds at a first glance, their issues (which they attributed to each other) are a sign of much more important matter. Smokers and non-smokers equally would talk about having trouble connecting with their peers, their daily lives being focused so much on staying afloat and making ends meet that the only choice they had for socialisation would be to take up smoking between their classes or risk being excluded. My research subjects could not picture what they could be doing instead of smoking or how their non-smoking peers spend their time. There was a clear lack of help from the universities as well, signifying that the physical space of the university was the biggest area of conflict between smokers and non-smokers. Non-smokers feel ignored by the university authorities, who allow the prohibition on nicotine use to be broken without any consequences, while smokers pointed to the lack of organised places where they could smoke without disturbing others. There was also a glaring lack of neutral-ground community spaces, which could

help students connect and relax without resulting in nicotine use. Many universities do possess such spaces, but they are either not big enough to contain every potential user, are too much out of the way for students to utilise them between classes or are used incorrectly, taking away from the peaceful and pleasant atmosphere they were supposed to provide.

Peer relationships begin with the first cigarette and weaken when the addiction is given up. My students talked about social pressure to smoke – coming from within themselves – from associating smoking with “coolness”, maturity, attractiveness and other positive attributes, despite the negative image of a “smoker” as an addict in wider social consciousness (Jackler, 2022). They brought forth the imagery of French philosophers, university professors and bad boys/femme fatales – the avant-garde, the controversial, somehow on the outskirts of society despite smoking being perceived as the dominant and the norm at polish universities. This in my opinion ties into the larger trend of “alternative” behaviours becoming engrossed by the popular culture, stripping them of their original meaning and turning them into only visual and aesthetical performance – which my students also noticed, calling these types of behavior in a jokingly pejorative way “Warsaw-residents-like”.

Mental health and financial stability of young people were also a big point of contention. Starting their journey in higher education, often moving out of their family homes into bigger cities and losing their local support network pushes young people into behaviours they would otherwise not engage in, such as nicotine use. Smoking was often described as a defense mechanism, a way to filter out stress or even a replacement for basic needs – with vapes and cigarettes being a stand-in for meals, notably between university classes or breaks at work. Some students expressed a similar sentiment – in a situation of limited time to care for their needs, smoking would take priority over not only eating, but also relieving themselves.

With the rising costs of living and housing in Poland (Bénard et al., 2023), students don’t have a way of creating meaningful connections outside of university. They lack the time to unwind and present themselves in other ways (such as through hobbies or other activities), being overworked and constantly under duress from the need to make ends meet. Combined with the societal expectation to excel and perform at the highest level, it’s no shock that the younger generation is seeking escape in substance use. This can then evolve into polysubstance practices, mixing usage of nicotine with alcohol, cannabis or other drugs (Bailey et al., 2019). This is a significant social issue, leading to

far-reaching health concerns for young people with predisposition to addiction, eminently if they don't have other methods of dealing with stress and negative emotions (Olthuis et al, 2013).

Outside pressure – nicotine lobby

Polish youth are also exposed to the dangerous marketing tactics of the nicotine lobby. With the meteoric rise of e-cigarettes and other alternatives, the pervasiveness of nicotine products in everyday life was hard to miss. The laws and regulations concerning these types of products were everchanging, with the nicotine companies trying to outrun the even more restrictive regulations. The packaging of these new-generation nicotine products are the main element of their marketing, catching the attention and encouraging people to try it (Moran et al., 2025). With a near limitless range of options for models and flavours these products had a wide consumer reach, tailored to specifications of not only your preferred nicotine use, but also individual identity and self expression. This crossroads of psychoactive substances and a trendy accessory softens the risks associated with prolonged nicotine use, transforming an e-cigarette into something more akin to a fashion statement or a toy. (Unger et al., 2024). During the time I conducted the study, smoke-free alternatives and vapes were sold in almost every convenience store, which my respondents would also mention. The ease of buying such a product also opened the way to take up smoking, with attractive and colorful advertisements every step of the way. In Polish law promotion of economic benefits on the packaging is illegal (Dz. U., 1995), but offering other types of benefits is a legal grey area. Those vendors would also offer many promotions, deals or even loyalty programs – the more you spend, the better the discount. In some cases, enlisting others into the programs would grant you free products or special privileges – preying upon young people wanting to try “the new cool thing” and join “the exclusive and prestigious club” of users. Some brands are employing “brand ambassadors”, which infiltrate public spaces, with focus on entertainment – such as bars, clubs and community events (Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, 2019). They would then engage people into a conversation, which would take a turn into selling them onto the idea of trying their new product – further connecting nicotine use with social interactions, relaxation and enjoyment.

In online spaces the issue multiplies tenfold – many online stores don't require any substantial age verification methods that young people – and

even children – can't bypass with a single click. The legal limits for nicotine in products were also not respected. A single cigarette offers 10–20 mg of nicotine compared to a nicotine pouch at 50–60 mg, with stronger variants coming to 120–150 mg of nicotine per gram. With the polish legal limit being 20 mg per gram, the ease of finding such products leaves much to be desired in the realm of legal ramifications for selling these types of products (see: Article 11hb added by Article 1(9) of the Act of 21 May 2025 (Dz.U.2025.799) amending this Act as of 5 July 2025).

Research limitations

Attempting to understand the phenomenon of students entering nicotine addiction came with many challenges. The literature concerning social behaviours associated with smoking focused mainly on the health aspects and mechanisms for breaking addiction, not necessarily the reasons why one would start this harmful habit. With the general use of cigarettes on the decline (CBOS, 2019) and with stricter laws around selling and purchasing e-cigarette products, there doesn't seem to be much interest into the more ritualistic and community-creating role of tobacco and its derivatives.

The data collecting methods chosen by me proved arduous as well – my original goal was to confront university smokers and non-smokers, but with many declarations of “fear of being different than the (perceived) norm”, many non-smokers refused to participate, unless through an anonymous online survey. This demanded a different approach to both methods of data collection, with the interviews focusing more on aspects of the daily life of smokers, and adding more open-ended questions to my survey, such that the non-smokers also had the opportunity to share more of their personal experiences without risk of social-exclusion. A much bigger sample size of both smokers and non-smokers would broaden the already discovered perspectives, but with ever-changing laws against nicotine products the research would need to be started from the base principles – one of the major changes since my study being the ban on single-use e-cigarettes, a preferred method of smoking for many young people.

With these restrictions the landscape of marketing and grey-area-selling of nicotine products also shifted. Previously, acquiring e-cigarettes, vapes or other variants of nicotine products required only a little internet know-how and a method for online payments. With the lack of age verification beyond

a pop-up asking for your age, there was nothing stopping anyone – including underage people – from buying nicotine products. Online stores would also offer discounts, club memberships or other types of marketing deals, to push people to buy more, triggering the fear of missing out – with the club memberships being a staggering example of psychological marketing ploys made to prey on vulnerable people, promising them social status, community and a “healthier and more attractive way” to deal with negative emotions (compared to traditional cigarettes). Nowadays it is much harder to access certain types of products through the internet, with the suppliers stopping production, but I found the literature into these types of advertising very lacking. Young people live in a very isolating world, with the trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic looming over their ability to create connection and community – which tobacco lobbies exploited, selling them addiction as a cure to all their problems (Watts et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Researching topics such as substance use examines our role as academics in helping the younger generation not only live, but thrive in current society. We need to ask ourselves how we can not only cater to the needs of the students related to smoking, but what else can be done to deter them from participating and developing lifelong addictions. Nicotine culture is a part of a much bigger problem in today’s society, with the rise of individualistic values, the capitalist need to consume to fit in and also a never-ending rat race for young people entering this stage of their life.

Students I interviewed were fully aware of the health risks associated with prolonged nicotine use, some of them even experiencing smoking related symptoms already. Even the very real risk of permanent damage to their body wasn’t enough for them to quit – the social benefits associated with smoking were a fair trade in their eyes. The need to keep your peers close and trauma bound together over their hardships concerning difficulties with studying and adult life created a bond between them, which was even more intoxicating than the nicotine (Collins, 2016). Friendships would often start with the first cigarette shared and could weaken or even disintegrate if a person tried to quit their addiction.

There isn’t enough pushback against “Big Tobacco”, which constantly invents new products meant to appeal to young adults through their advertis-

ing as safer, greener or more budget friendly options or through the appeal to certain authority and social values, with campaigns featuring pinkwashing or rainbowwashing marketing ploys (Jackler et al., 2022).

Nicotine plays a major role in enhancing everyday student interactions, including building relationships, participating in conversations, and promoting relaxation. Smoking practices, both student and university-wide, are a constant topic of discussion regarding the needs of smokers versus their impact on the spaces they occupy. The culture of smokers, characterised by openness and the sharing of nicotine products, unconsciously legitimises smoking behaviour among people who start their history with addiction during their studies. There's a glaring lack of involvement from university authorities or even legitimization of harmful and law breaking behaviours. Implementing more social and educational campaigns, focused on creating space for students to express themselves and connect on a deeper level, as well as implementing healthy coping mechanisms for stress and other mental health issues – without judgement and proselytizing – could turn over a whole generation of people into quitting smoking. Organizing more ways to support students who are struggling financially would allow them to take better care of themselves, without resorting to using cigarettes and their alternatives to cope with their difficult situation.

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Ongoing qualitative research on the embodied effects of childhood sexual abuse (CSA), by a survivor, with survivors: a presentation of initial findings

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Abstract. This chapter presents initial findings of ongoing qualitative research, undertaken by a doctoral candidate, researching the embodied effects of childhood sexual abuse (CSA), with people who have experienced such abuse, as a person with lived experience herself. The research aims and questions are introduced, the research's theoretical foundations, methods and ethics are outlined, before presenting the initial findings. This piece of writing serves as an insight into a researcher's process of discovery and analysis, stressing that the analysis and deliberation is ongoing. To illustrate findings, the writer chooses two research participants to focus on. Future aims for the research are outlined at the end.

Introduction

This paper is presenting initial findings of doctoral qualitative research, which is ongoing, in the sense that although data collection is concluded, data analysis is not. This piece of writing features my first reflections on my research data. Publishing initial findings is serving as an opportunity to present what I have discovered to my research community and peers, further strengthening the validity and rigorousness of the research. As an interdisciplinary researcher, with a background in the visual arts, I place a great deal of importance on the process, rather than just the finished product. I want to give my readers an insight into the ongoing research process, a look into my journey so far.

My research has the working title: ***The geography of bodies of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) survivors, from their own perspective.*** The research questions driving the research, are: 1. How do survivors of CSA experience their **bodies** in their post-abuse, everyday life? 2. How do CSA survivors **empower** themselves?

This research is *autoethnographic*, in that I, the researcher, have lived experience of CSA, researching other survivors' experiences (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). I use the term survivor, as I identify as one. I respect the position of others who prefer to use other terms to describe themselves. I position myself as a survivor, a researcher and an artist. The research bridges *the self to the community*, as I started researching myself autobiographically through artistic endeavors (McRobert, 2009; McRobert, 2012) and ended up being an *insider researcher* exploring the CSA communal experience (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011).

Working with additional qualitative methods: arts-based approaches

Throughout the whole process of this research, artistic expression has been implemented. My past approach to understanding myself was always visual and arts based. The research started from a metaphor that was visual for me. That is of the body of a CSA survivor as a landscape of a sovereign land, that was once colonised and now is free from oppression (McRobert, 2022). This led to drawings of my own landscape and drawings of my participants' metaphorical body landscapes. In addition to the drawings, I always used poetry as a foundation to the work, and I have already integrated my poetry in the ongoing PhD thesis, as well as use poetry to create a self-reflection of this research process throughout. Although important to my process, I wish to keep this strand of my research approach separate to this small publication. The body of artwork that will exist at the end of this process will be a body of work in connection to but independent of the qualitative research described and discussed in this chapter.

Theoretical framework

My research focus is on the body, embodiment and empowerment, orienting myself on the *empowerment theory* (Zimmerman, 1995; Urban, 2001; Stark, 1996; Carr, 2003), trying to see how people who have experienced the trauma of CSA find ways to empower themselves in their adult lives. Empowerment is framed as a journey without a finite end, a process whereby people find ways to acquire more control and agency over their own lives (Maton 2008; Rappaport 1981; Peterson, 2014). In an academic context, empowerment symbolises an approach that is not expert driven, but lead by the person seeking help, an approach that recognises the abilities and strengths of the person seeking to be

empowered, a 'strengths-based approach', as it has come to be known (Baxamusa, 2008; Ozer et al., 2013; Prati & Zani, 2013; Zippay, 1995; Peterson, 2014), that allows for post-traumatic growth (Hitter, Adams & Cahill, 2017). This is the growth, development and evolution of a person after a traumatic event.

In my research I am taking the stance that CSA is a practice that **disempowers** and **overpowers** people, and the only way to depart from the 'powerlessness, oppression or deprivation' (Carr, 2003: 13) that this may lead to, is to find a way of equipping oneself with the knowledge and tools with which to gain more control over their lives. My belief is that *empowerment* can only be done through the agency of the person formerly oppressed. Various social, political and economic factors can also come into play (Breton, 1989; Carr, 2003), as everyone has different resources at their disposal. Carr sees the state of being powerless as a position (2003), a location as it were. This suggests that a location can move and evolve over time (Carr, 2003). Someone who was formerly abused and thus disempowered need not stay powerless forever.

Research Methods

My primary research data constitutes 12 *qualitative interviews* with adult survivors of CSA. My interview approach was a hybrid model influenced by Charmaz's version of grounded theory (2014), Rosenthal & Loch's narrative interview-approach (2002) and Woodward's qualitative research approach with (significant) objects (2021). Although I did not ask my participants to bring an important object to the interview, I did give them the option to send in poems, narratives or drawings that they had written/made before the interviews, and afterwards. Some sent poems and biographical narratives. I used this material to begin the interviews, as a kind of icebreaker, but also to structure the interview. I selected specific quotes from the narratives or went through their poems with them to decode meaning together. I also had a list of themes I wanted to discuss and a small list of optional questions as my interview guide. Those who sent no poetry or narratives beforehand were asked to start by telling me about themselves biographically. In both cases, I followed the participant's lead, directing the conversation to the themes on my list. Moreover, details of people's abuse experiences are not the focus of my research, nor are the scenarios that play out, but whatever people wanted to share, especially to give context to their stories, was heard and considered. The interviews lasted between 60–120 minutes, but the average time was 90 minutes.

Ethics

My research project obtained an Ethics Votum from the Ethics Committee of the University of Applied Sciences Potsdam in mid-2024. In the application I stated my various ethical guidelines that aimed at keeping my participants both safe and empowered to participate. My research criteria included: being 18 and over, being a survivor of CSA and having had some form of therapy, whether in the past or ongoing. This suggests that the participant has the language to talk about the abuse, tools to manage uncomfortable feelings and an emotional support system, in case they need support after the interview. I obtained my participants through my own professional networks, through a CSA researcher-survivor colleague and through a CSA survivor-counsellor-activist. Generally, people got the call-out-for participation leaflet via email or postcard, via a third party. When they wanted to participate, they got in touch with me via email, which was printed on the leaflet. This made sure that participation was voluntary and self-initiated. Moreover, to keep myself safe throughout the process I reflected with my peers, my therapist and wrote creatively and academically about my experience, thus helping to process. This approach has so far kept me safe and empowered in my journey as a survivor-researcher.

Participant Sample

My sample of 12 was relatively diverse. The participants' ages ranged from 34 to 72, with three people in their 30s, one in their 40s, four in their 50s, three in their 60s and one in their 70s. Five participants are queer and seven are heterosexual. I interviewed three cis-men, six cis-women, three non-binary people, one who was socialised as a boy and two who were socialised as girls growing up. Where the sample is lacking in diversity is in terms of race and possibly class. Everyone presented as white, but the sample included participants from various countries, albeit all western: two people from Ireland, one from Spain, one from the USA, three from Germany, and three from the UK. Most people had moved away from their towns or cities of origin, if not their countries of origin. Migration away from the childhood environment was common. Moreover, I avoided the subject of class. I did not explicitly ask people and I prefer not to speculate much but believe most people would fall in the middle-class category now, although not all grew up middle-class.

In terms of the sampling methods, I needed people who were willing to come forward to talk to me, a CSA survivor cis-woman in her 30s, presenting as white, heterosexual and middle class, about themselves and their experiences. It was a self-selecting sampling method, which I deemed most ethical, as I was sure they wanted to participate. Although in some ways a limitation, selecting my own participants would have been ethically problematic, possibly causing harm, as well as impossible in terms of access. The opportunity to participate in research on CSA could also be said to give the opportunity to participants, as well as the researcher in this case, to empower themselves through this public identification as a CSA survivor, as it can be a form of personal and political empowerment (Delker et al., 2020).

‘During acts of coercion and violence, an individual’s agency, choice, and control are taken from them. Part of the power of narrative reconstruction is to regain a sense of personal agency and control that was violated by the violence’
(Delker et al., 2020: 247).

I felt it was important to hear people who came forward and wanted to speak to me, provided they fulfilled the participant criteria. Through participating in such research, as well as other forms of activism, self-expression and self-identification, one may be able to reframe and transform their own narrative, identity and perspective on the situation that formerly oppressed them. In the case of CSA, the aspect of stigma and taboo, as well as illegality, often silences survivors for a long time. Just the ability to talk about it without being censored can have a countering and rehabilitating effect (Fivush, 2010; Hernandez-Wolfe, 2011; Delker et al., 2020). There is no one recipe for empowerment, as it is an individual process (Urban, 2001), lead by the person wishing to be empowered and customised to each individual.

Analytical Approach

The interview data, in the form of interview transcripts, is being analysed through a qualitative approach, influenced by later versions of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). This process is ongoing and has incorporated most of the interviews but not all. So far, there has been a phase of initial coding, where I went through the interview transcripts, highlighting chunks of what the participant was saying that related to my research questions, but also the

aftermath of CSA in general. Most of what was said was deemed relevant and thus coded. That is, parts were given certain words to describe them, known as codes, generally one or two words long. Each chunk often received several codes at once. As I got deeper into the coding phase I noticed that certain themes were very visible and frequent, as well as helping to point to potential answers to my research questions. After advice from my supervisor and peer group I started grouping these codes into categories, even naming or describing the more prominent codes through the names of the categories. This started to help the research take shape.

Due to the limitation of this article, I chose to select two participants to focus on, to illustrate my budding categories and themes. They are Enid and Matt. Matt chose his pseudonym. Enid did not have a preference, accepting my choice. Enid is an Irish bisexual cis-gendered woman in her 30s and Matt is a British heterosexual cis-gendered man in his 50s. Enid experienced familial CSA and Matt experienced extra-familial CSA. Enid sent in no information before the interview. Matt sent me his website with information about his journey so far. Both participants engaged with the themes of empowerment and embodiment, offering rich data. I deemed there to be enough commonalities and differences between these participants to make them appropriate candidates for this small illustration.

Initial Themes and Categories

I have identified five categories, identifying main themes in my research so far. These are: 1. Body relating: Embodiment; 2. Empowerment: ‘Know thyself’; 3. Emotions: Feelings; 4. Identity: Outing; 5. Relationships: Outside world. Due to the limitations of this short chapter and the fact that two of these categories, **Body relating: Embodiment**, and **Empowerment: ‘Know thyself’**, directly relate to my research questions, I am going to focus on them for this piece of writing.

Body relating: Embodiment

This is a group that relates to everything to do with the body as a vehicle through life, a container. This is linked to the research question: *how do survivors relate to their bodies in everyday life?* Two main aspects came up: *body & health* and *body relating*.

Body & Health

Physical health problems reported by participants included: back, spine, neck stiffness, mobility issues/pain; osteoporosis; severe arthritis; chronic intestinal disease; unexplained breathing problems; breast cancer; heart disease; kidney disease/renal failure; chronic fatigue syndrome (ME/CFS); severe menopause experience and endometriosis. *Mental health* diagnoses included: complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD); dissociative personality disorder (DPD) and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

There is significant research suggesting the connection between CSA and chronic (ill) health conditions that are not just restricted to mental health, but affect the functioning of the physical body (Tsur, 2022; Van der Kolk, 1994; Van der Kolk, 2014). Connections have been found to chronic pain (Kendall-Tacket, 2001) and fibromyalgia (Häuser et al., 2014), as well as arthritis, asthma and heart disease (Leeb et. al, 2011), to name a few. There may be reason to suppose that the trauma of CSA and the stress that follows such an experience can affect one's health in a holistic way, affecting potentially many processes happening in the body. My participants linked their illnesses and ailments to their CSA experience and its fall-out. This may be because of information they have read on the subject, or their own intuition, or both. It is ethically important to me not to make such a deduction on my own, but in combination with them. Lots of themes surrounding bodily experience came up. The first one I wish to show is the experience of physical pain.

“So even trying to like, remember how I felt, it's like I was in constant pain before I was in actual physical pain” (Enid, 8:91, 501).

Enid suffers from chronic fatigue syndrome (ME/CFS), which causes debilitating exhaustion but also a lot of physical pain. She can live alone and take care of herself. She has an income from the government on account of this illness, as she can no longer work. During our interview she alluded to the experience of physical pain a lot. I chose the above quote to start with, as there is a connection made between the emotional pain that she felt for a long time before she started experiencing physical pain. It is as if the emotional pain, linked to the abuse, is seen as the precursor of the physical pain.

“In my early recovery from alcoholism, and the traumas were really fully on me then, I used to use this hand as a clamp over my neck, because my neck

was in so much pain, it was almost as if I'd broken it, I'd never broken my neck, so I can't absolutely compare it, but, you know, if I was going to bed, I would literally lean down, and the damage to my central nervous system, you know, was considerable as well, I had a lot of lower back pain" (Matt, 9:182, 738).

Matt's physical complaints included intermittent but chronic pain in his neck and back. Here he is talking about the time where his post-traumatic stress was at its most acute, where he was drinking a lot, before he got sober, and had a lot of physical pain in his body. He links this physical pain to damage of his nervous system, which he links to the CSA traumas that were 'fully on [him] then'. The experience seems to be stored in the body in various places, making itself known from time to time through physical pain and debilitation.

Some participants engaged with the idea of embodiment, or 're-embodiment' in the case of Enid, linking it to being present in one's body. This may sound like something that should just be, but for people who have experienced terrifying, sometimes life-threatening physical (including sexual) trauma, being present in one's body is not to be taken for granted. The body was a place of great danger and pain, the site of abuse, and so many people found ways to leave their bodies during this abuse, known as dissociation (Van der Kolk, 2014).

"I found with this kind of practise of deliberate re-embodiment in terms of like yoga and also like going internally and talking to parts of myself and like processing these exiled moments of trauma, making them feel safe. It's like, it gradually started to create this sense of like resetting my point of view back inside myself, rather than this like holographic projection I'd created" (Enid, 8:179, 947).

As Enid illustrates, engaging with one's body in a physical way, through yoga, including exercise and mediation, can help oneself come back into the body, the body they are in now and not the child's body that was. Dissociation can cause a stand-still, a pause on the trauma, that splits the traumatic experience off from the present, fragmenting it in one's memory, but not processing it. This means that over time, even when the trauma has long passed, the experience remains trapped in one's (body) memory and consciousness, constantly invading the present, as the trauma is relived repeatedly (Van der Kolk, 2014). Finding the connections between all of one's parts

seemed to be the key to processing, but also suggesting that trauma does split us up, separating parts of us, through dissociation, as a coping mechanism to get through the painful time in the short-term, but causing issues of disconnect in the long-term. Despite the impression of separation and splitting, everything remains connected, albeit with a lack of communication and understanding between parts. This communication can be cultivated over time through self-investigation and self-awareness.

Enid goes on to identify another physical activity that she believes helped her to become more embodied, helping to counter the effects of the sexual abuse, that is in the act of sex:

“I guess this is an embodiment journey, but like those two relationships with women I had, where I didn’t become afraid of them. It was cause I was like purposely like embodied in sex” (Enid, 8:141, 753).

Enid connected her being fully present and embodied during sexual interaction with these two partners over the years with helping to bring her back into her body, into herself and into her present. She described a safe, loving environment in the context of sex, which sounded like a kind of antidote to the original traumatic sexual experiences.

Body relating

The way people relate to their bodies in an everyday sense was explored, as well as how people related physically with others. People reported the following: body image issues, drug use/abuse reported (not everyone framed it as negative), difficult relationship with food/eating, difficulty engaging in certain forms of physical exercise but happy in others, clothing: having a certain dressing style that expressed them or hid them.

Matt described his inability to be physically, sexually and emotionally intimate with people, as getting close to someone would be a trigger for a great deal of post-traumatic pain and stress. He could not date or get close to anyone and even though wanted to have a family, found the harrowing state he would be in at such proximity to others too counterproductive.

“Because it would trigger, it would bring up within my body, within my mind, the abuse, the memories, the visual, the sorry, the physical and the emotional memories of abuse” (Matt, 9:41, 193).

He explored all these feelings and could identify them, where they were stored in his body and what they were connected to:

“I mean, years ago, I could label certain emotions, so like shame was in my genitals, anger was in my genitals, and in the pit of my stomach, tension was in my neck, I was very aware of walking and feeling a lot of anxiety, a lot of pain, a lot of trapped emotion in different cells of my body almost” (Matt, 9:181, 779).

Just being aware of certain body parts, by witnessing them, them being pointed out, can trigger the feelings that were linked to the abuse experience that involved them. In the case of CSA one’s body is the site of the trauma. The crime scene is carried with one everywhere they go (Larkin, 2025). The body can be put in different situations, it can grow, it can age, it can be changed or dressed differently but it remains that same body that went through those experiences that it never wanted to go through. Experiences that violated, oppressed and silenced it.

“I think just like, it’s like the parts of your body that have made you unsafe or that are like sites of trauma, are also like things you’re walking around with and just feel, felt very like vulnerable” (Enid, 8:129, 709).

Enid notes that knowing that her body was a site of CSA made her feel vulnerable. At the same time one has no choice but to live in it, after all “the body is like, it’s where it all is” (Enid, 8:200, 1100). Negative feelings linked to the abuse are stored in the body, attaching themselves to various parts, processes and contexts.

Empowerment: ‘Know thyself’

The code-come category, ‘know thyself’ refers to an ancient Greek philosophical maxim, made famous by Socrates (circa 350 BC). It refers to getting to know one’s situation, problems, reactions, selves, leading to more control in one’s life. It includes the practice of self-reflection, self-awareness, with the aim at self-improvement. In more contemporary times, Freire (1970) proposed that in order to realise empowerment, one needs to practice “critical consciousness” (Carr, 2003: 15). This can be also defined as self-awareness, self-reflection and questioning what happens and happened in one’s environment. Amongst my participants,

I observed that trauma fall-out seemed to be identified, understood and managed more, the more people got to know themselves. This observation began to answer the research question: *how do survivors empower themselves?*

Part of being aware of oneself was identifying feelings and blocks that hindered one in their journey towards empowerment, also identified as growth, healing, amelioration of their stress, in general terms. Identifying the feeling of shame seemed to act like a gateway to a sense of freedom from the effect it had on people. Once people realised that this overpowering feeling came from shame, shame linked to the abuse, people reported a sense of relief.

“The change was letting go of shame, which I never thought would happen. I was crippled by shame, which really forced me, in a sense, to lie a lot of the time” (Matt, 9:39, 185).

Once Matt identified the shame he was feeling, he started to let go of it, changing his life. This was part of a process of being able to see what one is responsible for, what one can control and what one cannot. This can free up a lot of self-blame and self-hate that could hinder empowerment.

“I was like, Oh, that like awful feeling that’s dominated my life is like horrible shame. Just like (inaudible) shame” (Enid, 8:13, 68).

Enid alludes to the phenomenon of feeling emotionally bad for no clear reason. This feeling led to anxiety and depression in her early adulthood. Once she identified that it was shame, shame linked to her CSA experience, and thus not her fault, the condition was identified, explained and approached differently. She began approaching the feeling with compassion:

“Um, and sometimes that can be like, if there’s a big buildup of emotional energy, just kind of direct compassion at it. Um, I try to like, uh, practise, uh, like loving kindness to like, you know, the internal monologue voices or whatever, like, um, or like attacking you or feeling really ashamed. So, like, that’s a sort of constant thing of trying to like, uh, remain cognisant of like, these are traumatised children’s voices essentially” (Enid, 8:75, 440).

She talked about having self-compassion and understanding why she might be feeling the way she did, giving the situation a different perspective. This per-

spective is one where one is more in control of the narrative, rather than being at the mercy of a medical professional telling one they have a specific condition with no cause. Knowing what is wrong is the first step of knowing how to ameliorate it, even if one cannot fix it entirely. But it helped Enid to take certain steps to alleviate her stress. By being in touch with the traumatised voices inside her she became better at taking care of herself, becoming kinder and more compassionate.

Another large part of ameliorating one's situation was identified as knowing and dealing with triggers. Triggers are defined as any external factors that remind a person of the abuse experience. They could range from smells or sounds, to visual stimuli associated with the trauma experience in some way.

“I feel like while showering or seeing those parts of my body would like trigger abuse memories a lot” (Enid, 8:138, 749).

This ties the being aware of what is happening, ‘know thyself’ category, with the effect one's body has on one, embodiment category, in certain contexts. As the site of the crime (Larkin, 2025), the body itself can be a trigger for bad memories connected to the abuse experience. The body parts involved in the abuse, in this case. Being empowered is about being aware but also taking responsibility for oneself, acting in situations to ameliorate one's situation or maintain an equilibrium. Enid speaks about her actions, and how they have influence, or ‘weight’, like a body does:

“I do think that there is a genuine empowerment of like, I started to feel the weight of myself in the world, if you know what I mean? Kind of like my actions have weight” (Enid, 8: 181, 955).

Further Considerations

As I continue with my ongoing analysis process, I aim to understand the remaining categories outlined further, namely *Emotions: Feelings*, *Identity: Outing* and *Relationships: Outside world*. The emotions category was created because people identified how they felt when describing their journeys and what effects the feelings had on their trajectories enough to make it insightful. I wish to look deeper into this. There is some cross-over with the already expanded on categories, linking feelings with processes of embodiment and also empowerment but this needs to be looked at more closely. The identity category refers to the presentation

of identity in the participants, from one's gender, sexual orientation, profession, religion, to their medical diagnoses, that helped to anchor them throughout their lives, as well as the status of being 'out' as a CSA survivor or not. Political decisions like whether to identify as a CSA survivor or not were discussed in interviews and I wish to investigate the significance further. And finally, the effect of relationships and interactions with the outside world on people's journeys. Specifically, the people in one's environment seemed to have a direct effect on people's process of empowerment (or not). I wish to also further delve into this.

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Seeking an empowering discourse: reflections on changing language about immigrants in academic literature

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Abstract. This chapter explores the evolution of academic discourse on migrants and immigrants, with a particular focus on the shift toward more inclusive and socially conscious language in the field of sociology. The central aim of this contribution is to analyse transformations in how people with migration experience are represented in academic literature. By interrogating the linguistic and categorical choices present in scholarly narratives, the study seeks to understand how these choices can support position of individuals with migration experience. The key theoretical assumption is based on the social constructivist approach. On this basis, various critical standpoints to migration terminology have been described. Many of them fit into the empowering discourse, which comes with reflexivity and mindful use of social categories in quantitative and qualitative social research.

Introduction

Migration is a complex global phenomenon with a long history and numerous contemporary debates on terminology used to describe people with migration experience. According to Teun van Dijk (2017, pp. 4–5), migration as a social phenomenon consists of many groups of participants, institutions, many types of social and political (inter)action and many genres of migration discourse as social and political discourse of interaction. All of these actors (including scholars) use specific terminology when discussing migration-related issues. From a social constructionist perspective, language is not merely a tool for communication – it shapes reality, constructs meaning and significantly influences the recognition and representation of social groups. The categories employed in research are inherently connected to the kind of knowledge that is generated and, as a result, shape the ways in which solutions to social problems

are pursued (Mazzucato 2024, p. 1). Thus, it is crucial to reflect on social categories in research practice.

The objective of this chapter is to examine transformations in how people with migration experience are represented in academic literature. The guiding questions include: What socio-linguistic trends are emerging in academic discussions about migration? What theoretical and methodological perspectives inform these shifts? And how can researchers and educators use language as a tool for empowerment?

Definitions and critique of categories

At the international level, no universally accepted definition of the term “migrant” exists. From an inclusivist approach, migrant is an umbrella term that reflects the everyday understanding of someone who leaves their habitual place of residence – whether domestically or across an international border – either temporarily or permanently and for many possible reasons (IOM, online). This approach treats migration as encompassing all forms of movement. In contrast, the residualist approach (e.g. adopted by UNCHR) excludes from the term “migrant” those who flee wars or persecution (Carling, online). Based on this approach, migrant is “a person moving away from their usual place of residence for reasons other than conflict or persecution, may be voluntary or forced” (Immigration 2022, online). Thus, the residualist approach draws a clear distinction between “migrant” and “refugee”. However, it is not without weaknesses – for instance, it risks implying that migrants do not have legitimate protection needs from persecution (Carling 2023, p. 399). In human rights context, the term “people on the move” is used for people moving from one place to another for a relatively long period of time (Pijnenburg & Rijken 2020, p. 283). This phrasing has a potential to avoid negative connotations associated with the terms “refugee” and “migrant” in public discourse. However, it remains a very broad category. In practice, scholars use a variety of terms, sometimes interchangeably. From the residualist perspective, people on the move are represented by categories “refugees and migrants” as well as “migrants and refugees”. In contrast, from the inclusivist approach, people on the move are defined as “migrants”, “migrants, including refugees”, or “refugees and other migrants” (Carling 2023, p. 400). For statistical purposes, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA 2025) establishes a distinction between international migration (defined in a change of country of

residence) and international temporary mobility (all other international border crossings, such as, for example, cross-border workers, seasonal workers, other types of temporary workers, training-related mobility, health-related mobility, asylum seekers). International temporal mobility may potentially evolve into international migration.

When researchers refer to categories defining migrant status, there is a linguistic shift in the use of specific categories. Instead of “noncitizen” or “alien,” more inclusive terms such as “immigrant,” “person,” or “individual” are recommended. Similarly, “undocumented” or “irregular migrant” are preferable to “illegal migrant,” and “country of destination” or “country of origin” are favoured over “host country” and “sending country” (IOM; Immigration 2022). Immigrants are also called as “new residents” (UN DESA 2025, p. 10). This list is not exhaustive (see IOM for further terminology). Right-wing politicians in Europe capitalized on the negative connotations of the term “migrants” when discussing the crisis, which led to the word being viewed as dehumanizing and xenophobic even when used in its traditional, broad meaning (Carling 2023, p. 400; Lazović, 2017). There is a need to acknowledge that researching migration is never a neutral, objective, or unpolitical undertaking (Stierl 2020, p. 1097). Only once this is accepted, and once harm resulting from research is considered a real possibility, can the migration discipline really consider the ethics of impact and the “do no harm” principle its “golden rule” (ibidem).

Bridget Anderson (2019, p. 12) poses the question: “If everybody moves, when does movement become migration, whose movement counts as migration and why?”. If in the social sciences the word “migrant” mainly refers to someone who perceives themselves (or is perceived) as out of place or racially othered, in the realm of political debate the “migrant” is a person whose movement or presence is often considered a problem (ibidem). When viewed through a state-centric gaze, the “migrant” necessarily remains “a distinct category of human mobility (or, mobile humanity)” (De Genova, 2013, p. 253), an anomaly to be governed and disciplined (Anderson 2019). Roger Brukbaker (2004) argues that migration research must avoid “groupism” (treating social groups as monolithic and ignoring conflicts connected to race, gender, class) and methodological nationalism (taking the nation-state as the natural unit of analysis). His work underscores the importance of analysing how “migrant” is constructed, how it creates hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion.

Janine Dahinden (2025, p. 3) advocates a reflexive perspective, emphasizing the importance of “investigating the *work* that categories do, their entangle-

ment with power and the consequences". She proposes "de-migrantizing" research design by shifting the unit of analysis away from "the group of migrants" toward the general population as a whole. This approach enables researchers to examine when and through what processes the label "migrant" is produced, who gets assigned this label (or not), and at what point "migration" actually becomes empirically, theoretically, or politically meaningful. Once migration is no longer treated as an objective given, researchers can analyse how migration matters for both individuals and society, making visible how processes of migrantization operate through power relations and institutional practices (Dahinden, 2016; Wyss & Dahinden, 2022).

The term "migrant background" is widely used in continental European educational research. It has been criticized for being an ascribed, broad category reinforcing inequity. When researchers draw a line between people "with" and "without" migration background – for example, as predictor variables in quantitative research – they treat a highly diverse population as though it were homogeneous (Brubaker, 2002). In such a classification, a refugee escaping persecution ends up in the same category as an expat admitted under highly skilled migration schemes, even though their admission pathways – and thus their access to rights – differ fundamentally. In other words, simply knowing that someone qualifies as having a "migration background" reveals nothing meaningful about their life opportunities (Borrelli & Ruedin 2024, p. 5). Moreover, conventional definitions of "migration background" leave no space for individuals who, over the course of their lives, come to be seen as part of the societal majority (Lessard-Phillips et al., 2017). These people fall in between categories and are perceived as only partly (non)belonging to their relatives and to the citizens (Borrelli & Ruedin 2024, p. 10).

Based on similar critique, Vietze, Schwarzenthal, Moffitt et al. (2023) proposed that social categories used in quantitative, educational research should be relevant from a theoretical, sociocultural, and participant perspective, be selected to promote social justice, and be feasible for use. They applied these criteria to choose meaningful social categories (i.e., family heritage, religion, citizenship, cultural identification and generation status) in a preregistered analytic example on the implications of discrimination experiences, perceived societal Islamophobia, and national identity for the academic motivation of secondary school students in Germany. For example, asking participants about their cultural identification provides an opportunity to take participants' own perspective into account (ibidem).

Borrelli & Ruedin (2024, p. 8) argue that viewing some immigrants and their descendants as ethnic minority groups has advantages over “migration background”. Ethnicity refers to how groups coexist in society, how boundaries are drawn, and how identities are actively and socially constructed. Such groupings can be critically examined, and we can empirically study when they become targets of discrimination. At the same time, ethnic groups and their boundaries are also shaped from below – by the people who identify with them – even though outsiders can strongly influence this process by imposing predefined boundaries and signalling how a group is viewed from the outside (Jenkins, 1997). Ethnicity thus enables a more flexible way of describing relevant social groups and allows for multiple identifications at the individual level – something rigid categories like citizenship, nationality or “migration background” cannot provide (Borrelli & Ruedin 2024, p. 8). While it is true that ethnicity has also been used as a tool of oppression, it nevertheless opens space for multiplicity and agency. It can furthermore be self-identified, measured, and used in statistical analyses if desired (*ibidem*). As follows from the two critical reflections presented, instead of using the category of migration background, there are proposals to use cultural identification or ethnicity.

In academic and policy contexts, a social category of “migrant” often refers to the individual’s status as a migrant, while “person with migrant experience” is a broader, more descriptive phrase highlighting the life journey and learning processes involved in moving to a new country. The choice depends on whether the focus is on identity, legal status, or the dynamic process of adaptation and learning, as the latter emphasizes the complex, transformative nature of migration for an individual. “A person with migration experience” is preferred in qualitative research to emphasize the individual’s subjective journey, learning processes. Thoughtful use of social categories can more accurately depict diversity, highlight discrimination and social inequalities and respect participants’ experiences (Vietze, J., Schwarzenhal, M., Moffitt et al. 2023, p. 404). Many educational researchers have been inclined to use social categories based on quantitative research traditions. Educational research needs to promote discourses which focus on inequity and diversity rather than on deficit and that this can be mirrored in the selection and use of social categories. Researchers are encouraged to critically reflect social justice implications as they frame their research questions, select relevant social categories, and draw conclusions based on intergroup differences (Vietze, Schwarzenhal, Moffitt et al. 2023).

The Coalition for Diversity and Inclusion in Scholarly Communications recommends to “avoid referring to people’s immigration status unless contextually relevant and essential” (Immigration 2022, online). This is because “putting someone in the ethnic or immigrant box is feared to socially marginalize rather than include” (Levitt 2016, p. 279). Borrelli & Ruedin (2024, p. 12) encourage researchers to consider more precise vocabulary to better capture the dynamics at play. For example, referring to “ethnic groups” or “stereotypes” in the study of discrimination can be more analytically useful than referring to “immigrants”. Depending on context, it may be more meaningful to speak of social class, socio-economic exclusion, marginalisation, economic precarity or social segregation, among other possible dimensions. Therefore, empowering discourse is understood as reflective discourse, which acknowledges the complexity of terminology used in migration studies. Such discourse implies that researchers use categories with caution, aware of their strengths and weaknesses. They ask themselves: do they need to use such terms as migrants, immigrants or other categories will be more meaningful to their research objectives? Another consideration is the impact of research on policymaking. As Natter & Welfens (2024, p. 1684) observe, “large parts of migration scholarship continue to work (un)intentionally with state categories and within nation state contexts – many precisely in order to be heard by policy actors and have impact on political debates or simply because nation states continue to structure social and political life writ large”.

Further reflections

In response to the limitations of migration terminology, some alternative theoretical proposals have emerged. Many scholars propose using mobility-based rather than nation-state-based categories. Mobility-based categories allow researchers to capture the dynamic elements of people’s lives, going beyond binary distinctions such as migrant/non-migrant, first/second generation, or ethnic/non-ethnic (Mazzucato, 2024, p. 3). Researchers sometimes use quotation marks to signal the inadequacy of certain terms. For example, young people may not perceive their “home country” as home in the sense that researchers intend. Categories such as ethnicity or generation may depict migrants as static. Therefore, there is a need for concepts focused on process (Anthias, 2012). Valentina Mazzucato and Joris Schapendonk (2025, p. 2) conceptualise migration as „complex mobility trajectories”, defined as “spa-

tiotemporal processes that inherently question taken-for-granted migratory logics of departure, transit and arrival or migration as a clearly distinct move where mobility prior or after such a move is not considered". Migration is seen as a process involving multiple forms of mobility and immobility. However, mobility-based categories, due to its complexity and fluidity, may be analytically challenging and create uncertainties for scholars and bureaucracies when labelling mobile people (ibidem, p. 5). The authors also note a methodological shift from traditional methods, like interviews and surveys, which can capture mobilities after movement, to mobile methods, which encompass a broader set of (im)mobility experiences, including emotions and meanings following the doubts, failed attempts of movements and moments of transitions (ibidem, p. 6).

Other studies adopt a cosmopolitan perspective, seeing migrants as transnational citizens. This perspective emphasises global connections, multiple belongings and complex ties. It describes those international migrants who maintain connections to their country of origin and its diaspora. Cindy Horst and Tore Vincents Olsen (2021, p. 4) argue that studying immigrants who lead transnational lives increases our understanding of how attachments to particular places or people can coexist with cosmopolitan orientations. They encourage the use of intersectional approach, which require exploring relevant social identifiers in context. For example, when transnational citizens in Europe send financial support for humanitarian purposes, researchers must ask: "what are the values that drive them to do this and to what extent does their gender, age, educational background, professional identity, experience as a parent, religion, or a range of other personal characteristics influence these practices?" (ibidem, p. 14). Horst & Olsen (2021, p. 15) conceptualise transnational citizens as "more than (former) migrants, rooted in their past through the 'homeland' and transnational communities."

Further reflections appear in literature on superdiversity and post-migrant society. The concept of superdiversity challenges the traditional view of "immigrants" as a single, homogenous group, instead emphasizing the immense variety within migrant populations due to intersecting factors like age, gender, class, migration status, and language (Vertovec 2007, 2023; Grzymala-Kazłowska, Phillimore 2019). It reframes immigration not by monolithic ethnicity, but as a complex, multi-dimensional process influenced by unique individual experiences and the specific context of their new environment. Research shifts from studying "immigrant groups" to analysing how diverse individuals nav-

igate diverse urban contexts and their unique challenges and opportunities. In educational policy, Steven Vertovec gives an illustration: if pupils of a particular ethnic origin perform poorly at school, the cause is often attributed to their migration background. In contrast, a superdiversity approach examines “a complex mixture of factors such as migration status, place of residents, social hierarchies and parents’ level of education” (“Superdiversity – rethinking diversity” 2024, online). This approach is more nuanced and supports social inclusion of people with migration experience.

Finally, post-migrant theory conceptualises societies in which migration is a fundamental and permanent aspect, making diversity the norm and moving beyond treating migration as an exceptional or peripheral event. The term “post-migrant” emphasizes the social, cultural and political transformations resulting from past and ongoing migration, which shapes the collective “we” and identity of a nation. It signifies a phase of social negotiation and the overcoming of the “migrant-native” divide, recognizing that migration has become an integral part of society’s foundation rather than a temporary exception (Barbarino & Seydel 2024, p. 2937). Therefore, a post-migrant perspective promotes the use of language that recognizes the multiple and overlapping identities that people hold. This perspective advocates for a broader analytical framework considering multiple systems of classification, including class, gender and languages.

In sum, social categorisation has become “a new pillar of migration scholarship” (Bialas, Lukate & Vertovec 2025, p. 704). Scholars increasingly focus more critically on the contested process of categorisation. There is a shift toward more contextual and situational understandings of categories, toward the potentiality, performativity and relationality of categories (ibidem, p. 706). In many cases, intersectional and dynamic perspectives are often better suited to capture the complexity of human experiences in migration processes.

Conclusion

As researchers, we inevitably make use of categories. The challenge is to employ categories that are meaningful for our analytical purposes and ethically responsible. This requires a reflective practice that considers social, political, cultural and ethical contexts. It often involves balancing between official classifications, political correctness and research participants’ own understandings of their identities. Researchers may choose categories that empower participants of their stud-

ies, for example, by using of their own terms to represent their identities. There is growing awareness of the limitations of binary categories like “immigrant” versus “native” and increasing recognition of the need for more nuanced discussions of diverse migration experiences. An intersectional approach helps researchers generate richer knowledge about people’s life, while attention to the dynamic nature of migration trajectories supports more accurate representations.

Terminological choices often differ between quantitative and qualitative research. Quantitative studies typically rely on official data and state-defined categories. Also, many researchers (un)intentionally employ state-based categories to influence policymaking. Nevertheless, some quantitative scholars (Borrelli & Ruedin 2024) advocate alternative classification systems, such as gender, ethnicity, language or social class, to reduce negative attributes ascribed to migrants. Qualitative research offers greater flexibility: categories can be adapted to reflect participants’ perspectives, relational identities and lived experiences, including situations in which individuals do not identify as “migrants” at all. A mobility-based relational ontology suggests that for many people, relationships and everyday practices matter more than formal identities.

Because language both reflects and reproduces power relations, researchers have a responsibility to approach their subjects with sensitivity and critical awareness. This chapter highlights the importance of adopting reflexive, inclusive terminology and avoiding deficit-based narratives wherever possible. By questioning dominant representations and embracing alternative perspectives, empowering discourse not only contributes to more robust academic knowledge but also supports broader social change toward a more just and equitable society.

Practical guidelines for researchers and educators

Migration is a complex and dynamic process that has many implications for people and communities, as well as for researchers and educators. In education, it is important to foster an understanding of diverse experience of immigrants, taking into account their strengths, learning from them through co-creative practices and providing opportunities to adapt to a new country by creating welcoming and supportive environments. It is also important to combat hostile and othering language and discrimination, as well as to develop empathy. In social research, it is considered a good practice to undertake participatory research that includes the experiences and knowledge of immigrants.

A mix-method approach (combining qualitative and quantitative tools) may be helpful in gaining a deeper understanding of the meanings behind people's experiences, their choices and decisions regarding (im)mobilities, their changing of cultural identifications (e.g. distancing themselves from certain categorisations), as well as their emotions and social interactions. Following the principles of restorative and regenerative education (Obrillant 2024), it is essential to move beyond the idea of "doing less harm" principle and actively create thriving conditions for diverse people. This also means applying empowering language. Empowering language for immigrants focuses on human-centered framing that highlights skills, potential and contributions. It involves using terms such as "immigrant", "newcomer" or "person seeking refuge" rather than "illegal alien" (e.g. OHCHR, online). Successful narrative change on migration relies on a human rights-based approach, embedding – alongside empowerment – elements such as participation and inclusion, equality and non-discrimination, accountability (OHCHR 2020, p. 23). There is a strong need to use terminology that, on the one hand, helps us understand the multiple contexts and explore power relations. On the other hand, reflexive and more sensitive language may empower both research participants and researchers.

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SECTION III

Digital, Social, and Global Challenges in Education

Digital transformation in Vietnamese higher education: educational reforms and emerging challenges

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Abstract. In the context of the knowledge society, the rapid advancement and integration of digital technologies have made digital competence a central concern in higher education. Teacher educators, in addition to their roles in teaching and curriculum development, play a crucial part in preparing future teachers to effectively integrate technology into their classrooms. Strengthening their digital competence is essential for fostering innovative pedagogical practices and supporting the broader digital transformation of education. In Vietnam, educational digital transformation has been a national priority since 2019; however, significant challenges remain in equipping teacher educators with the necessary digital skills and pedagogical strategies. Existing research has primarily focused on school teachers and students, leaving a gap in understanding the digital competence of teacher educators in higher education. This pilot study explores the challenges in developing digital competence among teacher educators at three major universities of education in Ha Noi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Da Nang. A questionnaire survey involving 59 participants provides initial insights that can inform future large-scale studies and guide policy development in the field of educational digitalisation.

Introduction

In the information and knowledge society, the rapid advancement and profound integration of technology into our lives have made digital competence a prominent concern in education (Zhao et al., 2021). Following the outbreak of

the COVID-19 and its profound impact on the education sector, concerns about digital competence have intensified across all reached a new levels, including higher education. Teacher educators, in addition to their responsibilities for teaching, curriculum development, and monitoring learning through various digital platforms, play a key role in educating and preparing future teachers to integrate digital technologies into their classrooms (Tondeur et al., 2019; Uerz et al., 2018). Developing digital competence is therefore essential for teacher educators, as it enables them to design and implement innovative pedagogical approaches that are vital in the era of digital transformation—a comprehensive process that leverages digital technologies to enhance teaching practices and provide enriched learning experiences (Alenezi, 2021)

Recognising the benefits of digital transformation, the Vietnamese Government began investigating and implementing digital transformation within the education sector in 2019, marking the onset of the Digital Transformation Era in Vietnam. The integration of digital technologies into higher education presents significant challenges, particularly in preparing future educators to navigate a digital society (Thái et al., 2021). Despite the growing importance of digital technologies in education, research on digitalisation in Vietnam has primarily focused on school education and students (Hoang et al., 2022; O'Connor et al., 2023) with minimal emphasis on the digital competencies of teacher educators, particularly in the context of teacher preparation. There is limited understanding of how teacher educators in Vietnamese universities are integrating these technologies into their teaching practices.

This study explores the challenges of digital integration encountered by teacher educators within the context of ongoing educational reforms and digital transformation in Vietnamese higher education. Moreover, the impact of institutional and systemic factors—such as technology access, support programs, and educational policies—on the development of digital competencies remains underexplored. While teacher educators are expected to develop their own digital competencies, the mechanisms and barriers to achieving this remain insufficiently studied, particularly across different regions and institutional settings within Vietnam.

To address these gaps, this study explores the challenges faced by teacher educators in developing digital competence across three major Vietnamese cities: Ha Noi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Da Nang. These cities represent diverse educational and technological contexts, enabling a comparative understanding of regional conditions. Data were collected through a pilot study with a question-

naire survey involving 59 teacher educators from Ha Noi National University of Education, Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, and the University of Da Nang – University of Science and Education.

The research contributes to digital education by offering actionable recommendations. Proposed solutions include tailored professional development programs, enhanced access to digital infrastructure, and fostering collaborative networks among teacher educators. By addressing these challenges, this study provides practical insights for policymakers and educational leaders to support teacher educators in leveraging digital technologies effectively. The findings aim to strengthen Vietnam's higher education system, ensuring its adaptability in a rapidly evolving global digital landscape.

Vietnam's Education System and the Digital Transformation

In a study on Vietnamese educational development, Vallely (2005) highlighted ongoing efforts to address structural and contextual challenges in advancing educational progress. Three key lessons emerged from his analysis of policies concerning teacher workforce development, educational management, and strategies for mobilising social resources to promote educational advancement. First, the Vietnamese government has consistently regarded education and training, together with science and technology, as top national priorities. Second, the education system must undergo comprehensive reform to promote democratisation, socialisation, diversification, standardisation, and modernisation. Third, educational management reform should begin with new conceptual and strategic approaches to educational development.

The past decade has witnessed remarkable progress in Vietnamese higher education as a result of Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW. The reform has significantly transformed the system, marking “a pivotal phase in the sector's development trajectory” and reflecting comprehensive efforts to improve both quality and efficiency. Key achievements include: (1) the expansion of higher education infrastructure, with the number of universities increasing from 214 to 242, alongside strong growth in master's and doctoral programs; (2) significant improvements in educational and research quality, through curricular reform, new pedagogical practices, and a stronger emphasis on scientific research; (3) the advancement of internationalization, with Vietnamese universities building partnerships with international counterparts to exchange knowledge and enhance global standing; and (4) a strong digital transformation, where

information technology has been applied to educational management, teaching, and learning to optimize operations and enrich the student experience. Overall, these developments underscore the dynamic evolution of Vietnam's higher education system and its vital role in socio-economic development and global integration (Nguyen, 2024).

Digital transformation in education has become a global priority, and Vietnam has actively pursued this agenda by incorporating technology into teaching and learning. The Vietnamese Ministry of Information and Communications (MIC) issued Circular No. 03/2014/TT-BTTTT, establishing Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) skills standards for the education sector. More recently, the Prime Minister's Decision No. 2222/QĐ-TTg (December 30, 2021) approved the National Digital Transformation Programme for vocational education through 2025, with orientations toward 2030. These initiatives have laid a solid foundation for a profound shift toward digital transformation, particularly in higher education. Moreover, the forthcoming Higher Education Strategy 2021–2030 in Vietnam, as outlined by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), highlights governance modernisation, quality assurance, and faculty development as strategic priorities for reform (Parajuli et al., 2020, p. 21). These priorities align closely with the need to strengthen teacher educators' digital competence as part of Vietnam's broader digital transformation agenda.

According to Le Thi Thanh Thu (2024), the implementation of the national digitalisation agenda prioritises the development of platforms that support distance teaching and learning, ensuring the comprehensive integration of digital technologies in management, pedagogy, and assessment. All higher education institutions are required to offer distance learning opportunities, with pilot initiatives mandating that at least 20% of course content be delivered online. The policy further emphasises three key priorities: the digitalisation of learning materials, the establishment of a centralised data warehouse for sharing both online and face-to-face teaching resources, and the enhancement of educational technologies to support personalised instruction and learning. Collectively, these priorities reflect Vietnam's strong commitment to building a digitally empowered higher education system.

Challenges Facing Teacher Educators amid the Digital Transformation of Vietnamese Higher Education

Teacher educators play a crucial role in preparing future teachers by imparting subject knowledge, developing teaching skills, and supporting professional development (Loughran, 2014). To fulfil these responsibilities effectively, they must possess strong digital competence, enabling them to manage disciplinary knowledge and integrate digital tools into both teaching and research practices (Ramírez-Montoya et al., 2017). These competencies are essential for developing practical pedagogical knowledge, enhancing student learning, and equipping students for life and work in a digital society. Additionally, these abilities help teacher educators develop and uphold the fundamental competencies required for their profession (Štemberger & Konrad, 2021). Consequently, their digital competence significantly influences their professional and educational careers. This demands ongoing self-improvement and active engagement in professional development throughout their careers (Van der Klink et al., 2017). However, advancing digital competence remains challenging at both individual and institutional levels. Teacher educators often struggle to use digital tools effectively and to translate their pedagogical potential into meaningful classroom practices. At the institutional level, excessive workload and overlapping responsibilities often limit opportunities for participation in continuing professional development, hindering sustained growth in digital competence. Similar concerns about numerous time-consuming tasks and insufficient time for professional learning have also been identified in other empirical studies with teacher educators (Wagner et al., 2024).

According to O'Connor et al (2023), following the COVID-19 pandemic, teacher educators in Vietnam face challenges similar to those encountered globally, encompassing technological, pedagogical, institutional, and systemic dimensions. A continuing challenge is ensuring that lessons learned from the pandemic are effectively applied to enhance teaching and learning in engaging, sustainable ways. Another persistent concern is how to integrate the strengths of face-to-face pedagogy into blended approaches that meet the professional and social needs of both educators and learners. Hoang et al (2022) found that teacher educators in Vietnamese universities of education generally possess intermediate levels of digital competence, with younger educators demonstrating higher ICT proficiency and minimal gender differences. Significant challenges include limited practical skills in digital content creation and problem-solving, insufficient hands-on training, and infrastructural constraints such as unsta-

ble internet access and inadequate institutional support. These findings underline how both individual and systemic factors restrict the sustainable development of teacher educators' digital competence in Vietnam.

Building on this gap, the present study explores the challenges faced by teacher educators in Vietnamese higher education as they develop and apply digital competence amid the ongoing digital transformation. By examining how individual, institutional, and systemic factors interact to shape their professional experiences, this study seeks to provide an evidence-based understanding of the barriers that hinder teacher educators' effective integration of digital technologies into teaching and learning across the regions of Vietnam

Research questions

This pilot study addressed the following questions:

(RQ1) What are teacher educators' perceived challenges across key domains (infrastructure, digital competence, pedagogical integration, workload/stress, international perspectives)?

(RQ2) Do these challenges differ across Ha Noi, Da Nang, and Ho Chi Minh City?

Methodology

Data collection tools and strategy

The structure and content of the questionnaire were conceptually informed by existing international research on educators' digital competence and digitalisation in higher education. Previous studies emphasise that teachers' digital competence extends beyond technical proficiency to include pedagogical and professional dimensions influenced by institutional and systemic factors (O'Connor et al., 2023; Tondeur et al., 2019; Wagner et al., 2024). Accordingly, the survey addressed challenges across five interrelated areas – infrastructure and access, digital competence and professional development, pedagogical integration, workload and stress, and international perspectives – reflecting the multifaceted nature of digital transformation in higher education.

Data were collected through an online survey using Google Forms. The survey was distributed to all teacher educators at three major universities (frame $n = 90$) and received 59 voluntary responses (response rate: 66%).

The questionnaire included 41 questions, written in English by the international research team and then translated into Vietnamese, organised into 7 sections. Section A collected demographic and professional background information, including gender, age, work experience in higher education, teaching subject, institution, and prior experience integrating digital tools into teaching. Sections B to F explored specific areas of challenge: (B) Infrastructure and Access, (C) Digital Competence and Professional Development, (D) Pedagogical Integration, (E) Workload, Stress, and Professional Motivation, and (F) Comparative and Regional Perspectives. Sections B–F included items measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree, plus an additional N/A = Not Applicable/No Experience). The final section (G) contained open-ended questions inviting participants to elaborate on their experiences, reflections, and suggestions. Respondents were encouraged to describe the main challenges encountered when integrating digital technologies into teaching, systemic and institutional supports, international collaboration, and recommendations for enhancing digital teaching and learning in Vietnamese higher education.

This pilot study employed an embedded mixed-methods design, with the questionnaire survey serving as the primary quantitative component, while open-ended questions provided a complementary qualitative perspective (Uwe Flick, 2014). The open-ended responses were included to provide contextual explanations and illustrative insights into the challenges identified through the closed-ended items. This design allowed for a more nuanced understanding of teacher educators' experiences without extending the scope beyond a pilot study.

To assess aspects of technology use and challenges, we primarily employed multiple-choice questions organised in a matrix table, with criteria in rows and levels (Likert scale) in columns. The other format used was open questions, which enabled respondents to input relevant information freely. We posed open questions to cross-verify responses and gain deeper insights into the outputs of multiple-choice and tag questions. All data were translated from Vietnamese into English for analysis and report writing.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were analysed by computing respondent-level domain scores (means on 1–5 scales) using pairwise-missing handling; N/A responses were treated as missing for the corresponding domain. Where applicable, items were reverse-coded prior to aggregation. Internal consistency was assessed

with Cronbach's α ($\alpha \geq .70$ deemed acceptable for a pilot). Group differences were examined using one-way ANOVA; Levene's test guided post-hoc selection (Tukey when variances were equal; Games–Howell when unequal). Effect sizes were reported as η^2 . Analyses were conducted in SPSS. Open-ended responses were analysed using a descriptive content approach, whereby recurring points were grouped according to the five analytical domains of the survey. This qualitative synthesis was used to support and contextualise the interpretation of the quantitative findings (Braun & Clarke, 2012)

Participants

The pilot study was conducted using a convenience sample of 59 teacher educators from three major universities of education: Ha Noi National University of Education (HNUE), Ho Chi Minh City University of Education (HCMUE), and The University of Da Nang – University of Science and Education (UED). These institutions were selected because they represent the three most significant urban centres in Vietnam (Ha Noi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Da Nang) with diverse educational and technological infrastructures. Participants varied in academic discipline, years of teaching experience, and exposure to digital teaching practices, ensuring a heterogeneous dataset. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Informed consent was obtained prior to survey participation.

Results

Sample characteristics

The pilot study included 59 teacher educators from three leading universities of education: Ha Noi National University of Education ($n = 14$, 23.7%), Ho Chi Minh City University of Education ($n = 22$, 37.3%), and the University of Da Nang – University of Science and Education ($n = 23$, 39.0%). The majority of participants were female (66.1%), with males accounting for 33.9%. In terms of teaching experience, the largest group had 11–20 years of experience (40.7%), followed by those with more than 20 years (33.9%); a smaller proportion reported fewer than 10 years.

Participants came from a wide range of academic disciplines, with the largest share in Primary and Early Childhood Education (32.2%) and History (13.6%), as well as smaller numbers from fields such as English, Chemistry, Educational Sciences, and Political Science. Regarding digital teaching ex-

perience, nearly half reported a moderate level of experience (49.2%), while 42.4% indicated substantial experience, and only a small fraction had limited or no exposure.

In terms of learning management systems (LMS), the most widely used platform was Microsoft Teams (66.1%), followed by Moodle (11.9%) and internal institutional LMS (6.8%). Other platforms, such as Google Classroom, Blackboard, and Zoom, were mentioned but are far less common.

Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. Overall, teacher educators' perceived challenges were moderate, suggesting that while digital transformation in higher education is progressing, substantial barriers remain. Infrastructure and access ($M = 2.37$, $SD = 0.84$) and digital competence/professional development ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 0.85$) were rated relatively low, highlighting critical barriers. Pedagogical integration challenges were somewhat higher ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 0.78$). Workload and stress also scored moderately ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 0.75$). International perspectives were viewed more positively ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.78$), although this section had higher rates of missing responses due to limited international exposure. Collectively, these findings reveal a nuanced picture of teacher educators' experiences—where infrastructural and professional constraints persist, yet attitudes toward global digital integration remain relatively optimistic.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics by domain

Domain	Items (k)	Mean	SD	Min	Max
B. Infrastructure & access	5	2.37	0.84	1.00	4.40
C. Digital competence & Professional Development	6	2.52	0.85	1.00	4.67
D. Pedagogical integration	5	3.06	0.78	1.40	4.60
E. Workload & stress	4	2.52	0.75	1.00	4.25
F. International perspectives	7	3.21	0.78	1.43	4.71

Items reflected agreement with challenge statements (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree); higher scores indicate greater perceived challenge.

Reliability

Cronbach’s alpha analysis indicated satisfactory internal consistency for most domains: infrastructure and access ($\alpha = .73$), digital competence and professional development ($\alpha = .85$), pedagogical integration ($\alpha = .72$), and international perspectives ($\alpha = .84$). The workload and stress domain produced a lower coefficient ($\alpha = .62$), which reflects the inherently diverse ways in which teacher educators experience the pressures of digital transformation—such as increased workload, stress, and reduced flexibility. This suggests that the challenges in this area are multifaceted and not easily captured by a single scale. Although one item in the international perspectives domain demonstrated weaker consistency, the domain as a whole remained robust, underscoring the relevance of international collaboration as both an opportunity and a challenge for Vietnamese teacher educators.

Overall, participants’ open-ended responses broadly echoed the quantitative patterns, frequently highlighting constraints related to infrastructure and access, limited time for continuing professional development, and difficulties in translating digital tools into effective pedagogical practice.

Table 2. Reliability of the domains

Domain	Cronbach’s α	N (listwise)	Note
B. Infrastructure & access	.73	59	Acceptable
C. Digital competence & Professional Development	.85	59	Strong
D. Pedagogical integration	.72	59	Acceptable
E. Workload & stress	.62	59	Low reliability
F. International perspectives	.84	40	One weak item (F5)

Note. $\alpha \geq .70$ generally acceptable for pilot studies; Section F listwise N = 40 due to “Not applicable/No experience” responses.

Group comparisons (Ha Noi, Da Nang, Ho Chi Minh City)

One-way ANOVA tests were conducted to examine whether teacher educators’ perceived challenges differed significantly across the three cities—Ha Noi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Da Nang. As shown in Table 3, Levene’s test results confirmed the assumption of homogeneity of variances for all domains except Pedagogical Integration ($p = .037$), for which the Games–Howell correction was applied. Across all five domains, no statistically significant differ-

ences were observed: Infrastructure and Access ($p = .915$), Digital Competence and Professional Development ($p = .336$), Pedagogical Integration ($p = .449$), Workload and Stress ($p = .248$), and International Perspectives ($p = .589$). Effect sizes ($\eta^2 = .003-.049$) were consistently small, indicating minimal variation between cities in participants' responses.

The findings indicate that teacher educators across Vietnam's major cities experience similar challenges in digital transformation, suggesting that these difficulties are not region-specific. This consistency highlights the dominant influence of national and institutional factors over regional contexts and calls for coordinated, system-wide strategies to enhance digital competence and equity in higher education.

Table 3. One-way ANOVA results by city

Domain	Levene p	F(df)	p	η^2	Post hoc
B. Infrastructure & access	.609	$F(2.56) = .089$	.915	.003	ns
C. Digital competence & Professional Development	.716	$F(2.56) = 1.111$	.336	.038	ns
D. Pedagogical integration	.037	$F(2.56) = .811$	.449	.028	Games–Howell ns
E. Workload & stress	.152	$F(2.56) = 1.432$	.248	.049	ns
F. International perspectives	.972	$F(2.56) = .534$	.589	.019	ns

Discussion and Conclusion

This pilot study explored the challenges faced by teacher educators in Vietnam's higher education system during the ongoing digital transformation. The findings demonstrate that teacher educators perceive moderate levels of challenge across five domains, with the most critical difficulties reported in infrastructure, access, digital competence, and pedagogical integration. Despite generally positive attitudes towards digitalisation and international collaboration, the results highlight ongoing structural and professional barriers that hinder teacher educators' ability to effectively incorporate digital technologies into their teaching practice.

The analysis of reliability confirmed that the newly developed questionnaire is a feasible and coherent tool for investigating these issues, with four of the five domains achieving acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha > .70$). The lower reliability of the workload and stress scale ($\alpha = .62$) highlights the inher-

ently diverse ways in which teacher educators experience digital pressures, from increased administrative duties to reduced flexibility in teaching. This variation reflects the multidimensional nature of digital transformation, which extends beyond individual competence to include institutional and systemic influences.

Interpreting the survey findings alongside participants' open-ended reflections strengthens the evidence that perceived challenges are shaped by both individual conditions, such as time constraints and levels of digital competence, and institutional factors, including infrastructure, organisational support, and policy-related pressures.

The lack of statistically significant differences between Ha Noi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Da Nang suggests that these challenges are not specific to any region but are widespread throughout Vietnam's higher education system. This supports the idea that digital transformation in education should be viewed as a multi-level phenomenon involving macro (national policy), meso (institutional culture and infrastructure), and micro (individual practice) dimensions. Conceptually, digital competence should not be seen merely as technical skill but as a comprehensive construct that includes pedagogical, organisational, and professional aspects.

The interrelation between these areas indicates that the development of digital competence among teacher educators relies not only on access to tools or training but also on institutional leadership, organisational climate, and supportive communities of practice. Universities play a vital role in fostering such environments by integrating digital transformation into strategic planning, providing reliable technological infrastructure, and embedding digital competence into career development frameworks. Nationally, cohesive policies are necessary to ensure fair digital access and standardised expectations for digital pedagogy across higher education institutions.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight several priorities for both institutional leaders and policymakers. First, there is a pressing need for ongoing and context-aware professional development programmes that address both the pedagogical and technological aspects of digital competence. As Wagner et al. (2024) observed, informal and peer-based learning – such as mentoring and collaborative problem-solving – often has a stronger impact on competence development than traditional one-off training courses. Universities should therefore foster professional learning communities and incentivise ongoing engagement with digital innovation. Second, investment in techno-

logical infrastructure remains essential. The low mean scores for infrastructure and access in this study reveal persistent inequalities in connectivity and resource distribution. Institutions need to ensure reliable digital platforms, adequate devices, and accessible technical support to enable teacher educators to integrate technology efficiently into their teaching. Finally, the findings reinforce O'Connor et al.'s (2023) call to embed digital transformation into institutional strategies that align with national policy frameworks, ensuring that teacher educators are not only reactive users of technology but also active contributors to pedagogical innovation.

In conclusion, this pilot study provides valuable initial evidence on the challenges teacher educators face during Vietnam's transition toward a digitally enhanced higher education system. The findings reveal that infrastructural limitations, workload pressures, and fragmented professional development opportunities remain significant obstacles. However, the generally positive orientation toward digitalisation and international collaboration demonstrates both the readiness and the potential of Vietnamese teacher educators to engage meaningfully with digital transformation. Strengthening digital competence in this context will require a systemic, coordinated approach—linking national policy, institutional capacity, and individual agency—to ensure that teacher educators are fully equipped to prepare future teachers for an increasingly digital and interconnected world.

Author statement

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Building cyber-resilient schools: integrating AI security and digital hygiene in education

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Abstract. As schools increasingly rely on cloud platforms, mobile devices and AI-driven systems, they face growing exposure to ransomware, data breaches, AI-enabled manipulation and privacy risks. This paper argues that building cyber-resilient schools requires more than technical fixes: it demands the alignment of AI security with organisational governance, teacher preparedness and students' digital-hygiene practices. Drawing on recent international research, the paper develops a holistic framework that connects AI security, behavioural factors and school culture, and highlights cyber-resilience as a long-term, shared responsibility of the entire school community.

Introduction

Building cyber-resilience in schools has become a major challenge for contemporary education policy, as institutions are increasingly targeted by ransomware, phishing and data-theft attacks that can disrupt teaching and compromise the privacy of thousands of students and staff (IBM, 2025; Education Data Hub, 2021; NCSC, 2025). In response, many countries are developing dedicated strategies and coordination bodies for K-12 cybersecurity. A notable example is the K-12 Cybersecurity Government Coordinating Council established in 2024 by the U.S. Department of Education to strengthen schools' cyber-resilience as part of national critical infrastructure. At the practical level, debate is shifting from narrowly defined IT protection toward a holistic conception of cyber-resilience, one that includes incident prepar-

edness, rapid response and continuity planning, as well as the development of digital competencies across the entire school community in an AI-rich environment. Although similar policy initiatives and threat patterns can be observed across different education systems, regulatory frameworks and institutional arrangements differ from country to country. For this reason, the discussion in this article separates context-dependent examples from more general considerations relevant to school cyber-resilience.

Artificial intelligence plays a special role in this landscape, simultaneously strengthening and undermining schools' digital security. On the one hand, AI is being integrated with email, cloud, and educational platform security systems to more effectively detect malicious links, unusual logins, and phishing hidden in seemingly innocent messages (e.g., analyzing the language and context in messages or cloud-based documents). On the other hand, the literature highlights that AI-based educational platforms can themselves generate new risk vectors, from student data leaks, through model vulnerabilities, to the possibility of automating attacks using generative AI (Pikhart, 2025; Edly, 2025; University of Illinois, 2024). That is why we are increasingly talking not only about "AI in education", but also about AI security in education, covering the principles of tool selection, data minimization, supplier auditing and training teachers in the safe use of AI-based services.

The third pillar of a cyber-resilient school is the systematic development of digital hygiene and digital citizenship among students and teachers. Research on inclusive education and digital literacy emphasizes that awareness of cyber threats, the ability to manage one's own data, and an understanding of basic network security principles should be considered an integral part of digital literacy, not an "add-on" to the curriculum (Charles-Zalakoro, 2025; UNICEF, 2020; UNESCO, 2024). Recent educational research underscores the need for coherent frameworks that link technological innovation with pedagogical and organisational readiness. Majewska-Pyrkosz (2024) argues that the rapid emergence of AI tools in teaching and school administration requires rethinking the role of educators, who must balance new technological opportunities with emerging categories of digital risk. This supports the view that digitalisation in education is not merely a technical upgrade. However, a systemic transformation affecting school culture, teacher competence and student safety. At the same time, studies on Education 4.0 point to the expanding role of generative AI and automation in school ecosystems. Mekić et al. (2024) show that AI-driven systems reshape not only instructional processes, but also the broad-

er cybersecurity landscape, as schools become increasingly dependent on cloud infrastructures, automated workflows and data-intensive applications. These shifts intensify the need for transparent governance, clear data-use policies and robust ethical oversight to mitigate risks related to biased algorithms and the improper handling of student information.

Research on cybersecurity education further underscores that strengthening cyber-resilience requires more than robust technical infrastructure. Studies demonstrate that adaptive learning environments and hands-on cybersecurity exercises significantly improve students' ability to recognise and respond to online threats. These findings indicate that resilience is not built through isolated lessons but through ongoing, scenario-based learning embedded in everyday practice (Vykopal, Švábenský and Čeleda (2023)). Moreover, the integration of generative AI into both teaching and digital-safety instruction highlights the importance of addressing behavioural, ethical and cognitive aspects of digital competence. As shown by Elkhodr and Gide (2025), effective cybersecurity education must combine critical thinking, responsible AI use and reflective digital-hygiene habits. More recent studies show that developing digital-hygiene habits, such as conscious password management, critical source evaluation, limiting personal-data disclosure and hygienic smartphone use, supports technical security while also reducing risks like cyberbullying and internet addiction (Datta and Krancher (2024)). Building cyber-resilient schools therefore requires combining AI-related security measures with long-term education for responsible technology use across the entire school community. In Poland, findings from large-scale studies such as NASK's *Nastolatki 3.0* document the routine presence of cyberbullying, contact with harmful online material and prolonged screen time in young people's lives. These results illustrate the concrete conditions under which Polish schools operate and the types of risks they must address in practice. Similar patterns observed in other countries suggest that, while the empirical examples discussed here are context-specific, the challenges they represent are not unique to Poland.

The models and recommendations presented in this section reflect a general organisational approach to cyber-resilience in education. While selected empirical examples refer to the Polish context, the underlying principles are designed to be transferable to different national and institutional settings.

Understanding Cyber-Resilience in Education

Cyber-resilience in education refers to the capacity of students, educators, institutions and the digital systems they rely on to anticipate, withstand, adapt to and recover from cyber threats that can disrupt learning or compromise safety (Sun et al. (2022)). This conceptualisation draws on international studies and reflects a broadly shared understanding of cyber-resilience in education. In contemporary schools, vulnerabilities stem from extensive dependence on cloud platforms, mobile devices and AI-driven tools, making cybersecurity concerns part of the everyday reality of teaching and administration. Research on children's online experiences shows that digital risks and opportunities co-exist, and that resilience requires technical, social and educational approaches. At the individual level, cyber-resilience closely aligns with digital resilience. Studies indicate that young people develop resilience not only through formal instruction but also through informal online practices. Hassoun et al. (2025) note that children already display forms of "information sensibility", such as filtering content, cross-checking information and seeking help when uncertain. Educational strategies that build on these existing skills are more effective than those assuming a lack of basic competence. Qamaria et al.'s (2025) systematic review identifies four core components of adolescent digital resilience: risk awareness, regulation of emotional and behavioural responses, help-seeking and reflective learning after negative experiences. These dimensions show that resilience is dynamic and can be purposefully cultivated in school settings.

Evidence from intervention studies shows that cyber-resilience can be effectively taught. Lee and Hancock (2023), found that an elementary-school programme significantly improved children's ability to recognise harmful online situations, manage digital conflict and use help-seeking strategies, demonstrating that even young learners can internalise adaptive responses when instruction is structured and developmentally appropriate. This supports broader claims that resilience develops through guided practice rather than exposure alone. Teachers play a crucial role in this process. Their confidence and competence in cybersecurity education determine how often and how effectively digital-safety concepts appear in lessons. Childers et al. (2023)) show that although many teachers initially feel unprepared to design cybersecurity activities, targeted professional development significantly boosts their confidence and instructional quality, thereby indirectly strengthening students' resilience.

Research also stresses the need for early, continuous cybersecurity education. Ebrahimi et al. (2025) show that programmes for young children often lack coherence and call for a spiral curriculum that revisits key ideas across age groups. Cyber-resilience in education is also shaped by system-level policies and national strategies. Fernández Nieto, Romanini and Zhu (2025) compare K-12 cybersecurity education in the United States, the European Union and China, showing how differences in governance, centralisation and resource provision influence the degree to which resilience is embedded in schools. In some contexts, strong policy frameworks and comprehensive teacher training enable wide-scale implementation; in others, fragmented structures lead to uneven access and inconsistent learning experiences. Their findings reinforce the idea that resilience requires coherent, well-resourced national approaches.

Artificial Intelligence and School Security

According to UNESCO (2021) and the OECD report (2023), the most common applications of AI in schools include: intelligent tutoring systems and adaptive learning platforms (e.g., Century Tech, DreamBox, Knewton), automated grading of written assignments and exams (e.g., Gradescope, GPT-based systems), tools for monitoring and analyzing student behaviour (e.g., facial recognition, sentiment analysis in online communication), as well as teacher-support systems for lesson planning and personalised instruction. European policy documents (European Commission, 2021 AI Act; Digital Education Action Plan 2021–2027) stress that all such technologies must comply with requirements of safety, transparency, and non-discrimination. The AI-related risks outlined in this section are drawn primarily from international research and policy analyses and reflect challenges observed across different education systems.

The introduction of artificial intelligence into schools brings clear educational benefits but also new risks to student safety (see Figure 1). Research shows that the concept of school safety has expanded beyond legal and psychosocial protection to include digital security, personal data protection, algorithmic discrimination and emerging forms of AI-assisted cyberbullying (Selwyn, 2022; Williamson, 2019; Holmes et al., 2022). A rapidly growing area of AI adoption involves school-safety technologies, ranging from video monitoring and digital surveillance to early-warning systems for mental-health risks. International ethical frameworks, such as the European Commission's guidelines for AI and data use in education (European Commission, 2022), UNESCO's

Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2021), and OECD analyses of trustworthy AI in education (Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2020), stress that these systems must adhere to principles of transparency, proportionality and human oversight. At the technical level, literature reviews indicate rapid advances in AI-based weapon and threat detection in surveillance footage, including in school contexts (e.g., Santos et al., 2024; Salido et al., 2021), and these capabilities are increasingly commercialised by vendors of smart school monitoring systems. Meanwhile, platforms for monitoring student activity in digital environments have become more sophisticated. However, a systematic review of school online surveillance (O'Daffer et al., 2025) and investigative reporting on tools such as Gaggle point to substantial risks, including privacy violations, vulnerability to data leaks and high false-positive rates that may lead to unjustified identification and stigmatisation of students.

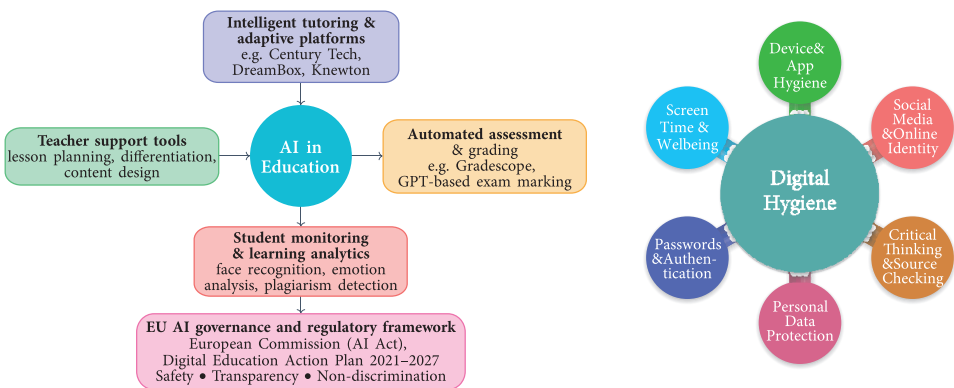
In the area of mental health, the literature highlights the potential of AI systems for early detection of depression or suicidal ideation based on educational data and self-reports (Goyal et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). Nonetheless, scholars consistently stress that such systems should support, rather than replace, professional psychological care (Miao, Holmes, Huang & Zhang, 2021). New categories of AI-enabled threats are also increasingly visible: the RAND report on deepfakes in schools (Diliberti et al., 2025) documents how generative models facilitate new forms of peer harassment and blackmail, complicating the balance between benefits and risks of AI deployment.

The most serious threat remains the violation of students' privacy and personal data protection. AI systems process vast amounts of sensitive data, from academic results to biometrics and online activity histories. According to a report by Check Point Research (2024), the number of cyberattacks on the education sector increased by 320.00% between 2020 and 2024. Livingstone and co-authors (2025) point out that children and young people rarely have the opportunity to provide informed consent to the processing of their data, which contradicts the requirements of the GDPR and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Another significant problem is the reproduction and reinforcement of existing social inequalities by educational algorithms. Studies by Buolamwini and Gebru (2018), Kizilcec and Lee (2020), and Baker et al. (2022) have shown that AI systems can unconsciously discriminate against students based on gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, for example, by providing lower recommendations for math and science courses for girls or worse predictions of educational success for children from disadvantaged families.

Since 2023, there has also been a sharp increase in cyberbullying, aided by generative artificial intelligence. Deepfake tools and large-scale language models enable the creation of realistic defamatory materials, from fake nude photos of female classmates to automatically generated series of offensive messages. Such cases have been reported in schools in Spain, the United States, and Poland. Against this broader international background, national data provide insight into how these risks materialise in specific educational contexts.

In the Polish context, the nationwide Nastolatki 3.0 survey conducted in 2022 among nearly 5,000 students found that almost 40% of teenagers had been insulted online and one quarter reported being mocked or humiliated, while around one third had received nude or semi-nude images through the internet. Polish studies echo these concerns: analyses of the Nastolatki 3.0 data and related reports indicate that around 50% of teenagers have encountered online aggression and about 40% have experienced it personally, with cyberbullying strongly linked to symptoms of anxiety and depression. Moreover, data from the Polish hotline Dyzurnet.pl show a steady increase in reports of unlawful and harmful online content involving minors. In 2022 the team received over 6,700 reports of material potentially depicting child sexual abuse, confirming CSAM in 2,861 cases, while the 2023 report notes an almost 200% rise in other categories of illegal content and a growing share of self-generated sexual material by minors. A further challenge concerns the limited explainability of many AI systems. Teachers and school leaders often struggle to understand why a student received a particular automated grade or was flagged as “at risk”. Holmes et al. (2022) describe this opacity as the “black-box” problem, which undermines trust in technology and constrains responsible pedagogical decision-making.

Figure 1. (a) AI in education; (b) Digital Hygiene



In response to these threats, the literature suggests implementing comprehensive protection mechanisms. Raji et al. (2020) recommend mandatory algorithmic audits before introducing any system into schools. Floridi et al. (2018) promote the Privacy by Design and Ethics by Design approaches. Improving the digital and ethical competencies of teaching staff (the EU AI4T project, the Polish Digital School program) and involving students and parents in the process of creating school policies regarding artificial intelligence are also crucial (Livingstone and Stoilova, 2023). Polish case law illustrates how quickly schools can overstep data-minimisation principles. In 2020 the national data protection authority (UODO) imposed a fine on a primary school for using fingerprint scanners in the school canteen, ruling that the processing of children's biometric data was unnecessary and disproportionate. While these findings reflect conditions specific to the Polish education system, similar concerns regarding privacy, cyberbullying and AI-related risks have been reported in other countries.

Digital Hygiene as an Educational Practice

Digital hygiene has become a central component of contemporary educational practice as digital technologies increasingly shape how students learn, communicate and manage personal information. It encompasses everyday behaviours that support online safety, data protection, digital identity management and well-being. In schools, digital hygiene includes not only technical skills but also social, cognitive and behavioural factors that influence how students navigate digital environments and develop resilience. As learners enter more complex online ecosystems, educators must teach device and app maintenance, secure authentication, source verification, data protection, screen-time management and responsible social media use. These categories, illustrated in Figure 1b as six interconnected domains, highlight the need for a holistic and coherent approach to digital competence. The six-domain structure presented here reflects a broadly applicable framework for digital hygiene education, rather than a model limited to a single national education system.

A key element of digital hygiene is device and application management, regular software updates, permission control, identifying suspicious files and securing personal devices. Armoogum et al. (2025) show that such routine practices, including limiting app permissions and removing unused software, form the foundation of cyber hygiene and significantly reduce risks such as

malware, data loss and unauthorised access. Although their work focuses on organisational settings, the same principles apply in schools, where modelling these behaviours supports students' long-term digital resilience. A second pillar concerns passwords and authentication. Engagement in cyber hygiene depends on informed decision-making: users who receive clear risk information and structured guidance are more likely to create strong passwords, use multi-factor authentication and avoid practices like password reuse (Howell et al., 2023). This demonstrates that digital hygiene is not purely technical but shaped by attitudes, reflection and instructional quality, highlighting the need for explicit teaching and hands-on learning about digital risk in schools.

Digital hygiene also includes personal-data protection, encompassing students' awareness of data traces, privacy settings, consent and information-sharing behaviours. Research shows that young people often underestimate the long-term consequences of sharing personal information. Berdi et al. (2024) found that stronger digital-hygiene skills correlate with lower involvement in cyberbullying and reduced risky disclosure, indicating that managing privacy settings and recognising unsafe interactions supports both individual safety and healthier peer relations. This demonstrates that digital hygiene contributes to safe and respectful online communities. Critical thinking and source evaluation constitute another key dimension. Farnan, Walton and Wright (2021) show that the ability to judge website reliability, based on DNS-pattern analysis, is a crucial protective factor, with weak evaluation skills linked to visits to unsafe sites. Their findings highlight the need for programmes that strengthen scepticism, verification routines and critical reasoning, such as checking URLs, assessing author credibility and identifying manipulative design. Digital hygiene is also closely connected to social media behaviour and online identity management. Adolescents construct online identities in fluid and sometimes risky ways shaped by peer dynamics and platform design. Camilleri et al. (2025) demonstrate that interactive tools, such as card-based learning activities, effectively raise awareness of identity risks, oversharing, reputational threats and digital footprints. A further dimension concerns screen time and digital well-being. Studies show strong links between digital literacy, smartphone dependency and overall well-being. Students who learn to manage notifications, set limits and reflect on their emotional responses to digital media report reduced dependency and improved well-being. These findings suggest that embedding digital hygiene within broader well-being initiatives enables schools to support students' mental health (Seo et al., 2020). The same research indicates that Polish adolescents spend on average more than five hours online on weekdays and

over six hours at weekends, which significantly increases their exposure to online risks and underscores the need for systematic digital-hygiene education.

Table 1: Six domains of digital hygiene in schools: definitions, behaviours, activities and learning outcomes.

Domain of digital hygiene	Short definition	Key everyday behaviours	Example classroom activities	Expected student competences
Device and application hygiene	Routine care of devices and software to reduce technical vulnerabilities.	Installing updates, managing app permissions, removing unused software, avoiding unverified downloads, using antivirus where appropriate.	Practical workshops on updating systems and apps, permission walkthroughs on smartphones, classroom checklists for safe device setup.	Keeps devices updated and clean, recognises suspicious files and apps, applies basic security settings on personal and shared devices.
Passwords and authentication	Practices that secure accounts and access to digital services.	Creating strong and unique passwords, using password managers, enabling multi-factor authentication, avoiding password reuse and sharing.	Activities on building strong passwords, simulations of password attacks, setting up MFA on school platforms with teacher guidance.	Designs strong passwords, understands the purpose of MFA, avoids risky authentication behaviours, explains why password reuse is dangerous.
Personal data protection and privacy	Managing data traces, privacy settings and information disclosure.	Adjusting privacy settings, limiting personal information sharing, thinking before posting, reviewing app data access, using pseudonyms where appropriate.	Mapping one's digital footprint, privacy setting "tune-ups" on platforms, discussion of real-world data misuse scenarios.	Identifies sensitive personal data, configures privacy settings, makes informed decisions about data sharing, recognises unsafe requests for information.
Critical thinking and source evaluation	Assessing reliability, safety and intentions of online content and services.	Checking URLs, cross-checking information, looking for author credentials, recognising clickbait and manipulative design, avoiding suspicious links.	Source comparison tasks, "spot the fake site" exercises, URL and domain analysis, guided evaluation of news and social media posts.	Evaluates credibility of websites, detects signs of fraud or manipulation, applies verification strategies before trusting or sharing content.

Domain of digital hygiene	Short definition	Key everyday behaviours	Example classroom activities	Expected student competences
Social media and online identity management	Shaping and protecting one’s on-line persona and relationships.	Controlling what is posted, managing friend/follower lists, using reporting and blocking tools, avoiding oversharing, considering long-term reputation.	Role-play around online conflicts, analysis of fictional profiles, exercises using reporting/blocking tools, discussions on digital footprint.	Understands how online actions affect reputation, uses platform safety tools, recognises and responds to peer pressure and risky social media norms.
Screen-time management and digital well-being	Balancing digital engagement with health, learning and relationships.	Setting time limits, managing notifications, taking breaks, reflecting on emotions after online activity, separating sleep time from device use.	Well-being journals, “notification audit” tasks, class discussions on feelings after intensive screen use, planning balanced daily routines.	Regulates own screen time, notices signs of overload, uses strategies to disconnect, connects digital habits with emotional and physical well-being.

Creating a Culture of Cyber-Resilience in Schools

Educational institutions have become closely embedded in digital infrastructures that now shape daily learning, communication, and administration. Schools operate within interconnected ecosystems of cloud platforms, digital assessment tools, mobile devices, collaborative applications, and increasingly, artificial intelligence systems. These developments have expanded opportunities for personalised learning and operational efficiency, yet they have also exposed schools to a growing range of cybersecurity risks. Because schools handle sensitive data on minors, from identity records to behavioural information and learning analytics, they have become attractive targets for cybercriminals. The rise in ransomware incidents, unauthorised access attempts, phishing campaigns, and data leaks indicates that schools now face threat levels comparable to those encountered by public agencies and small enterprises (Sun et al., 2022). This broader shift is reflected in the Cyber-Resilience Cycle illustrated, which emphasises that effective protection requires not only safeguarding systems, but also preparing for incidents, detecting emerging threats, and responding and recovering in a coordinated, iterative manner. The model highlights that resilience is a continuous process rath-

er than a one-time intervention, reinforcing the need for schools to embed cybersecurity practices into everyday operations and long-term strategic planning. The cyber-resilience cycle presented here reflects a general organisational approach to security that is applicable across different education systems, rather than a model tied to a specific national context.

Table 2: Levels of action in building a culture of cyber-resilience in schools.

Level	Key responsibilities for cyber-resilience	Example practices and interventions	Indicators of progress / capacity building
Student	Applying everyday cyber hygiene, protecting personal data, responding appropriately to online risks, seeking help when needed.	Participation in digital hygiene lessons, reporting suspicious messages, respectful online communication, practising strong authentication and safe device use.	Increased reporting of incidents, fewer risky behaviours, improved scores on digital resilience and safety assessments.
Teacher	Integrating cybersecurity and digital hygiene into everyday teaching, modelling secure behaviour, mediating online risks.	Embedding cyber-resilience topics across subjects, using simulations, discussing AI-related risks, encouraging reflective discussions.	Greater teacher confidence, more cybersecurity in lessons, observable changes in digital routines.
School leadership / governance	Establishing policies, procedures and culture supporting cyber-resilience; coordinating technical and human factors.	Updating policies, incident response plans, staff training, parent engagement, AI tool audits.	Updated policies, regular drills, incident logs, improved compliance.
Education system / policy level	Providing strategic frameworks, resources and regulation enabling school cyber-resilience.	National/regional K–12 cyber and AI strategies, infrastructure funding, training.	Clear guidelines, system monitoring, improved reporting mechanisms.

Leadership plays a central role in shaping school approaches to cybersecurity, which depends not only on technical measures but also on organisational culture, governance and communication. Educational leaders influence whether cybersecurity becomes a shared responsibility or remains siloed within IT. Lamond et al. (2025) show that many teachers still feel unprepared to teach cybersecurity, often limiting their actions to basic password management. Similarly, Kandır (2025) finds that school policies remain overly technology-focused, neglecting human factors such as staff competence, reporting culture and responsibility structures. Transparent policies, discussion of incidents and integrating cybersecurity into

school improvement planning help normalise secure behaviour and reinforce its importance for student wellbeing. Cyber-resilience also relies on digital citizenship and everyday cyber-hygiene across the school community. Practices such as strong authentication, updates, phishing recognition and personal-data protection significantly influence institutional security. Sun et al. (2022) frame digital resilience as awareness, emotional regulation, adaptive coping and reflective learning. Bayzan (2025) shows that teachers' varying levels of cybersecurity awareness affect school-wide vulnerability, while Mathew (2025) highlights the roles of perceived efficacy, trust in digital systems and the value placed on secure behaviour. These studies underline that digital literacy and cyber-hygiene must be embedded in daily practice rather than taught as isolated interventions. The growing presence of AI introduces additional complexity. AI enhances teaching, administration and analytics but also brings new risks. Ibrahim et al. (2024) note that K-12 cybersecurity education rarely addresses AI-specific threats such as data poisoning, model bias or privacy leakage. Cowling et al. (2025) show that digital safety, literacy and wellbeing are tightly linked in children aged 10–13, demonstrating the need for ethical safeguards in school AI systems. Liu (2025) argues that existing primary-level cybersecurity curricula are incoherent and fail to prepare learners for automated decision-making risks. Without strong data-protection protocols, AI tools may expose sensitive student data, requiring clear procurement frameworks, transparency, audits and staff training. Institutional resilience further depends on preparedness and coordinated incident-response mechanisms. Prevention alone is insufficient; schools must act quickly and coherently when incidents occur. Preparedness includes tabletop exercises, simulations, data-recovery drills and communication protocols. Chiner (2025) finds that prevention practices differ across educational stages, necessitating age-appropriate response planning. Strengthening infrastructure, network segmentation, multifactor authentication, secure storage and zero-trust principles, reduces breach impact. Freed et al. (2025) emphasise that digital resilience develops through continuous skill-building, while Mahmood (2024) argues for frameworks based on environmental scanning, flexible resource allocation and iterative learning to meet rapidly evolving challenges.

Maintaining cyber-resilience requires long-term commitment. The threat landscape shifts continually due to technological change, attacker innovation, social-media trends, and global events. For schools, this means cybersecurity strategies must be regularly updated and informed by data. Routine incident monitoring, evaluating training effectiveness, reviewing vendor compliance,

and revising protocols after exercises should become institutional practice. Sandi (2025) shows that organisational resilience emerges through iterative learning and a communal mindset in which all members recognise their role in maintaining security. Tasay and Basaran (2025) further demonstrate that students' digital literacy and cybersecurity awareness are strongly influenced by teacher attitudes and school culture. While specific governance structures and resources vary between countries, the organisational dimensions of cyber-resilience outlined here are relevant across diverse educational contexts. Taken together, these insights show that school cyber-resilience arises from the interplay of leadership, secure everyday habits, responsible technology governance, preparedness, and continuous learning. Institutions that integrate these dimensions become adaptable, capable of maintaining safe, equitable, and reliable learning environments, and better prepared to equip young people to navigate an increasingly complex digital world responsibly.

Conclusions

Building cyber-resilient schools requires moving beyond the idea that security can be purchased as a single technological solution and toward a systems approach that links technical safeguards, organisational governance and everyday practice. AI tools can enhance threat detection and response, but the literature shows they work effectively only when supported by clear policies, incident-response procedures and coherent risk management. Cyber-resilience therefore depends on pairing AI security with sustained education in digital hygiene, enabling students and teachers to understand AI's limits, recognise attack vectors and manage their data responsibly. Ethical frameworks such as UNESCO recommendations and European Commission guidelines emphasise that AI in education must protect child rights, privacy and transparency rather than normalising surveillance.

Cyber-resilience also relies on everyday behaviour. Practices such as careful data management, regular updates, secure passwords and critical online evaluation form a core protective layer linked to broader digital resilience, risk awareness, emotional regulation, help-seeking and reflective learning. Teachers are key actors: their competence and institutional support determine how cybersecurity and AI risks are embedded in classrooms. Where professional development is sustained, teachers better model secure behavior, where preparation is lacking, systemic vulnerabilities emerge and are inadvertently reinforced through every-

day practice. Integrating AI adds further complexity. Although AI can aid detection and prevention, it also introduces risks related to privacy, opacity, bias and AI-mediated peer harm. Without strong governance, audits and child-centred ethical safeguards, such systems may reinforce inequalities or erode trust. Long-term cyber-resilience therefore rests on three pillars: robust security governance, responsible and transparent AI use, and ongoing education in digital hygiene and digital resilience. While some empirical illustrations discussed in this article draw on the Polish education context, the conclusions outlined here are intended to inform policy and practice across diverse educational systems.

Statement

All figures and tables presented in this article are original and have been carefully reviewed for accuracy, consistency with the text, and compliance with copyright requirements.

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Fentanyl Panic in Polish Press Discourse. Well-being in the Post-Truth World

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Abstract: The following text deals with the phenomenon of moral panic about fentanyl spread, which escalated in the first half of 2024 in Polish press discourse. Through the qualitative discourse analysis I take a close look at the measures used to form opinions about the object of the study to rough out the need of enhancing abilities to keep emotions in control and to think critically, crucial for one's well-being and discuss the role of education in the process. As the threat of fentanyl addiction concerns youngest cohorts, the problem remains relevant in the loneliness epidemic era.

Introduction

Precise determination of the point in history, when humans started to use psychoactive substances cannot be performed. There is even a hypothesis that apes evolved into humans due to usage of psilocybin mushrooms, which helped develop the neural connections in their brains (McKenna, 1992). Even though it is highly speculative and not strictly scientific, the stoned ape theory shows that transcending consciousness is nothing novel and could have a significant impact on humans.

The author of the essay "The Doors of Perception" said: "The urge to transcend self-conscious selfhood is [...] a principal appetite of the soul. When, for whatever reason, men and women fail to transcend themselves by means of worship, good works, and spiritual exercises, they are apt to resort to religion's chemical surrogates" (Huxley, 1954). It seems to be one of many explanations of motivations to use drugs, due to the assumption that it is always connected with the spiritual experience and life-changing sensations.

Michał Herer (2025) has analyzed other aspects of drugs usage history. He linked drug consumption to anti-bourgeois revolt. He signalized three different attitudes of anti-bourgeois drug consumers in western history. The first one

present in the 19th Century in France – flâneurs – the strategy of Estrangement (author's translation). It comes down to reducing one's participation in city life-style to then becoming a passive observer on drugs. The second attitude could be observed during the Post-World War I rebuild and was called The Escape Forward (author's translation). Psychoactive substances became medicalized and utilized in the reality of post-war society. Stimulants were used to boost the strength and stamina of diligent folk. Nevertheless, after work people needed to have a rest, and that is where sedative drugs were found useful. Society functioned in the daily cycles of taking alternately stimulants and sedative drugs. The last strategy mentioned by Herer was The Denial (author's translation). It applied to the idealized American middle-class family and society, as well as to the political events such as Vietnam War. The contestation of that reality meant the shift to the eastern spirituality and transcending selfhoods through psychedelic drugs (such as LSD and psilocybin).

Of course, Herer's approach required generalization, but the models he proposed can be used in most of the cases of non-medical substance usage. On the other hand, the case of fentanyl epidemic in the United States shows quite a different model. It is because of the characteristics of the substance itself, but also the motivation to use it. There is not much scientific knowledge about the motivations, but I would like to quote some of the factors that are generally known to be connected with fentanyl usage: 1) difficult situation or striking experiences and searching for relief, 2) other opioid drugs addiction, built tolerance and searching for substitution (for example, because of limited access to heroin or taking more potent drugs to achieve the desired effects), 3) addiction to opioids as a result of medical treatment, 4) financial aspects – fentanyl is easier to produce and much cheaper than heroin (Reuter, Pardo & Taylor 2021), 5) the cost and accessibility of medical treatment in the United States can precipitate patients in debts that they might not be able to pay due to the health condition, another consequence of which might be homelessness connected with fentanyl addiction, and finally 6) other factors statistically associated with increased fentanyl usage risk: being younger (18–24 years), having only Medicare (worse health insurance) or being uninsured, being assessed in metropolitan site, having stayed in inpatient in past 30 days, having the history of overdosing, and other factors typical for the United States (Jiang, Guy Jr., Dunphy, Pickens & Jones, 2021). The list is not comprehensive, but it throws some light on the reasons why the problem exists.

Fentanyl usage – due to its calming, analgesic properties – eludes the Herer's categories. Moreover, it also might not be considered an attitude of anti-bourgeois

revolt. Nonetheless, I would like to address that it is still bound by the economic situation of capitalism and the inequalities, which are immanent characteristics of the system. Market economy had been invented by townsfolk and resulted in development of the technology, which has many positive effects on social life, but is also considered one of the most crucial factors of experiencing solitude (Górka, 2021; Libura, 2021; Mączyńska, 2023). Young people especially, who socialized with electronic devices, tend to neglect real-life interactions, moving to virtual spaces and social media. There they find individualistic and money-praising contents, that eventually lead to enormous pressure to succeed. While it might not be possible in most cases, the collapse of collective values makes coping with loneliness even more difficult and creates a field for substance abuse.

School is the primary place where children are socialized in peer groups. Its role as an institution is to prepare people for living in society, however, there is a sensitive issue of what knowledge it should share. It is an object of political debate, while some aspects seem more universal, especially when talking about well-being and mental health of students.

We can observe the raising indexes of medical treatments among children and youth in Poland related to mental health issues (Szredzińska, 2022). It is caused by many varied factors, but dependency on mobile phones and social media and lack of social interactions outside the internet are the most crucial ones that could be taken care of by schools. Implementing such subjects as critical thinking, integration, raising awareness of negative impact of social media in adolescent age could help young people cope with stress and spend more time with friends or on their hobbies and interests. Polish scholar system for a long time has been based on full-time lessons at school and doing homework afterwards, which reduced time for other activities and rest. This situation puts pressure on students and has a role in nearly 40% of children aged between 11–15 years old experiencing large amount of school-related stress (*ibidem*).

As fentanyl is a menace mostly to young people living in the cities, who experience difficulties and uncertainty, it is crucial to raise awareness and educate them in the area of dealing with these problems. The role of schools crystallizes here. There should be more attention paid to young people's well-being and threats like substance abuse.

Moral panic and post-truth

Through the informal observation of subject before the research itself, I realized that the presentation of the fentanyl case in the Polish media is far from objectivity and pure information. That is why I brought forth the theories referring to mass media's role in shaping reality and social life by addressing emotions of receivers. The theory of moral panics presented by Stanley Cohen (1972) was crucial to understanding the phenomenon, but it only refers to certain conditions. That is why the term "post-truth" is also present in my work.

Cohen (*ibidem*) coined the theory of moral panics in his book "Folk Devils and Moral Panics. The Creation of the Mods and Rockers" after the observation of social reaction to the subculture conflicts in the 1960s and how it was shaped by mass media. He described the phenomenon as a situation where "A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people. [...] Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way the society conceives itself." (*ibidem*). This essential definition highlights six key elements: 1) folk devils – actors posing a threat to the moral values, 2) the right-thinking people that try to fight the menace, 3) role of mass media – spreading the news in the certain form, 4) stereotypes and exaggeration in the presentation of the phenomenon, 5) the period of occurrence, and 6) the impact – social changes that took place after the end of the panic. The first five actants formed the core of my analysis. It is because it is still too soon to judge the influence of the fentanyl panic on Polish society or law.

"Post-truth" as a term was minted in 2016, when Great Britain left the European Union after the Brexit referendum and Donald Trump won presidential election in the United States for the first time. The concept refers to the role of addressing emotions by communication sources to convince people to their views. Miroslav Vacura (2019) describes post-truth as "a situation in society and politics, in which the boundary between truth and untruth is erased, facts and related narratives are purposefully produced, emotions are more important than knowledge and the actors of social or political life do not care for truth, proof and evidence". I use the mentioned term as a description of the general situation

created in the money-struck western civilization, which was amplified and accelerated by the process of globalization to help accumulate the capital.

While Cohen's theory mostly refers to the elements of the phenomenon, post-truth definition emphasizes the mechanisms of influencing people and events by appealing to basic instincts and to the "ethical mess" of modern-day journalism. "News has become a matter of punditry. A man sitting at a desk in Washington or New York reads the cables and rearranges them to fit his own mental pattern and his by-line. What we often read as news now is not news at all but the opinion of one of half a dozen pundits as to what that news means." said John Steinbeck (1949) in "A Russian Journal". This kind of observation of the worsening quality of journalism is the aftermath of replacing the informative function by opinion-forming function as a main domain of media, result of which is more emotional and less factual communication. In the following years, the process progressed to the point where pure information lost its value because emotional messages and stunts are able to sell better.

Methodology

In my master's thesis (Lechicki, 2025) I analyzed press articles from two of the major press editor offices in Poland: *Gazeta Wyborcza* (the Electoral Gazette – 73 articles from 2010 to 2025) and *Rzeczpospolita* (the Republic – 85 articles from 2012 to 2025) through the qualitative discourse analysis method. The data selection was performed by using a search tool on the websites of the gazettes and using "fentanyl" as a key word to find all the articles published by them.

It is arguable if the press is still a relevant source of information for most people nowadays. I find it crucial how press discourse influences the rest of media discourses and how its words are spread via other channels. Above-mentioned titles were selected because they were announced the most opinion-forming press titles in 2024 by the number of quotations in other media sources (IMM, 2025), as well as their sales are the highest among non-tabloid titles (PAP Biznes, 2024).

To find out how the fentanyl panic was shaped in Polish press discourse, I used the elements of Cohen's theory (actors, period of occurrence, presentation, and the role of mass media), but also tracked such factors as overtones, contexts around fentanyl, key events related to fentanyl and narrative evolutions. I decided to use the qualitative analysis method rather than a quantitative content analysis, because it allowed me to pick up all of the emotional,

hidden and indirect nuances. Major part of my research remained in the spirit of Sociological Discourse Analysis (SDA) (see: Tomanek, 2008; Biskupska, 2014), because of the will to be neutral as a scientist. Journalism, on the other hand, is a profession with rooted tradition and with earned ethics. That is why I decided to implement a critical aspect of discourse analysis to my thesis to compare the idea to the reality. I believe that the two approaches of SDA and CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis) can be complimentary in some cases, like press discourse analysis, on the understanding that no political commitment affects the scientific approach.

Findings

Fentanyl was present in Polish Press discourse in singular articles since 2010 mainly in medical contexts, but after the Purdue Pharma case and the start of opioid epidemic in the United States more of the political-themed and sensational articles started to appear. The analysis showed that there was a relatively short period of fentanyl panic in selected media. It took place in the first half of 2024 and was related to highly publicized accidents of fentanyl-related demises in Żuromin in Masovian Voivodeship. The fentanyl panic in media ended with the event of arresting drug dealers who were responsible for giving illicit access to medical fentanyl (Lechicki, 2025). In the following paragraphs I would like to present the results of my master's degree research.

General overtone

The turnout of the analysis was the establishment of six categories of general overtones in articles to see how the editorial offices differed in the fields of interests and how it might affect the message.

While political and medical overtone can be understood directly, I owe you an explanation of the differences between moral panic, bombshell, informative and societal categories. First of all, informative articles were defined by the absence of emotional structures, just presenting the run of events. They were not written to serve opinion-forming function of the media, but informative one. Society-themed text touched on some of the prevailing social issues. Fentanyl posed a background of the events, not the main actant. And finally, the difference between bombshells and moral panic was the role of fentanyl as an actant in the events. The former treated the substance as

a background of some sensational events like arresting major drug dealers or famous people's demises related to drug abuse. The latter put fentanyl in the foreground sharing a message of its dangerousness, abusive potential and opioid crisis threat.

Table 1. General overtone of fentanyl-related articles published by *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita*

Overtone	Gazeta Wyborcza		Rzeczpospolita		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Medicine	8	10.96	7	8.24	15	9.49
Politics	15	20.55	37	43.53	52	32.91
Moral panic	13	17.81	5	5.88	18	11.39
Bombshell	20	27.40	20	23.53	40	25.32
Information	10	13.71	6	7.06	16	10.13
Society	4	5.48	4	4.71	8	5.06
Others	3	4.11	6	7.06	9	5.70
Total	73	100%	85	100%	158	100%

Note. Adapted from *Panika fentanylowa w polskim dyskursie prasowym*, by Lechicki K., 2025, pp. 33

The table above shows how the two discussed journals come at the subject of fentanyl. While *Rzeczpospolita* focused mostly on political matters, *Gazeta Wyborcza* showed more diversity. It is crucial that panic-struck structures were not only present in the moral panic overtone. It appeared in other types as well. Comparing the numbers of fentanyl-related articles strictly in the type of moral panic to the total amount, it is a worrisome fact that the narratives of moral panic could work as a subliminal message, while present in the other types.

Key actors of the fentanyl panic

Two main groups of actors – folk devils and guardians of morality – were determined in conformity to Cohen's theory (1972). It is interesting to see how simple answers to truly complex concerns are formed according to the concept of cognitive miser, a psychological bias that refers to searching for the straight solutions to reduce the excessive cognitive strain (Aronson & Aronson, 2020).

Three different fields of activities of the folk devils were present in Polish press: international politics, business, and criminal demimonde. These fields implied the type of influence of the devils and the entities, who are responsible

for fentanyl spread. The first area consists of international relations and politics. China and Mexico are two main entities accused of not taking enough actions against fentanyl and its precursors¹ contraband to the United States. Undoubtedly Donald Trump's tariff tax policy soon after winning the election in 2024 was truly a mediatic subject and it affected the image of Mexico and China as two of the largest fentanyl-mongers.

*Fentanyl is killing thousands of people in the United States, where, through Mexico, it is imported from China. It steps into Europe, in Poland it's been long since.*² (Gazeta Wyborcza, June 2024)

The second field of folk devils' activity is business with its main player – Purdue Pharma. The pharmaceutical company that started selling an opioid painkiller – oxycodone – under the name OxyContin on a huge scale in the USA. The story of the concern was also a subject of numerous publications such as Patrick Radden Keefe's (2021) "Empire of Pain: The Secret History of the Sackler Dynasty", and even a series like Netflix's "Painkiller". They used aggressive marketing campaigns to sell vast amounts of highly addictive medicine, which resulted in the so-called opioid epidemic in the United States, where the painkillers are often a replacement for a proper medical treatment. Drug users eventually discovered its recreational use. The tolerance to oxycodone is being built after some time and that is why effects wear off too quickly or are too weak and people addicted to opioid substances need to find a more potent replacement. Purdue Pharma was commonly mentioned in fentanyl-related articles as an actor responsible for the opioid epidemic in the United States.

The last area is probably the most obvious for illicit drug spread. It is a criminal activity after all. Less evident are the folk devils themselves. Two of the biggest scapegoats of the fentanyl panic in Poland were a drug dealer nicknamed Ghost of Żuromin (*Duch z Żuromina*) and a doctor from Poznań, who wrote prescriptions without coverage, so legally manufactured fentanyl

¹ Precursors are the substances used to produce wanted substance. Their flow is not as regulated as the targeted psychoactive substance's, because they can be used for other purposes as well. Illicit fentanyl production process is not complex comparing to other drugs and its substrates are easy to replace with another (Reuter et al., 2021).

² All presented scraps were translated by me for the purpose of this text. I kept as much of the original stylistic structure as possible for the logical sense to remain as well.

was sold on black market. Arresting these two and putting them in the court ended a fentanyl-related moral panic in Polish press in June 2024:

Oncologist from Poznan arrested. She sold the prescriptions for opioids: oxycodone and fentanyl. (Gazeta Wyborcza, June 2024)

Charges for “The Ghost”, a famous fentanyl dealer. (Gazeta Wyborcza, June 2024)

A doctor handled fentanyl prescriptions. Arrested by Poznan’s police. (Rzeczpospolita, June 2024)

Ghost of Żuromin arrested. He was to sell deadly fentanyl. (Rzeczpospolita, June 2024)

Actors above were the most often mentioned as those who should take responsibility for the problem of tens of thousands annual death of fentanyl overdose in the United States (Volkow, 2021) and spreading it further away. Of course, there were other entities who also have their role in the phenomenon, like Canada for example, from where some amount of fentanyl is transported to northern states. However, this role is more locally specific and its share is not comparable to China’s or Mexico’s. Moreover, the case of Canada was only called in relation to Donald Trump’s tariffs policy.

Another group of actors – morality defenders – was a lot less homogeneous and more difficult to classify into clear categories. Donald Trump and his battle against fentanyl import by raising duties on countries involved in its distribution was the most called thread. On one hand it could be read as the action to resolve the problem, on the other it could be seen as harmful to international relations. Both journals paid a lot of attention to the American president’s actions. Both did it in somewhat critical way, however Gazeta Wyborcza did it in much more emotional way, while Rzeczpospolita was more informative and careful. It is a direct result of the political affiliation of these two media. Wyborcza’s center-left, progressive orientation and socio-political area of interests focused more on presenting a certain vision of the world, where such actions are not requested:

Trumpists triumph: “That’s how you do politics!”. In exchange for sentence postponement USA’s neighbors promised a thing or two. Sheinbaum

announced sending 10 thousand Mexican soldiers to fight fentanyl contraband and illegal migration to the USA more effectively. Mexico has already sent an army to the border. Fentanyl – compared to marijuana or cocaine – is either way hard to detect. (Gazeta Wyborcza, February 2025)

comparing to Rzeczpospolita's conservative, America-sympathizing tone, where critic of the president was often softer and more restrained:

American president kind of stood his ground: for the suspension of the penalty tariffs Mexican National Guard is to take care of the border. However, it's just an arrangement – drug and people contraband won't stop. (Rzeczpospolita, February 2025)

Furthermore, this kind of criticism appeared among more numerous neutral lines, what additionally smoothed it over:

Canada and Mexico tariffs are to serve as mean of pressure in the case of fighting illegal migration and flow of drugs to the United States. Trump also treats them as an answer to decrease the deficit in commerce with these countries. (Rzeczpospolita, February 2025)

As American context implied the need of specific actions against the existing problem, fentanyl panic's context in Poland required the voice of experts who could explain the phenomenon and tell the readers if there is a real threat and the reason to be afraid. Four groups of positive actors in the subject were present: journalists, ex-drug addicts, police, experts in medicine.

Journalists were not commonly stated as the guardians of values. They worked as such by writing about the problem and explaining it, like "science journalist" in Gazeta Wyborcza, who overviewed the case of fentanyl:

Wyborcza's science journalist, dr Paulina Mozelewska examines where does fentanyl come from, what it does to a human, how do opioid crisis really look like in Poland, how to recognize if someone is addicted and what to do then. (Gazeta Wyborcza, June 2024)

Or like Bogusław Chrabota, a journalist of Rzeczpospolita, who brings the problem closer and warns readers about the possible danger in the future.

“You’re good there on the Vistula River”, I hear, “Solid, safe country without divisions. At least the profound ones”. [...] Poland seems to be a porch of the paradise. In just few days I’ll be back home. Luckily. “There ain’t no more of that Portland”, I hear. Whole center overrun by the homeless. Tents and encampments everywhere. Drugs, omnipresent fentanyl and zombie people. (Rzeczpospolita, September 2024)

Ex-addicts stories and later pro-social activities are a classic example of any drugs or addiction related story. They are shown as the warning on one hand and role models on the other:

Michał is 36 years old. He studies psychology and is a volunteer of Społeczna Inicjatywa Narkotykowa (Social Drug Initiative – author’s note). In the past he used substances himself – mainly opioids, fentanyl included. Addiction lasted for 11 years. When he realized that no amount of drugs can make him happy, he went to rehab and therapy with a success. He’s been “clean” for a few years now. (Gazeta Wyborcza, July 2024)

At first both editors blamed police for not taking enough action to investigate who is responsible for fentanyl-related deaths in Żuromin:

Everybody knows about him (Ghost of Żuromin – author’s note) even police, who “does nothing” (Rzeczpospolita, May 2024)

Local police said that no one was proved guilty of dealing fentanyl. (Gazeta Wyborcza, May 2024)

However, just a few months later there were reports of arresting fentanyl dealer in Żuromin and prescription-trading doctor from Poznań, which ended the period of strict fentanyl panic. Some panic-struck narrative structures were still present after these events, but the focus switched to the American opioid crisis again.

Experts from the field of medicine were quoted in two separate ways: recalling their opinions or a commentary to intensify the keynote of the text or give some context – appearing in both journals; or the interviews with experts published wholly as an article – only in Gazeta Wyborcza.

Narrative structures

The idea behind stunt journalism is to draw attention to the articles, especially when published on the website. Editors make money either on advertisements they put on the websites or paid subscriptions to get access to their contents. These circumstances lead to the phenomenon of raising attractiveness in the broad sense by addressing emotions (especially negative ones) of the receiver. The whole point is embraced by the above-mentioned term “post-truth”.

To achieve sales goals, journalists use numerous methods such as applying specific narrative structures that can work more directly on the imagination or more subliminally. My analysis led to shed light on specific schemes of panic-struck narrative structures used to refer to fentanyl in emotional ways. These categories were: personification, referring to chemical properties (potency and synthetic origin), highlighting dangerousness (lethality and addictive potential), approximation, and “zombification”.

Personification is an inconspicuous manner which can enhance the attractiveness of the publication by creating a more interesting form of the sentence. On the other hand, it draws attention away from the real causes and comprehensive approach to a generalization that leads to more emotional and disturbing message. By personification I mean describing fentanyl not as a chemical substance, but as a kind of being that could take responsibility (for example imprisoned just like a human) for causing death of somebody who abused the substance. It was often said that “fentanyl kills”, not that the death was a result of overdose. This kind of depiction has considerable influence on how the substance is perceived. We must remember that it is commonly used in medicine, and more harm can occur when a patient refuses medication than when they are treated under supervision of the doctor.

Fentanyl was synthesized to replace morphine as a safer and less side effect-generating substance in the sixties. The outcome of the research was a medicament over a hundred times more potent than morphine later used as an analgesic and anesthetic to great effect (Stanley, 2014). Potency of the fentanyl was often mentioned by the authors:

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid 50 times more potent than heroin. (Rzeczpospolita, June 2024)

A killer synthetic drug, 100 times more potent than morphine (Gazeta Wyborcza, June 2024)

however, it does not directly translate to lethality. In this case therapeutic index is more important³. The ratio for fentanyl it is around 277, while for morphine around 71 (ibidem). On the other hand, effective and lethal amounts of fentanyl are so small, that without a specialistic apparatus it is difficult to measure precisely. Mentioning synthetic origin of fentanyl (comparing to the natural origin of cannabis for example) is an example of naturality versus artificiality opposition. By analogy it refers to simplified reception of what is not natural as harmful or unhealthy. Highlighting these properties, however satisfyingly it sounds to the authors, can cause unnecessary concern about fentanyl in medical use to the readers without competence to verify what mentioned factors stand for.

Fentanyl is often presented as an extremely dangerous substance, in most cases (which is not often pointed out) referring to illicit use. Creation of a certain image of fentanyl was based not only on its chemical properties, but also on its overdosing and addictive potential:

Fentanyl is one of the most dangerous painkillers. It builds a strong dependency and shows effects immediately after use. (Rzeczpospolita, March 2018)

More people died because of synthetic opioids overdose than American soldiers in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. (Gazeta Wyborcza, June 2024)

It is a fact that fentanyl is highly addictive and can be overdosed quite easily by taking a wrong dose, but the authors did not separate circumstances of illicit and medical use clearly enough to not be confused.

Approximation of the fentanyl epidemic with its consequences meant that the problem was brought closer to the reader either geographically by mentioning neighboring countries that have already faced the danger:

They are in trouble with fentanyl really close – in Latvia and Estonia (Rzeczpospolita, May 2024)

or psychologically by addressing the reader themselves and engaging them emotionally:

³ It is a ratio between the minimal therapeutically effective dose and the lowest amount that can cause death (simply speaking: the higher the ratio, the wider the margin of error while dosing).

145 Americans will die today from opioid overdose, three of them before you finish reading this article. (Gazeta Wyborcza, January 2018)

The most characteristic structure for the discussed phenomenon is referring to zombies. “Zombie drug” is used as a colloquial term for fentanyl, because of its distinctive effect on the motion of the user, who is severed from the external stimuli:

Fentanyl, known as “the zombie drug” (Gazeta Wyborcza, June 2024)

“Zombie drug” caused the deaths of over quarter million people. (Rzeczpospolita, August 2024)

Nevertheless, there is no agreement on what substance the mentioned term actually refers to. Even in the pages of the same journal different articles defined zombie drug as either fentanyl or xylazine, or the mixture of these two.

Summary

It might be difficult to determine if the discussed phenomenon had a considerable influence on Polish society and their way of perceiving fentanyl without any further research, I believe, however, that the provided reflection can contribute to discussion about the role of emotions and information in people’s lives. It is clear that the majority of today’s news is oversaturated with opinions and emotions to keep the power of the media as the fourth estate. Moral panic turns out to be one of the dimensions of its impact on affecting collective consciousness and morality by creating or reshaping the existing frameworks (Goffman, 1986). Hence in modern days panic-struck narratives become less of condition of the society, but one of the techniques used by media to keep power up. Back in the Stanley Cohen’s times, when the emotions were less present in the news, and moral panics less often occurring, they had a lot more influence on the social actions and beliefs. Today, because of the oversaturation of this kind of overtones, we can witness a few (or more) panics breaking out daily in varied media sources, and concerning different aspects of social life. This is how the moral panics in effect became part of a broader phenomenon of post-truth.

The fentanyl case and American opioid crisis are also important symptoms of late-capitalist economy focused on profits before humans as present, former

and future workers for the commonwealth. Such orientation is also reflected by scholar system, in which more emphasis is being put on practical skills, and later to find oneself in the labor market or just “get a good job, with more pay and be okay” (Waters, 1973). It lacks reflection about morality (with nearly a total lack of ethics lessons except religious education), society and inequalities (with up to an hour of civics weekly or citizenship education focusing more on political systems and law, not the sociological reflection), and critical thinking which could help prevent young people from falling into the traps of manipulation.

Polish context is obviously much closer to the definition of the welfare state than the American. Thanks to the factors like public healthcare it is less probable that the opioid crisis might reach as huge scale. On the other hand, the developing aspects of loneliness epidemic, westernization and market economy with its consequences of an enormous pression, as well as overrepresentation of opinion-forming function of media can result in popularity of the alternative coping mechanisms such as substance use or political extremism.

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Designing resilience through language mentoring: reflections on training student mentors for migrant integration in Romania

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Abstract. This chapter examines the design and implementation of the Language Buddy project in Romania, focusing on the mentor training phase that precedes peer language support for migrant youth aged 12–17. Grounded in social pedagogy principles, the project involves training university students from psycho-pedagogical teachers training programs, education, and language departments to serve as language mentors through non-formal learning approaches. Drawing on experiences from the Romanian implementation, this work-in-progress analysis explores how mentor preparation can foster resilience in beneficiaries and critical intercultural awareness among student mentors. The chapter presents methodological reflections on curriculum design, training challenges, and indicators of success in developing intercultural competencies. By examining the preparatory phase of peer mentoring systems, this contribution advances understanding of how social pedagogy can bridge higher education with community-based migrant support, offering insights for initiatives across European contexts while highlighting the transformative potential of structured volunteer preparation in building resilient, critically aware societies.

Introduction: Situating Mentor Training in the Language Buddy Project

The assumption that linguistic proficiency and goodwill suffice to support migrant youth in language acquisition fundamentally misunderstands the complexity of peer mentoring in migration contexts. Research demonstrates that effective peer mentoring depends critically on systematic preparation (Messiou & Azaola, 2018; Vickers et al., 2017). Without training, well-intentioned mentors may inadvertently cause harm through triggering traumatic memories, misinterpreting cultural communication styles, or feeling overwhelmed by situations beyond their capacity. This chapter explores how to pre-

pare student volunteers to serve as language mentors for young people whose lives may have been marked by displacement, loss, and uncertainty.

Since March 2022, Romania has issued over 181,000 temporary residence permits to people displaced from Ukraine, with 48,767 Ukrainian children enrolled in Romanian schools by 2024 (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2024). Beyond Ukrainian displacement, Romania hosts over 370,000 third-country nationals, representing 1.9% of the population (European Commission, 2024). For these young newcomers, language acquisition is fundamental for social integration, educational success, and building futures in Romania.

The Language Buddy Project: Context and Structure

The *Supporting language learning of migrant children and young adults through language buddies* (Language Buddy) project emerged from recognition that formal language instruction cannot address all communicative and social needs that young migrants face. Peer mentoring – pairing migrant youth aged 12–17 with trained university students – represents an attempt to bridge this gap through structured, relationship-based language support. The project is coordinated across eight European countries and funded through the EU's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), involving 16 partner organizations envisioning training 365 university student mentors to support 365 young mentees (Language Buddy Project, n.d.).

What distinguishes Language Buddy from informal conversation exchange programs is its explicit commitment to structured mentor preparation. Effective mentors require intercultural competencies, awareness of trauma-informed communication principles, pedagogical skills adapted to non-formal contexts, and capacity for critical self-reflection. Romania's AMIF program (2021–2027) focuses on shifting from emergency humanitarian assistance toward integration and inclusion. However, integration services do not guarantee continuity of support and are not always operational in all regions (OECD, 2025a). The demand for language learning support far exceeds institutional capacity. Moreover, Romania occupies a unique position in European migration dynamics. Historically characterized by emigration – millions of Romanians have sought work and education opportunities elsewhere in the EU – the country now experiences simultaneous immigration and return migration flows (OECD, 2025b). This dual reality shapes how Romanian society perceives and responds to newcomers, creating both opportunities for empathy and complexities around national identity and belonging.

This chapter examines the design, implementation, and early outcomes of the Language Buddy mentor training program in Romania. The analysis draws on program documentation, training materials, observations from training delivery, and preliminary feedback from student mentors who completed initial cohorts during 2025. Significantly, this chapter approaches mentor training not merely as means to an end but as a site of transformative learning valuable.

Theoretical Foundations: Preparing Mentors for Resilience-Building

The training program is based on four interconnected theoretical foundations: sociocultural theory (Jeong et al., 2022), resilience frameworks for young immigrants (Motti-Stefanidi et al., 2021), critical intercultural awareness (Byram, 2021), and non-formal learning approaches (Johnson & Majewska, 2022).

Sociocultural Theory: Learning as Social Co-Construction

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory provides foundational logic for understanding the mentor role. If language learning is fundamentally social – emerging through interaction rather than individual cognitive processing – then the mentor functions as collaborator in meaning-making (Marginson & Dang, 2017). The zone of proximal development (ZPD) defines the mentor's purpose: identifying what the mentee can accomplish with guidance that exceeds their current independent capacity, then providing adaptive scaffolding that gradually withdraws as competence grows (Walqui, 2006). This conceptualization transforms how we think about mentor training.

Mentors understand their role as co-constructors of language rather than evaluators. Training emphasizes responsive facilitation, cultivating mentors' abilities to interpret learners' zones of proximal development and adapt support accordingly. Lave and Wenger's (2001) concept of communities of practice is equally important. Mentees are moving from legitimate peripheral participation toward fuller membership in Romanian-speaking communities. Mentors serve as guides in this journey, mediating access to linguistic and cultural practices.

Resilience Theory: Strengths, Not Limitations

Contemporary resilience frameworks reject deficit-based approaches, instead emphasizing strengths, assets, and protective factors that enable positive adaptation despite adversity. Motti-Stefanidi's integrative framework concep-

tualizes immigrant youth resilience as multilevel, influenced by developmental, acculturative, and societal contexts. Cultural assets such as ethnic-racial identity, family support networks, and community connections are particularly important protective factors (Motti-Stefanidi et al., 2021). This has profound implications for mentor training. Mentors must view mentees through the lens of strengths, recognizing linguistic resources, cultural knowledge, and adaptive capacities they bring. Training emphasizes recognizing mentees' existing strengths – their multilingual repertoire, their resilience to change, their cultural knowledge – rather than positioning them as empty vessels.

Critical Intercultural Awareness

The training aims to cultivate critical intercultural awareness that goes beyond celebrating diversity or learning superficial cultural facts. Drawing on critical pedagogy traditions, this approach encourages mentors to examine power dynamics, recognize how cultural differences are constructed and politicized, and understand their own positioning within intercultural interactions (R'boul & Dervin, 2025).

Mentors need awareness that communication styles – high-context versus low-context approaches, indirect versus direct communication, varying politeness conventions – reflect cultural patterns, not individual deficiencies (Verschueren, 2008). A mentee's communicative behavior shaped by Ukrainian, Arabic, or other linguistic backgrounds should be understood culturally rather than corrected reflexively.

This awareness extends to recognizing mentors' own privilege. Romanian university students -generally from middle-class backgrounds, with good academic results and superior language skills – occupy positions of relative power. Training should help them recognize these dynamics, cultivating critical humility: the confidence to act, combined with willingness to question assumptions.

Non-Formal Learning: Beyond Classroom Walls

Language Buddy explicitly adopts non-formal learning approaches – structured yet flexible, learner-centered, emphasizing experiential and participatory methods. For mentor training, this means modeling the very approaches mentors will use: experiential activities, reflection, dialogue, and collaborative problem-solving. Non-formal methods are particularly well suited to trauma-informed pedagogy (Harrison et al., 2020). They allow for choice, flexibility, and building authentic relationships. Training mentors means helping them design

unstructured but purposeful encounters – conversations that feel natural but skillfully support language development (Arbour et al., 2024). These four foundations integrate into a coherent vision: mentors as culturally responsive, critically aware facilitators who employ sociocultural scaffolding within non-formal learning contexts to activate protective factors supporting immigrant youth resilience.

Designing the Mentor Training Curriculum: Methodological Reflections

Curriculum development emerged through collaborative design across the eight-country consortium. In Romania, national working groups convened representatives from Transilvania University of Brasov, Migration Integration Center Brasov NGO practitioners, and former migrant youth and parents. This participatory methodology positioned those with lived experience as co-designers.

The design process followed three iterative cycles: analyzing existing best practices in peer mentoring across Europe (Messiou & Azaola, 2018; Vickers et al., 2017), adapting frameworks to local contexts, and piloting initial modules with student volunteers whose feedback informed revisions. The resulting curriculum comprises eight interconnected modules addressing essential dimensions of resilient language mentorship.

Understanding the role of family and developing non-formal strategies integrates recognizing families as central to language learning while employing flexible pedagogical methods. These modules introduce trauma-informed communication principles, establishing that mentors must recognize how displacement-related trauma might manifest and when to escalate to professional support. Using digital tools addresses platforms and pedagogical considerations, while harnessing art as catalyst explores visual arts, music, and storytelling as alternative pathways for expression. Developing observation and reflective skills cultivates mentors as reflective practitioners (Orland-Barak, 2001), while mastering practical system organization addresses logistics, safeguarding protocols, and problem-solving strategies.

Pedagogical Approaches

The training's delivery method embodies the non-formal, experiential approaches mentors themselves will employ. Rather than lecturing, trainers create structured experiences that generate learning through engagement, followed by collective reflection. Each module integrates experiential activities, case study

analysis, role-playing with feedback, small group discussions, and structured reflection. With limited contact hours, we prioritized strategic depth over comprehensive coverage. Perhaps most delicate was calibrating trauma-awareness training. We chose focused awareness – recognizing potential trauma impacts, knowing escalation protocols – accepting that some mentors might still encounter situations exceeding their preparation.

Rather than treating resilience as discrete content, we embedded resilience-building principles throughout all modules. Mentors came to understand that providing consistent, caring attention – showing up reliably, demonstrating genuine interest, creating experiences where mentees successfully communicate – constitutes meaningful resilience support.

Training Challenges: Implementation Experiences from Romania

Our experience delivering Language Buddy training in Romania during 2025 illustrated several interconnected challenges requiring ongoing pedagogical negotiation.

The most delicate challenge concerned trauma-informed communication training. The Romanian context, with substantial numbers of Ukrainian displaced persons, made trauma-awareness essential. Yet determining appropriate depth proved persistently difficult. Some mentors emerged expressing fear of “saying the wrong thing,” while others appeared to underestimate the emotional intensity they might encounter. When presented with scenarios where a mentee became visibly distressed discussing family, some trainee mentors froze entirely, uncertain whether acknowledging emotion or changing topics would cause greater harm. Others responded with therapeutic-style probing that exceeded appropriate mentor boundaries. We adapted by integrating more graduated exposure to emotional scenarios, introducing simpler instances of mild frustration or homesickness before advancing to more intense emotional responses. We emphasized that mentors’ primary responsibility is presence and appropriate escalation, not intervention.

Another tension emerged between providing theoretical grounding and ensuring practical readiness. Mentors with education backgrounds appreciated conceptual frameworks – Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development, Freire’s dialogical pedagogy, resilience theory. However, mentors from language backgrounds often found theoretical discussions abstract.

We responded by restructuring modules to embed theory within practice. Rather than lecturing on zone of proximal development followed by exercises, we began with mentors attempting to explain Romanian concepts to partners at different proficiency levels, then introduced Vygotskian frameworks to illuminate what they had experienced. This “experience-first, theory-as-illumination” approach better served diverse learners.

Many mentors began training questioning whether their skills were “good enough” or worrying about making cultural mistakes. We employed several confidence-building strategies. Normalizing imperfection proved essential – explicitly telling mentors they would make mistakes and face situations exceeding their preparation, and that this represented normal learning. Creating peer support networks helped participants recognize confusion was collective rather than individual inadequacy.

Romanian Contextual Factors

The Romanian implementation faced specific challenges. Romania’s position as both emigration and immigration country created complex positionalities. Some mentors had family members working abroad and could empathize with migration experiences; others harboured ambivalence about immigration. During an intercultural awareness exercise, one trainee asked whether it was “fair” that refugees received support when “Romanian poor people get nothing.” Rather than dismissing this, we explored how scarcity narratives pit marginalized groups against each other, distinguishing legitimate concerns about resource adequacy from xenophobic framings.

Indicators of Success: Assessing Intercultural Competency Development

Evaluating mentor readiness required assessing actual competency development. Our assessment framework integrated pre- and post-training self-assessment surveys, written reflective assignments, trainer observations during role-playing exercises, and reflective journals. Training effectiveness was monitored via pre/post Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) assessments measuring developmental orientations toward cultural difference, complemented by Likert-scale competency self-ratings across trauma-informed communication, scaffolding strategies, and cultural responsiveness dimensions.

Evidence of Developing Competencies

Pre-training assessments revealed that most mentors initially rated themselves moderately confident in “helping someone learn Romanian” but low in “recognizing signs of trauma” or “navigating cultural misunderstandings.” Post-training, confidence increased significantly in trauma-awareness and intercultural sensitivity, though practical language facilitation confidence grew more modestly – suggesting training effectively complicated mentors’ understanding of the work’s complexity.

Reflective writing revealed shifts in cultural framing. One mentor’s progression proved illustrative. Initially, she wrote that mentors should “teach refugees to adapt to Romanian ways.” By training’s end, she reflected: “I assumed integration meant becoming more like us. Now I see it as finding ways to belong while maintaining what matters to them.” This represents significant conceptual growth toward culturally sustaining rather than assimilationist frameworks (Paris & Alim, 2017). Trainer observations noted that mentors increasingly asked questions like “What assumptions am I making?” and “How might this appear from their perspective?” – the metacognitive moves characteristic of critical intercultural awareness.

Transformative Learning

Perhaps most compelling were indicators of transformative learning – fundamental shifts in perspective rather than mere skill acquisition. Multiple mentors reported that training prompted reflection on their own linguistic privilege. One wrote: “I never thought about what it means that I can express myself perfectly in any situation while others struggle to be understood. That’s power I didn’t recognize.” This reciprocal learning suggests that peer mentoring training itself functions as powerful intercultural education (Vickers et al., 2017).

Bridging Higher Education and Community

The Language Buddy training program exemplifies how structured mentor preparation can function as a bridge connecting higher education institutions with community-based migrant support, operationalizing social pedagogy’s commitment to education for the common good.

The Romanian implementation required sustained collaboration between our university, schools, and NGO. The training phase became the nexus where

these diverse institutional actors converged, each contributing distinct expertise. This collaborative architecture challenges traditional university-community hierarchies. For participating students, mentor training represents a distinctive form of civic education. Unlike traditional service-learning, this preparation explicitly cultivates intercultural competence, critical consciousness, and ethical judgment as foundations for civic participation.

The training positions mentoring along a volunteer-professional continuum. While participants are volunteers, their preparation mirrors professional development in social work and education. This quasi-professional positioning attracts committed students, establishes quality benchmarks, and provides participants with documented competencies valuable for future employment. Structured preparation creates investment – students who complete intensive training feel more committed to following through.

Reflections, Implications and Limitations

The Language Buddy mentor training experience points to both possibilities and limitations of structured volunteer preparation for complex intercultural work. Three insights stand out.

First, experiential pedagogy that creates direct engagement with intercultural complexity before providing conceptual frameworks proves more powerful than abstract instruction. Second, explicitly addressing volunteers' anxieties and normalizing imperfection appears essential for building sustainable confidence. Third, creating communities of practice among mentors extends learning beyond the training event into sustained developmental trajectories (Lave & Wenger, 2001). The transformative potential extends beyond individual mentor competency to institutional and societal levels. At the institutional level, systematic training establishes quality standards and accountability. At the societal level, mentor training itself functions as powerful civic education. Students emerge with heightened critical consciousness about migration, integration, linguistic privilege, and cultural difference (Bojarczuk et al., 2025).

Several elements appear transferable across European contexts. The core curriculum structure addresses universal challenges in peer language support. For institutions developing similar initiatives, we recommend invest in collaborative curriculum design involving those with lived migration experience; prioritize experiential pedagogy over didactic instruction; establish robust on-

going support systems; normalize imperfection; collect systematic data; frame training explicitly as civic education with broader social value.

Despite successes, significant questions remain. We do not yet know whether training translates into better mentoring practice and improved mentee outcomes. Our data comes from self-reports and controlled exercises – not from actual mentoring interactions. Resource intensiveness presents another limitation. The comprehensive preparation requires significant investment.

Conclusions

This assessment of Language Buddy mentor training in Romania suggests that the answer to preparing volunteers lies in recognizing the preparatory phase as a critical site of investment worthy of sustained attention, resources, and ongoing refinement. Mentor training matters because the work itself is inherently complex, requiring simultaneous navigation of linguistic, cultural, affective, and ethical dimensions that exceed intuitive competence. Training transforms enthusiastic but potentially underprepared volunteers into reflective practitioners equipped with conceptual frameworks, practical strategies, trauma-informed awareness, and knowledge of their own limitations.

Beyond individual competency, systematic preparation establishes institutional accountability and program quality. Perhaps most compelling is the dual transformation this training enables. The obvious transformation concerns mentees – young people who receive more effective, culturally responsive, trauma-informed language support. The less obvious but equally significant transformation concerns mentors themselves. Students who complete this preparation emerge with heightened critical consciousness (Vickers et al., 2017). These students – future teachers, social workers, healthcare professionals, policymakers – carry intercultural competencies and commitments to inclusive practice into subsequent professional and civic roles.

Finally, investing in the preparatory phase represents investment in the kind of societies we hope to build. In an era of unprecedented global mobility, linguistic diversity increasingly characterizes educational institutions across Europe. Structured mentor preparation that grounds practice in critical pedagogy, trauma-informed awareness, and culturally sustaining principles offers one pathway toward more just responses to linguistic diversity. Systematic evaluation data validates this investment, demonstrating measurable competency gains that justify the resource intensiveness of comprehensive mentor preparation. By pre-

paring mentors to recognize mentees' assets, validate multiple ways of belonging, and engage respectfully with cultural differences, we model and enact the inclusive educational practices that resilient, critically aware societies require. The preparatory phase becomes not merely logistical necessity but pedagogical opportunity – a space where both mentors and mentees, both universities and communities, both individuals and institutions can learn what it means to build linguistic lives and inclusive futures together. This is the transformative potential of structured volunteer preparation, and it remains work in progress.

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Education in service of genocides: axiological analysis

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Abstract: Wide access to education is a great global achievement and a powerful tool to change the world. This article aims to discuss the possibility that this power can be misused in order to prepare society to commit atrocities such as genocide. Both the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide were state-organised mass crimes that exploited public institutions, such as schools, for genocidal mobilisation. The comparative approach and exploration of historical examples facilitate the identification of patterns that might also be relevant today in countries at high risk factors of mass atrocities. The striking characteristics of schooling in genocidal regimes are pseudo-scientific content in curricula, anti-intellectualism and the redefinition of values, so that they lose their original meaning in order to encourage people to support and actively participate in mass crimes.

Introduction

“Education is the most powerful weapon which we can use to change the world”. Nelson Mandela said this in his speech in the USA in 1990, shortly after being released from prison (*Nelson Mandela Visits Madison Park HS In Roxbury in 1990*). His words were repeated many times by educators from all over the world and became a motto that stresses the power of schools in promoting peace (*Lekcja Polskiego*). Unfortunately, the same sentence can be understood as a warning: *a powerful weapon* can kill and *the change* does not necessarily mean improvement. Education has a tremendous, largely positive impact on individuals and societies. On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge the threats that might also be the consequences of misused education, especially in countries with authoritarian regimes. This article aims to highlight the possible links between education and mass atrocities. The historical examples of the Third Reich and Rwanda are used to demonstrate that education was and can be used to facilitate genocides. Such education implements pseudo-scientific

content into curricula and redefines traditional values such as courage, patriotism, or community. Despite the fact that this article is based on the examples from the past, the possibility that schools can be used to serve mass killings is still present. Putin once said: *‘teachers play pivotal roles when countries are at turning points. Commanders don’t win wars. Teachers win wars’* (Borenstein, 2025). The awareness of *the evil face* of education and its effectiveness in facilitating genocides means that, despite pessimistic facts regarding the growing number of atrocities committed globally, education can be also used to prevent such crimes (Machul- Telus & Markowska-Manista, 2011, pp. 269–270).

Two faces of education

Education is usually considered in the context of peacebuilding and there are few publications that discuss its evil face (King, 2014, p. 6). Education is understood in this article broadly: as formal and informal schooling, curricula and approaches to teaching. Although currently 11% of children, according to UNICEF, are left without primary education, the growing number of those, who are included in education systems is a great global achievement (*Primary Education, UNICEF*). Despite the constructive and significant impact on society, education *does not serve the public. It creates a public* (Postman, 1996, p. 18). This means that education can have two faces, not just a positive one. It reflects society around and, in certain situations, *can be manipulated to drive a wedge between people, rather than drawing them closer together* (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000, VI). The possibility that schools can increase violence and prepare people to commit atrocities is not only speculation, but seems to be a pattern in the genocidal process.

The problems with the definition of genocide

Genocide is a relatively new word, constructed in 1944 by a Polish-Jewish lawyer, Raphael Lemkin, from two different words, one Greek (*genos*-race, nation, or tribe) and one Latin (*caedere*-killing). The term refers to *the intentional destruction of groups of people* (Straus, 2016, p. 31). Lemkin, as a student of law at the Polish University of Jan Kazimierz in Lwów (today Lviv) in the early 1920s, was moved by the fact that there were no legal means to punish the crimes committed by the Turks during the Great War against Armenians. His professor of law responded that *one can legally kill one’s own chickens* (Gebert, 2022, p. 23) and that sovereignty is a superior value in international relations.

Lemkin spent years attempting to define the crime where the groups were persecuted and exterminated. Another lawyer from the same university, Hersch Lauterpacht, focused on *crimes against humanity*, which can be interpreted more broadly than Lemkin's term *genocide* (Sands, 2017, XXII). The crimes committed during the Second World War, particularly the extermination of Jews and Roma, convinced many, that the Holocaust and Porajmos required the development of a new, group-focused legal category.

In 1948 the *United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide* was passed. According to the UN definition genocide is an *intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such, which can manifest through a number of acts including a) killing members of the group; b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group* (The Genocide Convention, 1948).

The definition is highly imperfect. It was agreed to under political pressure of the Cold War. The categories were limited to national, ethnic, racial and religious groups, which narrowed down the meaning. The broader definition would not have been accepted by the UN members, especially the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin, who wanted to exclude atrocities committed by the USSR. Other countries were also uninterested in a broader definition, because of mass crimes from the past, for example the slaughter of native Americans. Even the narrow definition was not unanimously accepted by all the UN member states (Gebert, 2022, p. 30), and many countries with high risk factors for mass atrocities have not ratified it to this day (Markowska-Manista, 2011, p. 213). However, *genocide* became a defined crime of international law, which was a huge achievement. Since the term was new, it also developed a less formal meaning. In everyday language, it stands for the biggest crime, a crime of crimes. The atrocities that do not fit into this narrow and imperfect definition, and therefore do not fit into the category of genocide, were seen by many as less 'evil' (Straus, 2016, p. 35). Even such crimes as those committed in Cambodia under Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, where the estimated number of victims was 2.2–2.5 million (Nijakowski, 2018, ebook section: *Definiowanie ludobójstwa w naukach społecznych*), did not fully meet the criteria of the genocide definition. In Cambodia there was no particular national, ethnic, religious, or racial group attacked, it could be anyone. Manus I. Midlarsky used the term *politicide*

(Midlarsky, 2010, p. 13) for those atrocities. This shows that the UN definition of genocide is imperfect and leads to many misunderstandings. This can be illustrated by aggressive comments when the “g-word” is used, or is not used, in connection with, for example Gaza, invaded by the Israeli Defence Forces after the Hamas attack on Israel on the 7 October 2023. For many people, the use of a term other than *genocide* in relation to Israeli atrocities signifies either the denial of Palestinian suffering or support for Benjamin Netanyahu. On the other hand, Israeli scholars claim that there was no genocide, as starvation in Gaza and the massacres of civilians were not intentional and deliberate (Orbach, Boxman, Henkin, & Braverman, 2025, p. 309), what also aims to excuse the crimes and lower their significance. The confusion surrounding the “g-word” caused a reaction by Ireland, which requested the International Court of Justice to broaden the definition of genocide (Government of Ireland, 2025).

The new word is also misunderstood, because in some languages, for example in Polish (*ludobójstwo*), it lacks any connection with the Greek word *genos* that refers to race or ethnicity and in everyday language is incorrectly treated as a synonym of mass murder. The atrocity committed by the Soviets in 1940, in which about 22 000 Polish officers and intellectuals were murdered by the shot in the back of the head (Kłaczek et al., 2015, p. 265), was a mass atrocity, but the aim was to destroy the elite, not a national, ethnic, religious or racial group. Therefore the Polish word *ludobójstwo* may impose misunderstanding or even lead to disputes. In numerous Polish publications a different, but less popular word is used instead, namely: *genocyd* (Machul-Telus, Markowska-Manista & Nijakowski, 2011). Moreover, experts, in order to avoid definitional problems with Lemkin’s word, more often than not, use the umbrella term *mass atrocity*, which has no legal definition, but is generally used to refer to *genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes* (Straus, 2016, p. 35).

Apart from the UN legal definition, there are a number of approximately 21 definitions of genocide created by different scholars (Rosenberg, 2012, p. 16). One of the key issues is how far in order to label an atrocity a genocide, it needs to be committed by a state. According to the definition offered by Manus I. Midlarsky, genocide is a state-organised crime (Midlarsky, 2010, p. 15). Lech Nijakowski assessed the role of the national state as highly significant (Nijakowski, 2015, p. 25), but did not agree that it constitutes a definitional factor. In the future this role could be taken by, for example, large corporations (Nijakowski, 2018, ebook section: *Definiowanie ludobójstwa w naukach społecznych*). Despite definitional difficulties, most scholars agree that a genocide

requires years of preparation (Rosenberg, 2012, p. 16). The state institutions, including schools, are involved in that process (Nijakowski, 2013, p. 215). The development of a genocide has been well researched and described, which also means that it can be stopped before the killings start. The preventive tools are the most effective at the early stages of genocidal mobilisation, therefore, the role of schools is so significant.

Genocides begin at schools

Genocide is a process, not an event (Rosenberg, 2012, p. 1). It takes years of preparation and the stages behind its development have been well described by scholars. Gregory H. Stanton identified 10 stages of genocide: 1. Classification 2. Symbolization 3. Discrimination 4. Dehumanization 5. Organization 6. Polarization 7. Preparation 8. Persecution 9. Extermination 10. Denial (*What Are the 10 Stages of Genocide?*). The first stage on this genocidal ladder, *Classification*, occurs in all societies. People of different cultures and eras create *ingroups* and *outgroups*, dividing themselves into “us” and “them”. This step usually takes place at schools. Generally, it does not lead to any further crimes, although it may result in school bullying. If it is not prevented, especially in countries with high risk factors for mass atrocities, it could act as an accelerator for further harmful steps, potentially leading towards mass crimes, including genocide. This is especially important once we acknowledge that such crimes in the past were committed by ordinary people. This was the scary conclusion of Douglas M. Kelly after the psychiatric examination of Nazi criminals from Nuremberg Prison, who later lectured on how democratic societies, including his country- the USA- are not immune to such forms of collective evil (El-Hai, 2015, ebook section *Nazistowski umysł*). The majority of mass murderers are not “monsters” – individuals with no morality. Most of them are *ordinary men*, as Christopher Browning entitled his book about 101 Reserved Police Battalion sent to occupied Poland in order to kill Jewish and Polish civilians (Browning, 2000). The new, reversed morality is even a necessity, which people use to rationalise and justify their actions. According to Harald Welzer, among those responsible for planning and implementing the Holocaust, there were only from 5 to 10% of those with mental issues, which is not a higher number in comparison to any other society (Welzer, 2010, p. 12). Genocides are committed by ordinary people and planned by *creative* individuals. Many of them had complex personalities and exceptional imagination (Welzer, 2010, p. 11).

Hannah Arendt's concept of *banality of evil* (Arendt, 2010) would apply to some average personalities, like Adolf Eichmann, but a large group of those who organised mass killings was exceptionally talented and too skilled.

Because in all societies people with sadistic inclinations are in the minority, the key roles in atrocity networks are played by those who might not even fully acknowledge the genocidal nature of their contribution (Nijakowski, 2021, pp. 15 – 16). Among those people there were experts such as lawyers, doctors, engineers, policemen, soldiers (Nijakowski, 2015, p. 19) and, first of all, the teachers. The training of mass murderers begins at schools (Nijakowski, 2022, p. 51). In those countries, where it was the state who organized the mass killings, the role of schools is especially significant. It is where the children learn how to hate and, where the future victims were dehumanised.

Violence is a huge problem at all schools, so children can be easily manipulated when the inferior group is indicated to them. This was demonstrated by well-known psychological experiments conducted by Jane Elliott (Verhaag, 1996). She divided the classroom by the colour of children's eyes, a characteristic they cannot control. *"The reaction from the students was immediate and intense. Brown eyed people were immediately angry, confused, withdrawn and blue eyed were immediately delighted, arrogant, superior, condescending, vicious little third graders, and they had been best friends the previous day"* (McIntyre). Children quickly learn how to play the game of hatred. Similar emotions were observed when the experiment was repeated with groups of adults (Verhaag, 1996). Therefore, the role of schools is the most significant at the early stages of the genocidal ladder. *Classification* and *symbolization* happen frequently and do not necessarily result in mass violence, unless preventive measures are not taken. With the support of school authorities, education might facilitate all the genocidal stages, including *extermination* and, like in case of Turkey, *denial*. Until today many Turks still claim that there was no Armenian genocide, because this is what they had learnt at school (Goldberg, 2006).

The links between schools and mass atrocities can be observed at different stages of genocidal mobilisation and may have different forms. Saloth Sar, better known as Pol Pot, was a teacher of history and geography, with detailed knowledge and an impressive memory as testified by his former student, who later became his victim (Tochman, 2023, ebook section *Rok wszystkich śmierci*. 1962). The infamous S-21 prison, where atrocities were committed during the Khmer Rouge regime, was located at Cambodian high school – Tuol Sleng. Although in Cambodia there was no particular group identified as inferior,

the educated people were especially threatened (Gebert, 2022, p. 370), which constitutes another linkage between education and mass atrocities. In Bosnia, during the war of 1992–1995, the killers and the victims were often neighbours and remembered each other from schools (Tochman, 2023, p. 30). This fact was used in the outstanding film by Jasmila Zbanic *Quo Vadis, Aida?* (Zbanic, 2020) about the massacre at Srebrenica in 1995, where the Bosnian victims and their Serbian oppressors were teachers, students and classmates.

Despite definitional problems, most scholars agree that there were three genocides that nearly or fully meet the UN definition from 1948: the Armenian Genocide, the Holocaust and the 1994 genocide in Rwanda (Nijakowski, 2018, ebook section: *Definiowanie ludobójstwa w naukach społecznych*). They were, unfortunately, also very effective: the target group was annihilated at the territory where the extermination happened at the level of 66 to 70% (Midlarsky, 2010, p. 28). Those crimes were committed by the states, which means that state institutions such as schools were actively involved in the process. Although the comparison of mass atrocities that had dissimilar causes and occurred in territories with different problems may lead to oversimplifications resulting from false analogies, this method is commonly used by many scholars in the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary field of *Genocide Studies*. Rwanda is not *a tropical version of the Shoah* (Lemarchand, 2009, p. 109). However, the method called *comparative history as macro-causal analysis* may enrich our understanding of the mechanisms behind mass atrocities (Nijakowski, 2022, p. 46). Therefore, the analysis focused on education in the Third Reich and in Rwanda shows the *genocidal* pattern, as in both of these states schools played a pivotal role in implementing genocidal steps.

Redefinition of values: Germany under the National Socialism and Rwanda before 1994

The education system in the Third Reich played a very significant role in the militarisation of society, but it also attempted and largely succeeded in imposing a new understanding of traditional values in order to prepare people to commit crimes in the future. Although Adolf Hitler was appointed a German chancellor in 1933, his views on education had been presented much earlier, in his book *Mein Kampf*, written in prison after the unsuccessful coup d'état in 1923. The author complained that the school curriculums are so overloaded with material that the students would not be able to remember it anyway, and what they had to learn would be largely useless in their adult life (Hitler, 2020, pp. 474–475). He

was critical towards the practice of learning foreign languages, which in his opinion, *poor children* find so tiring and they forget what they learnt so quickly. He called for a reduction in the history curriculum, maintaining that only *important* facts from the past should be taught, what in his understanding were only those facts that *serve the nation* (Hitler, 2020, p. 477). The meaning of the term *nation* was ideologically changed to exclude the people labelled as inferior: Jews, Roma, queer people, people with darker skin, mentally ill individuals or drug addicts, who were called *asocials*. Hitler's anti-intellectual slogans were repeated also in relation to sciences that, according to him, were too focused on material values, rather than on ideas that strengthen *the nation* and promote the ancient beauty of Greece and Rome (Hitler, 2020, p. 479).

Adolf Hitler wanted education to be focused on *values*, but redefined to reflect the National Socialistic ideology. He saw a threat in being well educated (Hitler, 2020, p. 488) and stressed the primary role of physical education for both boys and girls, who were perceived only as future mothers (Hitler, 2020, p. 470). It is surprising how many of those ridiculous postulates were implemented at German schools when NSDAP took over the power in the next decade. The education system of the democratic Weimar Republic was transformed into *education for death*, following the title of the book by Gregor Ziemer, an American school headmaster in Berlin, who was an eyewitness to this process of change and decided to publish his first-hand account (Ziemer, 2021). Walt Disney created an animated short film based on this book, under the same title, in 1943 for the purpose of anti-Nazi war propaganda (Geronimi, 1943). The observation of Ziemer confirms that Adolf Hitler managed to fulfil his plans for education to a large extent. It became highly ideologized, effectively spreading hatred towards the Jews (Ziemer, 2021, p. 24) and transformed all school subjects to serve the National Socialism. Even the subjects that are popularly believed to be objective and immune to political influence, such as math, promoted the reversed Nazi *values*.

“Assignment 97.: A mentally ill person costs 4 German marks (RM) a day, a cripple 5.50 RM, a criminal 3.50 RM. In many cases a civil servant has only 4 RM per day, a public employee barely 3.50 RM, an unskilled worker not yet 2 RM per head of the family. (a) represent these figures graphically. According to cautious estimates there are 300,000 mentally ill persons, epileptics etc. in nursing homes. (b) how much do they cost a year? (c) how many loans for young families at 1000 RM without refund could be spent from this money each year?” (Skibińska, 2010, nr 6).

This math assignment openly aimed to impose the view, that without mentally ill people and without criminals, so-called *healthy German families* could financially benefit. Knowing that the first concentration camp, Dachau near Munich, was set up as early as 1933, and that among those who were imprisoned there were people labelled *asocials*, one can conclude that the math activity effectively fostered acceptance of violent Nazi programs, including the *euthanasia* of the mentally ill. Between 1939–45 about 200 000 Germans were killed. The action, called with a scary euphemism *Gnadentot*, which means *merciful death*, was massively supported by the society, which was revealed by the German historian Götz Aly (Aly, 2015, p. 9). The society under the Nazi regime was prepared not only to accept those crimes, they were also brainwashed to believe that this is morally the right thing to do. Changing the meaning of values did not happen only at schools, but schools created a fruitful environment for indoctrination of all young people, whose age made them especially vulnerable to propaganda slogans. Many of those educated in the 1930s were later sent to the occupied territories in order to kill in the 1940s, even if they were not professional soldiers. Following the method known from the Nazi schools, they redefined moral values and used rationalisation, which allowed them to assess brutal murders as *merciful*. The most striking example was the testimony of one of the members of the 101st Police Battalion, who said that he was specialised to shoot only the kids. This was to *appease his conscience*, as someone else killed their mothers, and he knew that children without mothers would die anyway (Browning, 2000, p. 88). This shows how morality can be reversed to rationally explain even mass murders of little children. The process can take place outside of schools as well, but state-organised, public education can effectively accelerate it and contribute to the broad acceptance of this *new morality*.

Schools in the Nazi Germany redefined the traditional values, included pseudo-scientific content such as eugenics, created divisions into *us and them* and imposed antisemitic views on the learners. One of the initiatives directed towards kids was a 1938 publication, *Der Giftpilz – The poisonous mushroom* (*Pages From the Antisemitic Children's Book The Poisonous Mushroom*). This example is strongly connected with Bauman's explanation of the origin of genocide. In every modern society, the state takes the role of a gardener. Some people are labelled as undesired weeds that need to be removed as they do not fit into the *perfectly planned project* (Bauman, 2009, p. 47). It was at schools where the children were first divided into *us and them* and were taught to *hate the enemy* – the people labelled as inferior and dangerous *poisonous mushrooms*

to the *healthy nation*. They were also prepared to support the killings of Jews, Roma, homosexuals, mentally ill, Slavs and treat those crimes as *moral*. Most of the school materials and teachers' efforts were focused on Jews, who were presented as *eternal parasites* (Hitler, 2020, p. 347). The extermination of Jews during the Second World War, the Holocaust or Shoah, was one of those crimes defined by scholars as a *total genocide* (Nijakowski, 2018, ebook section: *Definiowanie ludobójstwa w naukach społecznych*). Today, in the territories where the Final Solution was carried out, the Jewish communities are insignificant in number. Education was not a cause, but it was one of the tools of this crime.

Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf* called Jews *parasites*, and the Tutsis in Rwanda were called *cockroaches*. Rwanda is a relatively small, African country with a territory smaller than Belgium. Until 1962 it was firstly a German, then a Belgian colony. The society of Rwanda was divided into three groups: the majority Hutu, the minority Tutsi, and the Twa, who constituted about 1% of the population and never had any political significance (Bartuś, 2022, p. 303), but were often victims of violence due to many superstitions (Markowska-Manista, 2011, p. 222). The divisions into those groups to a large extent resulted from colonial rule and European anthropologists, for whom they were considered different ethnicities (Hatzfeld, 2009, p. 10). Originally, the term "Tutsi" referred to the high status of landowners rich with cattle. There were many mixed marriages and no clear divisions between the groups until 1933 when the ID cards were introduced by the colonial power, Belgium (King, 2014, p. 42). The schools established by European missionaries in colonial Rwanda strengthened the social divisions and led to the spread of hatred. Belgians made the Tutsis a privileged group following the effective ancient Roman method of imposing control: *divide et impera* – *divide and rule*. For Belgians, Tutsis were privileged, which also gave them better education opportunities. In 1956 Tutsis constituted 16.59% of the population and held 60.9 % of secondary school spots (King, 2014, p. 62). At many Catholic schools, Tutsis studied in French, and Hutus in a local language (King, 2014, p. 64). Natural sciences were compulsory for Tutsis, but not for the Hutu. The difference in treatment was explained by the racist, pseudo-scientific theory according to which the Tutsis were superior Hamites from Ethiopia and the Hutu were inferior Bantu tribes (King, 2014, p. 65). This, according to the Belgians, made the Tutsis similar to Europeans and therefore considered by them the natural leaders (Bartuś, 2022, p. 306). The roles changed with the independence of Rwanda and the takeover of power by the Hutu majority in 1962. The same explanation was used, but this time to label the Tutsis foreigners in Rwanda, as they, according to this theory, came from Ethiopia

to dominate the legitimate people of Rwanda – the Hutus. The history classes at schools were changed into ‘*hatred history*’ lessons, as one of the former students called them (King, 2014, p. 71). Tutsis were forced to stand up and were humiliated. The “ethnicity” also determined chances for school enrolment: Tutsis were limited to no more than 9% of available places, a restriction that applied not only to schools, but also to other public institutions (Bartuś, 2022, pp. 314–315).

The genocide of 1994 was not the first act of violence in Rwanda, but the scale and fast pace of killing resulted in nearly total extermination of Tutsis in the territory where the atrocities happened. The survivors were those who managed to hide, escape or were lucky enough to be saved by a Hutu friend. Today, the Tutsis in Rwanda are largely not the survivors, but refugees from the neighbouring countries (Midlarsky, 2010, pp. 40 – 41). The estimated number of victims was 800 000 (Nijakowski, 2018, ebook section: *Definiowanie ludobójstwa w naukach społecznych*) and among them there were also moderate Hutus and Twas (Nijakowski, 2018, ebook section: *Ludobójstwo po końcu historii*). To understand fully the causes of Rwandan genocide it is important to study the history of violence in a mirror state of Rwanda, Burundi, a country with similar social division and a history of mass killings of Hutu and Tutsis playing both roles: the killers and victims. In 1972 the Tutsis killed 200–300 civilians with the intention to exterminate all educated Hutus (Nijakowski, 2018, ebook section: *Ludobójstwo po końcu historii*). This confirms the thesis that educational divisions played an important role in mutual hatred of Hutu and Tutsis and led to deepening the divisions in the society. The horrific consequence was the genocide in 1994 in Rwanda. This mass crime is fully consistent with the UN definition. Raphael Lemkin died in 1959, 35 years before the genocide in Rwanda that in so many ways fulfilled the criteria he introduced into international law. There were 6 people at his funeral (Gebert, 2022, p. 48). His work did not prevent mass atrocities, that in the 20th century could reach the unimaginable number even up to 360 million victims (Markowska-Manista, 2011, p. 208). It is an open question how far Lemkin would agree with comparative analysis that aims to identify patterns in dissimilar cases of the Holocaust and Rwanda in 1994. His assessment of colonial crimes is somehow disappointing. He was an active supporter of European expansion and claimed that the African people could only blame themselves for their misfortune (Markowska-Manista, 2011, p. 219).

Today, in Rwanda, under the leadership of Paul Kagame of the Rwandan Patriotic Front representing the Tutsis, there is a strong pressure to build

a Rwandan nation without using the terms “Tutsi” and “Hutu”. This also means that teaching and learning about the genocide of 1994 is challenging without using those categories.

Conclusions

The power of education should not be underestimated. It can contribute to peacebuilding, but only as long as it is free from propaganda and political influence of evil regimes. It must not include pseudo-scientific content or lower the quality of overall educational level. In both the Third Reich and Rwanda, a large part of the curriculum was based on false, racist and untrue theories such as the superiority of the Aryan race or Hamitic origin of Tutsis. In both countries education had a political aim and was not focused on intellectual growth of the learners. Furthermore, Adolf Hitler openly called for limiting the content and reducing the level of knowledge taught at schools. If education is taken over by dictatorial regimes, schools can contribute to facilitating atrocities. Another danger is that the regimes stress the importance of values in education, but those values are redefined and their meaning is changed. Courage, patriotism or national unity can be understood in a transformed, ideological sense. Empathy might be seen as a weakness and killing the weak ones might be excused as merciful. This article examined two historical examples, but the possibility of misusing education still exists today, even though the 20th century, called the “century of genocides” has ended (Jacek Leociak in Midlarsky, 2010, XII). The militarisation of Russian schools is being accompanied by lowering the level of teaching, which became less important than different ceremonies and meetings with soldiers (Borenstein, 2025). Israeli schools for years prepared the students to join the army after graduation, which is compulsory for both boys and girls.

Genocides do not happen overnight. They require years of preparation. This genocidal mobilisation involves state institutions and schools among them. Since a large part of every population is somehow involved in the education systems as students, parents or teachers, the role played by schools is crucial. Therefore education should be separated from politics and free from pseudo-scientific content. Students ought to acknowledge different perspectives and learn critical and creative thinking. There is a need to introduce some form of genocide education as a preventive tool that prepares society to react at the early stages of *genocidal ladder* (Markowska-Manista, 2011, p. 249). According to John Dewey, education and morality are inseparable (Dewey, 1972, p. 491).

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SECTION IV

Research Methodology, Ethics, and Epistemology

Methodological Challenges and Dilemmas in Sociological Research at School Environments

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Abstract. This paper examines the methodological dilemmas and challenges that researchers in the Sociology of Education encounter before, during, and after conducting research in school settings. It highlights the importance of formulating clear research questions by identifying gaps in the literature and clarifying the theoretical grounding of the study. The discussion then turns to methodological choices – quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods – and the dilemmas linked to selecting an approach that aligns with the researcher’s ontological and epistemological assumptions. Particular emphasis is placed on the practical challenges of data collection in schools, especially when working with vulnerable groups or navigating complex social dynamics. The paper also addresses issues of data analysis, theoretical framing, and the criteria of validity, reliability, credibility, and objectivity. Overall, it argues that rigorous research in school environments requires consistency, flexibility, and awareness of the multiple, often contradictory, educational “realities” that shape sociological inquiry.

Introduction

Research in sociology aims to explore, describe, explain, and sometimes predict social phenomena in an effort to identify patterns, norms, and motives of social behavior, and to understand – among other aspects – the meanings and emotions of social groups within specific contexts. This is a demanding process, as methodological challenges and dilemmas emerge at every step of the research journey: when formulating the research question or hypothesis, selecting an appropriate methodology and data-collection methods, and choosing analytical models that ensure valid conclusions about the phenomenon under study.

In this paper, I do not delve into the dichotomy between positivist and naturalistic inquiries or the criteria associated with each tradition. Instead, I seek to demonstrate that regardless of the “road” researchers choose in

order to solve their “intellectual puzzle,” the commitment to the “truth” remains essential. This commitment requires consistency, flexibility, and adaptability in order to navigate the research process and produce contextually grounded results.

For this reason, I present – and occasionally explain – some of the methodological challenges and dilemmas encountered within the sociology of education. By “challenges,” I refer to the demanding circumstances that arise during research, the “stimulating tasks or problems” (Merriam Webster Dictionary), while “dilemmas” refer to situations involving difficult choices or uncertainty (*ibid*). In other words, dilemmas concern the “which” and “why” of research, whereas challenges concern the “how.” To do so, I address the following guiding questions:

How can we, as researchers, examine what happens in school environments?

How certain can we be about the results of our research?

What is our role as scientists when conducting research?

Throughout the paper, I attempt to connect the criteria of good research (validity, reliability, objectivity) with the different stages of the research process – before, during, and after – in order to provide a comprehensive explanation of the procedure. My goal is to support young researchers in making informed methodological decisions and in anticipating potential challenges when designing and implementing their research.

This paper is mainly bibliographical, although in some cases I include examples from empirical studies – both my own and those of other researchers – to enrich the discussion and support certain arguments. The paper is divided into the following sections:

1. Research Questions or Hypotheses: Filling the Gap,
2. Methodological Dilemmas,
3. Methods and Challenges,
4. Theoretical Models and Dilemmas,
5. Reliability and Dependability of the Results,
6. Summary-Conclusions.

Each section includes definitions, methodological rationale, and an exploration of challenges and dilemmas relevant to sociological research, particularly within school environments.

Research Questions or Hypotheses: Filling the Gap

Research questions or hypotheses form the “intellectual puzzle” that drives a study. To develop effective questions, Agee (2009) suggests asking: “What do I want to learn from this study?” and creating an overarching question to guide the inquiry. Mason (1996) distinguishes three types of research questions, the *developmental* ones, which examine “how and why X or Y develop”; the *mechanical* ones, which explore “how X or Y work” and why they function in a particular way; and the *causal* ones, which investigate “what influence X has on Y” or “what causes X or Y.” There is of course possible that during the research process, new questions may arise (Agee, 2009). The main objective is to connect the theoretical framework with research questions or hypotheses, clarifying their scope and purpose.

In school-based research, defining the focus is often complex. Schools serve multiple functions – as learning organizations, institutions, and workplaces – and involve interactions among individuals with diverse statuses and roles. Therefore, researchers must clarify their focus: Are they interested in education as a social function, in educational policy, in student achievement, in interpersonal relations, in administrative practices etc.? Which actors – teachers, principals, parents, or students – are relevant, and in what contexts (classroom, schoolyard, or beyond)?

Therefore, a thorough bibliographical review is essential to identify the research gap – be it empirical, theoretical, methodological, or related to the population (Miles, 2017). This review not only clarifies the gap but also defines the key concepts for the inquiry, effectively serving as the literature review in consequence. Maintaining detailed records and summaries of prior research is critical for constructing a solid theoretical foundation.

For example, if investigating teacher relationships in schools, researchers must define what constitutes a “relationship,” with whom (colleagues, students, principals, parents), in which context (inside or outside the classroom), and which teacher population (primary or secondary). Such considerations guide the development of meaningful research questions.

Personal values and experiences inevitably influence research interests (Weber, 1949). In educational research, researchers’ own experiences as students, their perspectives on education, and their habitus must be acknowledged and bracketed to avoid imposing interpretations that misrepresent participants’ meanings (Silverman, 1985: 3). *Value freedom/*neutrality (Weber, 1949: 11) is

crucial before engaging in empirical work, ensuring the distinction between “value judgments” and “link to the values” (ibid).

In summary, developing an effective research question is a challenging process, that may not be successful right from the beginning. A well-constructed question, grounded in theory and literature, reduces methodological challenges during data collection and analysis, providing a clear pathway for empirical research.

Checklist: Developing Research Questions or Hypotheses

- ☐ Identify the theoretical framework guiding the study.
- ☐ Specify the type of research question (developmental, mechanical, or causal).
- ☐ Clearly define the research focus and population.
- ☐ Conduct a systematic bibliographical review to identify gaps.
- ☐ Explicitly define key concepts and variables.
- ☐ Reflect on and acknowledge personal values and assumptions.

Concise Summary: Well-formulated research questions or hypotheses, grounded in theory and literature, provide clarity, reduce methodological uncertainty, and guide all subsequent stages of the research process.

Methodological Dilemmas

Once a theoretical research question or hypothesis is formulated, a robust methodology is required to answer it. Researchers must carefully consider which methodology and methods are most suitable and effective for addressing their research questions, and explicitly justify their choices.

Mason (1996) emphasizes that the choice of methodology reflects a researcher’s underlying theory of reality and knowledge. Therefore, before selecting a methodology, researchers should ask: “What is the nature of the phenomena or social reality I wish to investigate?” and “What constitutes valid evidence of this social reality?” (Mason, 1996, pp. 11–13).

The two primary methodologies are *quantitative* and *qualitative*, with *mixed methods* combining elements of both.

In *quantitative research*, statistical and numerical data are used to examine relationships between variables (e.g., student dropout rates in relation to financial status, ethnicity, or religion) (Bryman & Cramer, 1990). However, quantitative approaches may risk overlooking the direct study of educational processes as they occur in schools (Silverman, 1985: 9). Moreover, standardized measures

may impose predetermined categories that fail to capture the diversity of participants' experiences (Patton, 1987: 9). Extended literature review and auxiliary data-collection methods can mitigate these limitations.

In *qualitative research*, the focus is on exploring meanings, norms, and patterns to understand relationships between two variables (e.g., the connection between school dropout and students' perception of learning). However, qualitative approaches are also subject to criticism about issues of credibility and generalizability (Marshall & Rossman, 1999: 193; Marshall, 1990). To address this, Mason (1996) recommends empirical and theoretical generalization using representative populations, comparison of sampling units, and document analysis. In addition, triangulation of data sources further strengthens credibility (Marshall & Rossman, 1999: 192–193; Marshall, 1990). To ensure qualitative data validity, Mason (1996) emphasizes demonstrating why the chosen methodology is appropriate for addressing the research questions and how data analysis and interpretation effectively support the study. Bhandari (2021) adds that “population” and “ecological” validity must also be considered.

To sum up, “quantitative methods are no more synonymous with objectivity than qualitative methods are synonymous with subjectivity”, since “all statistical data are based on someone's definition of what to measure and how to measure it” (Patton 1985: 166, based on Scriven 1972).

Mixed methodology, though not as recent as often assumed (Pelto, 2015; Migiros & Magangi, 2011; Bryman 2008: 15), is widely used today. It integrates the primary qualitative methods (participant observation and open-ended interviews) with common quantitative methods (surveys and program interventions) (Morgan, 2017: 153). Mixed methods are especially suitable for phenomena that combine numerical representation and causal explanations, such as investigating both the extent of student dropout and the underlying reasons (see also Brannen, 1992; Bryman, 2008).

In the past, triangulation, was used in the sense of combining different methods to collect data (Timans, Wouters and Heilbron 2019), while nowadays, triangulation consists of *data triangulation*, which refers to “collecting different kinds of data on the same question”; *investigator triangulation*, which refers to “using different fieldworkers and interviewers to avoid the biases of one person working alone”; *methodological triangulation*, which refers to “using multiple methods to study a program”; and *theory triangulation*, which refers to “using different perspectives (or theories) to interpret a set of data” (Patton, 1987: 161; See also Mason, 1996; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

In conclusion, selecting the appropriate methodology ensures internal validity in quantitative research and credibility in qualitative research. Researchers must clearly justify their methodological choices, demonstrating how these decisions reflect their epistemological and ontological stance and support the research question.

Checklist: Selecting an Appropriate Methodology

- ☐ Clarify ontological and epistemological assumptions.
- ☐ Assess the suitability of quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods.
- ☐ Identify potential methodological limitations.
- ☐ Incorporate strategies to enhance validity or credibility.
- ☐ Justify methodological choices explicitly and transparently.

Concise Summary: Methodological choices are theoretically informed decisions that directly affect the validity and credibility of research findings and must be carefully justified.

Methods and Challenges

Marshall and Rossman (1995) highlight that method selection should align with both the research purpose – explanatory, descriptive, exploratory, or predictive – and the overall research strategy. For example, if the purpose is explanatory, seeking to uncover the beliefs or attitudes shaping a phenomenon, methods such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, survey questionnaires, and document analysis may be appropriate (p. 41). Conversely, if the purpose is descriptive, seeking to explore and describe beliefs or attitudes as they occur, the use of similar methods is suggested with the addition of survey questionnaire (*ibid.*).

Within each methodology, the choice of data-collection methods varies depending on the research goals. Selecting appropriate methods is essential for ensuring the validity and reliability of the study (Hammersley 1997; 2008). Since most such topics are discussed, in this section, I focus on challenges related to participants in school-based empirical research.

A primary challenge arises when working with children, a vulnerable social group. Researchers must balance study objectives with participants' well-being, ensuring that risks of harm are minimized (Bishwakarma, 2017). Researchers must also consider broader social contexts, including discrimination, exclusion, and unequal treatment, to accurately interpret findings and protect participants (*ibid.*).

Similar challenges apply to adult participants. Adults may be subjected to certain form of discrimination, etc. and be afraid to participate in the research. Likewise, they may fear repercussions or feel uncomfortable participating in research, potentially withdrawing midway. A proactive approach involves maintaining additional participants as backups to ensure data collection remains robust.

There are also challenges related to truth and accuracy, which affect both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. For example, student responses to questionnaires may be playful or misleading, video recordings may not fully capture typical behavior in classrooms, and content analyses of official records may reflect only the perspectives of those who document them. To address these issues, triangulation of methods – such as combining observation, interviews, and document analysis – can enhance the validity of findings.

In interviews, participants may be vague, reserved, or even misleading (see also Zimmerman & West, 1975). Researchers can mitigate this by clarifying responses, posing alternative questions, or conducting follow-up interviews. Maintaining respect for participants' individuality, ethnicity, and status especially with sensitive groups is critical, as well as maintaining control during interviews, particularly when engaging with elite participants (Patton, 1987). Ethical dilemmas may also arise if a participant requests exclusion of specific information shared during interviews; in such cases, their wishes must always be respected, and alternative sources or participants with similar experiences can be sought.

On the other hand expose researchers to unexpected events, such as emotional impact, bullying, violence, or criminal incidents. In such situations, researchers should record observations carefully while intervening only when safety is at risk. Additionally, participants' hostility or suspicion – e.g., being offensive towards their colleagues or even perceiving researchers as spies – requires professional composure and adherence to research objectives. However, such offensive comments or hostilities – e.g., against female colleagues – may be a “finding”, which will eventually help us unlock other aspects of the phenomenon explored, such as – in our example – gender stereotypes.

These challenges underscore the complexity of school-based research, which involves diverse spaces (i.e., classrooms, offices, schoolyards), participants (i.e., students, teachers, parents, principals, evaluators), and institutional processes (e.g., policies, evaluations, teaching). By carefully selecting methodology and methods – according to our interpersonal skills, too – and by applying flexibility and adaptability in the field, researchers can successfully navigate these challenges and gather meaningful, contextually grounded data.

Checklist: Managing Methodological Challenges in the Field

- ☐ Ensure ethical protection of vulnerable participants.
- ☐ Anticipate participant withdrawal and non-response.
- ☐ Address issues of accuracy and truthfulness in data.
- ☐ Use triangulation to strengthen validity.
- ☐ Maintain professional composure in challenging field situations.
- ☐ Document unexpected events systematically.

Concise Summary: Fieldwork in school environments involves ethical, interpersonal, and practical challenges that require adaptability, methodological rigor, and reflexivity.

Theoretical Models and Dilemmas

Once data are collected, researchers must proceed with their analysis, using models or paradigms consistent with their ontology and epistemology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The choice of model significantly influences the interpretation of findings.

For example, analyzing the fairy tale *Little Red Riding Hood* can yield different insights depending on the theoretical lens applied. A feminist perspective may highlight gender roles and the representation of female characters, while marxist theories may emphasize social class inequalities, and structuralist analysis may focus on narrative patterns (e.g., the “dangerous other”).

Similarly, in sociological research, different paradigms offer distinct perspectives on the same phenomenon. Examples include *symbolic interactionism*, which emphasizes meaning-making and social interactions (Blumer, 1969 Kavτζάρα, 2020); *constructivism*, which explores how social reality is constructed and maintained (Berger & Luckman, 1976/1966); and *phenomenology*, which explores experiences and consciousness (Schutz, 1967/1932; Husserl, 1999).

The choice of a theoretical model reflects how researchers perceive the social world and shapes the conclusions drawn from their data. Therefore, selecting an appropriate paradigm is crucial for ensuring that the analysis aligns with the research question, methodology, and epistemological stance. Researchers must remain transparent about their theoretical choices and explain how these choices influence their understanding of the phenomenon.

Checklist: Selecting and Applying Theoretical Models

- ☐ Ensure consistency between theory, methodology, and research questions.
- ☐ Select paradigms aligned with epistemological assumptions.

- ☐ Explicitly justify these choices.
- ☐ Reflect on how theory shapes interpretation.

Concise Summary: Theoretical models are interpretive tools that frame data analysis and must be selected and applied transparently and coherently.

Reliability and Dependability of the Results

The results of sociological research are evaluated based on reliability and dependability. In particular, in quantitative research, external and internal reliability refer to whether other researchers would obtain the same results under similar conditions (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982, in Spencer, Ritchie, Lewis & Dillon, 2003; Mason, 1996). However, these criteria are not applicable to qualitative research, as real-world contexts are dynamic and constantly changing (Marshall and Rossman, 1999: 194–195). In qualitative studies, dependability requires detailed documentation of the complexity of situational contexts and interrelations, including the procedures for data collection and analysis (*ibid*; Mason, 1996: 146; Mehan, 1979: 29; Silverman, 1985: 21; 1993).

Undeniably, researchers must critically assess the accuracy, consistency, credibility, and objectivity of their findings (see also Scriven, 1972). Following Garfinkel's (1967) principle that "action makes sense in context," researchers should demonstrate how results are "grounded" in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Spencer, Ritchie, Lewis & Dillon, 2003). This involves presenting a transparent account of the school environments studied, while minimizing bias from the researchers' own assumptions or stereotypes. The researchers' "I" and stereotypes, in all methodological instances, may be "blinding" and "binding" the results. In order for the results to be credible, it's essential to show in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and its participants (Marshall and Rossman 1999: 192–3; Lincoln & Guba 1985).

Ultimately, in qualitative research researchers should provide contextually rich, credible, and in-depth insights into social phenomena, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the participants' perspectives and experiences. By systematically documenting and interpreting findings, researchers ensure that their results are trustworthy and meaningfully reflect the studied "reality".

Checklist: Ensuring Reliability and Dependability

- ☐ Document data collection and analysis procedures in detail.
- ☐ Provide contextualized descriptions of research settings.
- ☐ Demonstrate how findings are grounded in empirical data.

- ☐ Reflect critically on researcher bias and assumptions.
- ☐ Ensure transparency and coherence in reporting results.

Concise Summary: Research findings emerge from systematic documentation, reflexivity, and transparent analytical procedures.

Summary – Conclusions

In this paper, I aimed to present some of the challenges and dilemmas that researchers face before, during, and after conducting research, with a focus on school environments.

Primarily, a thorough and coherent research design is essential prior to conducting any study. The process is not straightforward, as challenges and dilemmas regarding the development of research questions or hypotheses, and the selection of appropriate methodologies and data collection and analysis models, are always present.

To achieve high-quality research, it is necessary to explicitly connect the methodology to the results and link empirical findings to theoretical frameworks. This approach enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of the research, while respecting the complexity and variability of school contexts and participants.

In the field, additional challenges and dilemmas may arise. Researchers are obliged to address these by maintaining scientific transparency, objectivity, and respect for both the settings and the participants.

However, does our role as scientists end there? Beyond demonstrating the research process and showing that we explored, observed, described, identified, or measured what we intended (Mason, 1996: 24), our task is more complex.

As researchers in the sociology of education, we face the difficult task of revealing the “unseen” or hidden phenomena perceived by our senses and interpreted by our minds. Yet, like the prisoners in Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, we share common experiences regarding schooling. To perceive realities beyond the “shadows” of presuppositions, personal values, and habitus, we must navigate the challenging path toward “truth” by combining sociological imagination (Mills, 1953), flexibility, and adaptability, while resisting elitism in science.

Only then can we “return to the cave”, as in Plato’s allegory, and inform others about the non-visible truths. It is important to remember, however, that we do not present an ultimate truth, since school environments encompass diverse and often contradictory realities, and participants have different characteristics (status, role, etc.), which frequently produce varying and conflicting results.

In conclusion, research in school environments is a complex and demanding endeavor. As sociologists, we must remain consistent with our roles, upholding the rights and obligations they entail. By solving an intellectual puzzle and arranging its pieces thoughtfully, we present a “truth” about a phenomenon and enable others to understand it. However, we must remain honest with ourselves: this represents only a partial, context-dependent truth, not an absolute one.

Checklist: Key Takeaways for Sociological Research in Education

- ☐ Design research coherently and systematically.
- ☐ Anticipate methodological challenges and dilemmas.
- ☐ Maintain ethical integrity and scientific transparency.
- ☐ Link theory, methodology, and findings explicitly.
- ☐ Acknowledge the partial and contextual nature of research “truths.”

Concise Summary: Research in school environments is inherently complex and demands methodological rigor, ethical responsibility, and reflexive awareness, yielding partial yet meaningful sociological truths.

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Epistemological tensions and researcher resilience in a context of coloniality: navigating between neutrality and engagement

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Abstract. This chapter explores the epistemic tensions faced by researchers, particularly those from formerly colonized countries in the Global South, caught between the demands of scientific neutrality and ethical engagement with the coloniality of knowledge. In dialogue with Critical Theory (based on emancipatory reason) and decolonial thought (which challenges Eurocentric universality), the chapter highlights epistemic resilience as a posture of resistance and reconstruction of meaning. The Haitian case study – through the heritage-based preservation of the memory of slavery – illustrates how cognitive justice can serve as a bridge between emancipatory rationality and the pluriversal horizon of decoloniality. The text advocates for a situated, reflexive, and reparative science, where rigor, commitment, and plurality come together in the service of truly liberatory knowledge.

Introduction

All over the world, human beings have had to confront what Dussel (2009) calls “core problematics,” that is, a set of fundamental or ontological questions that *Homo sapiens* has had to engage with throughout its maturation as a species. The answers to these questions have given rise to a plurality of cultures, knowledge systems, and relationships with the world. However, beyond the dimension of economic exploitation, colonial relations have also imposed epistemic domination, based on the non-recognition of this simultaneity of epistemes or of the world’s pluriversality (Escobar, 2017). A large part of dominant scientific traditions – particularly positivist ones – have proved incapable of integrating the diversity of these cultures and rationalities (Damus, 2020, 2023; Connell, 2007).

This situation, which several authors describe as the coloniality of knowledge (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Mudimbé, 1988; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2016; Qui-

jano, 2000), is manifested in the persistence of a hierarchy within scientific communities themselves, between Western knowledge, considered universal, and subaltern knowledges relegated to the status of mere cultural localities. In other words, the coloniality of power has been accompanied by a coloniality of knowledge and of being (Maldonado-Torres, 2007), which continues to reshape the modes of production, validation, and circulation of knowledge today. According to Sousa Santos (2016), this triple articulation – power, knowledge, being – constitutes the core of colonial modernity and the source of global cognitive inequalities.

This tension at the heart of contemporary social sciences, confronts researchers – particularly those from or engaged in countries in the Global South – with an ethical and methodological dilemma: how to reconcile scientific rigor with an explicit commitment to cognitive justice? What forms of epistemic resilience can be used to articulate these seemingly contradictory requirements? These questions are the guiding thread of this chapter, which is part of the broader debate on the persistent effects of coloniality in global knowledge production (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Santos, 2016). This text proposes to place the Haitian research experience at the heart of contemporary discussions on epistemological plurality and the conditions for truly pluriversal and engaged knowledge, rooted in the realities of the South.

To shed light on these issues, the chapter draws on broader research devoted to the role of communication practices in the heritage preservation of the memory of slavery in Haiti. This study is based on a qualitative approach combining documentary analysis, online observation, open-ended interviews, and content analysis. The reflections offered here are based on data collected from two Haitian heritage institutions – the Institut de Sauvegarde du Patrimoine National (ISPAN) and the Bureau National d’Ethnologie (BNE) – as well as on documents produced as part of UNESCO’s Slave Route project (2009–2023). This methodological approach, based on the triangulation of sources and contextualized analysis, aims to highlight the tensions between communication, memory, and identity in a postcolonial context and to illustrate, through this fieldwork, the ethical and epistemic scope of the questions previously raised.

The chapter therefore has a dual objective: on the one hand, to elucidate the epistemological tensions weighing on researchers from the Global South in a world still structured by the coloniality of knowledge; on the other hand, to propose a reflexive ethic of scientific engagement, oriented toward cognitive justice and researcher resilience. It questions the principle of neutrality by placing it

within the geopolitics of knowledge, articulates a critical epistemology with a reflection on the position of the researcher, and then develops a typology of epistemic resilience – cognitive, ethical, and institutional – supported by examples drawn from Haitian reality (UNESCO/Slave Route, ISPAN, Vodou, museums).

Coloniality as a horizon of tension

The coloniality of knowledge does not follow colonialism; it constitutes its persistent matrix, reorganizing racial, cultural, and epistemic hierarchies in the structures of global knowledge production (Quijano, 2000). It reflects the persistence of a world order in which colonial legacies continue to structure the modes of production, legitimization, and circulation of knowledge. This is particularly evident in the concentration of research funding in the North, in the dominance of citation networks and journals indexed by Western institutions, and in the unequal distribution of scientific infrastructure, which perpetuates a hierarchy between spheres of knowledge. By establishing Western modernity as a universal model, this system has marginalized other forms of thought and created a cognitive hierarchy between the North and the South. This dynamic has been analyzed from various theoretical perspectives, ranging from neo-Marxist critiques of global knowledge hierarchies (Bhambra, 2021) to radical decolonial approaches highlighting the structural coloniality of knowledge (Grosfoguel, 2011). Understanding this logic means grasping the epistemological tensions that still shape the work of researchers in the South today, caught between institutional recognition and the quest for endogenous legitimacy.

Coloniality of power and the geopolitics of knowledge

Indeed, numerous analyses reveal a global articulation of a system of power that has survived colonialism and is based on the “inferiorization of non-Western places, human groups, knowledge, and subjectivities” (Tsehae & Vieille-Grosjean, 2018, p. 120). This coloniality of power, at the heart of the geopolitics of knowledge described by Mignolo (2002), is accompanied by symbolic violence that relegates the knowledge of formerly colonized peoples to the realm of folklore or archaism. This articulation between knowledge and power has fueled numerous works that interpret the coloniality of knowledge as the intellectual continuity of the colonial project, transposed into contemporary structures of knowledge production (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo

& Walsh, 2018; Tlostanova, 2015). These works converge on the same requirement: to think of decolonization not only in political terms, but also in epistemic terms, by reestablishing the plurality of rationalities (Santos, 2016) and epistemic freedom (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018) as conditions for cognitive justice.

Western modernity, often presented as universal, has in fact developed along diverse historical trajectories, some of which have been based on the exclusion and marginalization of other forms of thought. In several historical configurations, this dynamic has favored the imposition of a hegemonic rationality that has subordinated, erased, or rendered invisible the intellectual resources of non-Western cultures. This modernity – which Dussel (1992) dates from 1492, when Europe defined itself as a “conquering ego” through the violent domination of the Other – arose not only from the Reformation, the Enlightenment, or the Industrial Revolution, but also from the asymmetrical contact between Europe and the peoples of the South. This contact, based on conquest and subordination, enabled major European metropolises to establish themselves as the center of the world system by setting up their culture and rationality as a universal model. Behind the emancipatory myth of this modernity lies what Dussel (1992) calls the “sacrificial logic,” that is, the justification of colonial violence in the name of progress and civilization, thus legitimizing the inferiorization of dominated peoples.

Against this paradigm, postcolonial critical thought (Dussel, 2009; Mignolo, 2002; Quijano, 2000) calls for a trans-modernity based on ethical and egalitarian dialogue between the intellectual traditions of the world. It does not mean opposing North and South in a binary fashion but rather recognizing that each community of thought has an equal right to argue and contribute to universal knowledge – a condition for inclusive universalism based on the circulation and mutual enrichment of knowledge. This perspective is in line with the approach of the epistemology of connection, which advocates for cognitive justice and the co-construction of knowledge between different epistemes, in a spirit of reciprocity and shared responsibility (Piron, 2018).

Cognitive diglossia

The lasting effects of the negation of the Other are reflected in societies of the Global South in the form of intellectual and cultural alienation. This manifests itself in the internalization of a hierarchy of knowledge, in which local, oral, and experiential knowledge is perceived as “non-knowledge” that Western

science can correct. This situation, which Piron (2017) describes as *cognitive diglossia*, leads many Africans and Haitians to devalue their intellectual traditions and to consider Western rationality as the only viable path to modernity. It echoes Fanon's (1952) analysis of the alienation of the colonized subject, convinced of their inferiority and seeking recognition through imitation of the master. Similarly, Thiong'o (1986) showed how colonial domination becomes embedded in language, producing a disconnect between thought and culture.

The intellectual history of Haiti illustrates with exemplary clarity the persistent effects of this domination in the field of knowledge. Anxious to prove their "civilization" to the former metropole, "almost all Haitian intellectuals of the 19th and 20th centuries agreed to discredit the 'backward practices' that Haiti cannot boast of in the eyes of foreigners" (Hurbon, 1988, p. 66). By adopting the colonizer's prejudices, these thinkers internalized a racial and cultural hierarchy that elevated metropolitan culture as the exclusive horizon of legitimacy. Thus, Hannibal Price (1898, p. 444) describes vodou and Creole dances as "amusements for the most crudely ignorant of Creoles," while Louis-Joseph Janvier (1883) praises the progress made by a nation he depicts as Catholic, French-speaking, and civilized, freed from the "traces of barbarism" associated with its colonial past.

This process of cultural self-denial – symptom of psychological alienation (Fanon, 1961) and epistemic alienation (Piron, 2017) – goes beyond the Haitian case: it expresses tensions common to postcolonial societies, where intellectual and scientific legitimacy remain subordinated to the epistemic norms of the North. The hierarchical relationship between dominant and subaltern knowledge refers to what Fricker (2007) describes as *epistemic injustice*, understood as the systematic exclusion of certain voices from the legitimate field of knowledge. Although formulated within an Anglo-Saxon analytical framework and not directly postcolonial, this concept powerfully illuminates the mechanisms of epistemic disqualification at work in postcolonial societies.

This perspective, further developed by Santos (2016), sheds light on how coloniality produces regimes of ignorance and intellectual invisibility. Unlike Fricker, who analyzes epistemic injustice at an interpersonal level, Santos places it within a structural and historical logic linked to the coloniality of power. The two approaches are thus complementary: they converge to show how certain voices are disqualified – one at the micro-interactional level, the other at the macro-systemic level. This gives rise to *colonial subjects*, in Mitova's (2024) sense, understood as individuals forced to adopt the conceptual

frameworks of the colonizer, their own modes of thought having been disqualified as irrational.

The project of freedom or epistemic decolonization – understood as the ability to produce knowledge from one’s own place of enunciation – therefore appears to be imperative: refocusing the pursuit of knowledge in its geopolitical and social contexts in order to overcome epistemic oppression and rehabilitate the plurality of ways of knowing. Epistemic resilience is understood here as the ability of researchers and institutions to transform the constraints inherited from domination into critical resources, aimed precisely at reappropriating the power of knowledge. It consists of converting the epistemic legacies of coloniality into opportunities for creation, by anchoring research in the researcher’s place of enunciation. The latter, especially in the context of the South, is called upon to break with the logic of self-negation in order to valorize endogenous knowledge and engage in a process of cognitive justice. Producing knowledge thus becomes an act of resistance: not only describing the world but contributing to its decolonization.

Similar mechanisms of epistemic marginalization have been extensively documented in African political contexts, where the undervaluing of endogenous rationalities shapes both state governance and knowledge production (Moumouni & Gazibo, 2024). This responsibility requires researchers from the Global South to produce rigorous knowledge while remaining faithful to their historical and cultural realities. Fanon (1961, p. 221) reminded us: “The colonized man who writes for his people, when he uses the past, must do so with the intention of opening up the future, inviting action, and founding hope.” This approach is in line with the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, 2002; Adorno, 1969; Cusset & Haber, 2002), for which knowledge only has meaning through its emancipatory scope. As these thinkers put it, science cannot limit itself to explaining the world: it must contribute to transforming it, by revealing the mechanisms of domination and restoring subjects’ power to act. It is in this vein that Dussel (2009) situates decolonial thought: he reaffirms the critical vocation of knowledge by directing it toward the liberation of peoples marginalized by colonial modernity. Theoretical knowledge, he emphasizes, must enable victims of oppression to become aware of their state of negation and develop an “enlightened critical everyday consciousness” (Saint-Georges, 2016, p. 288). Thus, critical theory, extended and broadened by Southern epistemologies and decolonial thought, finds points of actualization in some contemporary research in the Global South, where the possibility of

a truly emancipatory science, inseparable from praxis and committed to the transformation of reality, is emerging.

However, this articulation calls for recognition of the limits of the dialogue between critical theory and decolonial thought. Transmodern reason is not simply a continuation of Frankfurtian emancipatory reason; it differs from it by challenging its universalism. These differences are central and ought to be made explicit to avoid any overly hasty rapprochement between European rationalist critiques and decolonial critiques.

The impossibility of axiological neutrality

This situation invites us to question a widely held conception of the principle of axiological neutrality. This principle, inherited from Weber (1993), does not preclude researchers from adhering to certain values or engaging in the public sphere; rather, it requires intellectual integrity based on a reflective awareness of the effects of subjectivity in scientific analysis. However, without denying the contribution of positivism to the construction of knowledge, we must recognize the ideological presuppositions of its dominant interpretation: by elevating neutrality to a dogma, positivism has transformed a methodological ideal into an exclusive criterion of scientific legitimacy. According to Pfefferkorn (2014, p. 87), this dogmatism has contributed to detaching science from its social conditions, producing a community of intellectuals considered to be unattached and sometimes reduced to a simple apology for the middle ground, which reinforces the illusion of neutrality criticized in this section. Illusory disengagement, presented as a guarantee of objectivity, has led to a compartmentalization of research and a disengagement from scientific thought. It is therefore important to understand how this illusion of neutrality functions as a mechanism of coloniality in contemporary research practices.

Researchers from the Global South, aware of the emancipatory vocation of science, must distance themselves from this reductive conception of neutrality, which confuses objectivity with indifference. Scientific objectivity cannot mean moral or political withdrawal; on the contrary, it implies making explicit the values and commitments that guide the production of knowledge, in the service of a true epistemic decolonization. All scientific production is socially situated, and it is “impossible to speak [...] of ‘disinterested knowledge,’ detached from any practical significance” (Cusset & Haber, 2002, p. 27). This idea finds resonance in Bourdieu, who invites researchers to engage in critical

reflexivity, enabling them to recognize the social conditions of their knowledge production and to understand how their positions, values, and interests influence their scientific work. This perspective underlies his call to transcend “the sacred boundary [...] between scholarship and commitment” in favor of knowledge that is both rigorous and engaged, reconciling intellectual integrity and social responsibility (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 40).

This is precisely what Critical Theory, developed by the Frankfurt School, sets out to overcome. Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) showed that the supposed objectivity of modern science conceals power relations rooted in the economic and political structures of capitalism. Far from being neutral, knowledge contributes to the reproduction of the established order. Instrumental reason contributes to the legitimization of social and epistemic inequalities (Fraser, 1989; Honneth, 1996), while the supposedly neutrality of technical devices masks their embeddedness in logics of domination (Feenberg, 2010). In other words, science is a field traversed by interests, values, and power relations. Horkheimer (Horkheimer, 1974, p. 27) aptly summarizes this tension: “Since the scientist and science are integrated into the social apparatus, the positive results of scientific work are a factor in the self-preservation and permanent reproduction of the established order.” This tension grounds the Frankfurt School’s plea for an emancipatory reason capable of articulating knowledge and social transformation. While Critical Theory has exposed the domination exercised by instrumental reason and the commodification of knowledge, decolonial thought reveals its colonial matrix – based on the racial and cultural hierarchization of forms of rationality. The coloniality of power has proven more durable than colonialism itself, still structuring the global economy, culture, and scientific production (Quijano, 2000). Western modernity has imposed its own categories – development, progress, universality – as norms of knowledge, marginalizing other intellectual traditions. This configuration corresponds to what Dussel (1992, 2009) identifies as the “dark side of modernity,” namely the logic of exclusion of the Other and the denial of the simultaneity of epistemes.

While Critical Theory has called for an emancipatory reason capable of unveiling structures of domination, decolonial thought does not replace it; it proposes an extension of it by placing this aim in a transmodern perspective rooted in the experiences and intellectual traditions of the South. Rather than a replacement, it is a shift in the locus of enunciation: transmodern reason asserts the plurality of rationalities and reinscribes the critical project in a dialogical horizon based on the mutual recognition of epistemes, as formulated by Migno-

lo (2002). Thus, decolonial thought expands and shifts criticism: it retains its emancipatory aim but situates it from the margins, within historically excluded peoples and knowledge. The project of decolonizing knowledge (Mudimbe, 1988; Thiong'o, 1986) then joins that of a critical and reflexive science: no longer speaking about the subalterns, but thinking with them, within a horizon of cognitive justice and epistemic plurality. These reflections on the impossibility of axiological neutrality find particular resonance in the Haitian context, where public discourse on the memory of slavery illustrates both the persistence of colonial frameworks and the possibilities for epistemic resistance.

The research experience in Haiti: glorious memory, African roots, and researcher commitment

The persistence of the coloniality of knowledge is acutely evident in the heritage and communication practices surrounding the memory of slavery in Haiti. Although the Haitian Revolution was the first radical break with the modern colonial order, the heritage preservation of this memory remains permeated by discursive and normative frameworks originating elsewhere. Between epistemic dependence, institutional silence, and cultural resistance, Haitian memory oscillates between the heroization of the past and the erasure of suffering. This interplay of tensions reveals the challenges of an endogenous reappropriation of historical narrative and an ethical refounding of knowledge.

Coloniality and epistemic dependence

The Haitian experience provides a privileged field of observation for analyzing the persistence of the coloniality of knowledge in communication and heritage practices related to the memory of slavery. Since the launch of UNESCO's Slave Route Project in 1994, a joint initiative of Haiti and Benin, the country has found itself in a paradoxical situation: although this project symbolizes the first radical break with the modern colonial and racial order, it nevertheless remains embedded in normative and discursive frameworks largely shaped from outside.

The heritage associated with the slave trade and slavery encompasses both tangible and intangible dimensions. It is a heritage of humanity that can become a vehicle for reconciliation, education, and development. Preserving and safeguarding this heritage is not only part of the duty to remember, but also part of everyone's political responsibility and civic engagement

(UNESCO, 2014). This universalist perspective has stimulated a proliferation of research, programs, and events dedicated to the heritage preservation of this memory, which has now become a major scientific, cultural, and political issue. The Slave Route project, which aims to promote the preservation, management, and enhancement of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage stemming from this history (UNESCO, 2018, p. 17), is fully aligned with this logic of universal recognition. In its updated version, the *Enslaved People's Route* (UNESCO, 2024), the organization calls for “de-racializing our vision and decolonizing our imaginaries of the world” by questioning the structural inequalities inherited from the slave trade. These global approaches to heritage preservation align with what Smith & Waterton (2012) refer to as *Authorized Heritage Discourse* – an institutional narrative that imposes a dominant vision of heritage, privileging expert frameworks, monumentality, and universal values at the expense of local and subaltern memories. Harrison (2013) likewise underscores that heritage is never neutral: it constitutes a space of symbolic struggle where various regimes of memory and competing forms of legitimacy clash.

A key observation from our research on communication practices surrounding this heritage designation in Haiti highlights a profound disconnect between international perspectives and local representations. National institutions favor a heroic and triumphant memory – centered on fortifications, battles, and military figures of independence – at the expense of a painful, intimate, and victimized memory linked to servitude and the daily resistance of enslaved people. As Augustin (2020, p. 460) points out, the memory of slavery remains marginal in the Haitian collective consciousness, which is dominated by the glorification of the revolution.

This orientation of memory does not reflect an explicit rejection of UNESCO's approach, but rather the absence of an articulated national discourse on the memory of victims, leaving international frameworks to fill this symbolic void. Three interdependent dynamics contribute to this situation: an intellectual tradition of heroic glorification, inherited from the first post-independence elites eager to legitimize the nation through the greatness of its ancestors; a lack of coherent and sustainable cultural policy, accentuated by structural dependence on international funding and agendas; and weak inter-institutional coordination, particularly between agencies of the Ministry of Culture, which fragments public discourse and prevents the development of an integrated memory policy.

Thus, the heritage preservation of the memory of slavery in Haiti sits at the crossroads of two logics: the universalizing discourse promoted by international institutions and a national retreat into a heroic narrative, where the suffering of enslaved people remains relegated to the margins of the collective story.

The absence of official discourse on the memory of slavery

Analysis of the Institute for the Protection of National Heritage (ISPAN) publications (2009–2023) reveals a marked overrepresentation of defensive monuments and post-independence fortifications (Citadelle Laferrière, Fort Jacques, Fort Drouet, among others), symbols of a glorious past, at the expense of colonial dwellings and sites linked to the lives and resistance of enslaved people. Of more than a hundred sites listed, only two directly concern the period of slavery. This heritage hierarchy embodies an epistemology of forgetting, where the celebration of freedom erases suffering. Institutional discourse reinforces this orientation. ISPAN bulletins highlight the architectural achievements of engineers and the greatness of revolutionary heroes, without mentioning the slave labor that made these constructions possible. The memory of enslaved people is reduced to a ghostly presence, stripped of any recognition of their humanity or their contribution to the formation of national heritage.

This situation does not stem from opposition to UNESCO's perspective – which, on the contrary, emphasizes the memory of victims – but from the almost complete absence of an official national discourse on this dimension of memory. By “official discourse”, we do not mean isolated initiatives by international organizations or occasional cultural institutions (UNESCO commemorations, Heritage Days, regional museums), but a structured and continuous position explicitly formulated by the Haitian state or its major public institutions. However, in Haiti, the memory of slavery does not fit into any coherent national narrative: in the absence of a clear cultural and memory policy, public institutions leave it to international organizations to define its contours. As a result, local representations continue to privilege the heroic and triumphant memory of independence, while discourses on pain, servitude, and reparations come almost exclusively from abroad, notably from UNESCO, the UN system, and universities in the Global North.

This discursive imbalance expresses a form of epistemic dependence: not a faithful adoption of external frameworks, but a vacuum in national discourse that leads to a partial and often superficial appropriation of concepts produced

elsewhere. In the absence of endogenous reflection, international categories (“world heritage”, “universal memory”, “duty to remember”, etc.) are imposed as frameworks of legitimization without any real local appropriation.

This dependence is rooted in the country’s intellectual history. As early as the 19th century, thinkers such as Firmin (1885), Janvier (1883), and Price (1898) sought to prove Haiti’s “civilization” according to Western criteria. This quest for acceptance led to the repression of African roots and the relegation of the memory of slavery to a shameful past. Haiti’s elite continues to strive to demonstrate the non-barbarism of the Haitian people (Hurbon, 1988), thereby reproducing the logic of the colonial gaze.

Empirically, the ISPAN/BNE media corpus (2009–2023) reveals a predominantly heroic configuration of public memory: among roughly one hundred heritage entries highlighted by ISPAN, defensive monuments and post-1804 fortifications dominate, while sites directly linked to the lived conditions of enslaved people remain marginal. This hierarchy is reinforced at the discursive level: the phrase “memory of slavery” does not appear as a stabilized or explicit framing, even though the terms “memory,” “slave,” and “slavery” circulate separately – suggesting a fragmented evocation rather than a coherent narrative, and helping to elucidate the tension between UNESCO’s international frameworks and national regimes of legitimation.

Between cultural silence and cultural poaching

At the heart of these alienating practices, Haitian society does not remain passive. Its practices reflect a form of “cultural poaching” (Certeau, 2010), meaning the practice of appropriating elements of the dominant culture and discourse in order to reinterpret them and use them in one’s own way. This dynamic echoes Hall (2023) reflections on the tensions between appropriation, resistance, and reinvention of heritage in postcolonial societies. Memory is not simply a legacy to be passed on, but a field of identity negotiation where communities constantly redefine dominant narratives.

Even if the dominant public discourse does not explicitly address the memory of slavery, it persists in rituals, vodou, music, and oral tradition, where suffering is transformed into a life force and an affirmation of identity. The National Bureau of Ethnology (BNE) illustrates this dynamic: its initiatives, although institutional, are more akin to specialized heritage work than to a genuine official discourse by the state. By promoting African roots through vodou cults and sa-

cred sites such as Lakou Souvnans or the Saint-Jacques basin, the BNE inscribes the memory of slavery in a living culture, where religious symbols become vectors of memory and resistance. As a BNE executive confided, “cultural objects associated with vodou highlight the treatment suffered by slaves in the past [...]. To talk about vodou is to address the issue of slavery directly.”

Comparable tensions between popular reappropriations of memory and institutional silences have also been observed in West African heritage contexts, where communities reinterpret dominant frameworks in order to reclaim epistemic agency (Moumouni, 2024). This popular reappropriation, coming from the bottom up, reintroduces the memory of the victims through cultural practices rather than through stone monuments. It gives a voice back to those who have been made invisible, while revealing the absence of a truly articulated narrative framework by the state. However, this absence does not mean total non-existence: there is indeed a scattered discourse of memory, carried by local or heritage initiatives, but it has not yet been consolidated into a coherent public narrative. This situation fuels a collective unease: attempts at reconciliation fail because of unacknowledged pain and the lack of a cultural policy of reparation. The antagonism between heroic memory and victim memory persists – the former reinforces national cohesion, while the latter, lacking full recognition, remains confined to the margins of public discourse. UNESCO, by placing the memory of victims at the heart of its programs, invites an ethical reinterpretation of history. Haiti, for its part, has not yet produced an equivalent narrative framework: this gap creates a symbolic void that is filled by external narratives.

Cognitive justice and epistemic resilience: towards a restorative science

In this context of institutional silence and epistemic dependence, the role of Haitian researchers is both political and ethical. Their mission is not only to document, but to decolonize the heritage preservation of the memory of slavery: to question dominant interpretive frameworks, break with the mechanical reproduction of institutional models, and reconstruct a national discourse capable of articulating memory, knowledge, and justice.

A naïve heritage preservation – one detached from critical reflection on the power relations that structure it – runs the risk of transforming the memory of slavery into a mere backdrop for identity or serving economic interests, particularly tourism. By aestheticizing the traces of the past or freezing them in

standardized museum displays, we silently perpetuate the logic of domination we claim to have overcome. Researchers must therefore resist this symbolic neutralization of the past by taking responsibility for making visible the silenced voices, vernacular knowledge, and repressed collective wounds.

The work of Jean Price-Mars (1928) is a foundational example of this. Through his famous phrase, “Let us be ourselves as much as possible,” he laid the foundations for a rooted epistemology, recognizing the value of popular knowledge, African traditions, and Creole spiritualities. Through this stance, he was already formulating an ethic of cognitive justice, where the co-construction of knowledge becomes both an act of symbolic reparation and an affirmation of collective dignity.

Scientific commitment, far from contradicting methodological rigor, broadens its scope: it calls for a situated science, conscious of its historical, linguistic, and political roots, and for an inclusive heritage communication capable of connecting different memories – those of revolutionary pride and those of servile pain. Such an approach requires constant epistemic vigilance to prevent heritage promotion practices from becoming instruments of political amnesia or cultural homogenization.

That said, the Haitian experience cannot be reduced to a tension between dependence and resistance: it embodies the challenge of critically reclaiming memory and knowledge through research, teaching, and public communication. By combining decolonial thinking and critical theory, it meets a two-fold requirement: denouncing the structures of domination that hierarchize knowledge and rebuilding the conditions for truly emancipatory knowledge. Rather than being limited to a protest stance, this articulation opens a normative space for regenerative and restorative pedagogy (Damus, 2023), where knowledge becomes an act of emancipation and memory, a lever for justice and collective transformation.

From this perspective, cognitive justice, as conceived by Visvanathan (2009), challenges rationalist models – including those derived from the Habermasian tradition – by contrasting them with a plurality of situated epistemologies. It recognizes the legitimacy of non-Western intellectual traditions and implies a profound transformation of the scientific stance, based on reciprocity, co-construction, and shared responsibility. In this framework, reflexivity becomes an ethical duty. It is a matter of advocating for an epistemology of connection, attentive to the social and cultural anchors of knowledge and aware of its political implications. This conception finds direct

resonance with the work of Smith (2021), who advocates for a decolonization of methodologies through the researcher's ethical engagement with the communities concerned. It also intersects with calls for situated knowledge and critical reflexivity (Harding, 2010; Fine, 1994), rather than a supposed illusory neutrality.

Conclusion

In closing, we can take a stand in favor of epistemic resilience that extends the ethics of cognitive justice by translating it concretely into research, training, and institutionalization practices. This is an active response to the cognitive hierarchy inherited from colonialism, but also an attempt to reconstruct the meaning and power of action of the researcher in a world marked by epistemic dependence. By combining critical lucidity and creativity, this resilience aims to re-embed knowledge in its contexts of enunciation, to build autonomous spaces of validation, and to redefine scientific rigor based on the realities of the Global South, while engaging in dialogue with other rationalities around the world.

This stance is not merely an adjustment to inherited constraints; it represents transformative resistance – an ethical re-founding of the relationship to knowledge. It commits researchers to transcending the false opposition between objectivity and engagement, combining critical reason and social responsibility, methodological rigor and contextual anchoring. Understood in this way, cognitive justice presents itself as a horizon of convergence between two major critical traditions: on the one hand, the emancipatory rationality inherited from the Frankfurt School's Critical Theory, which aims to reveal the relations of domination embedded in the production of knowledge and to make knowledge a lever for human emancipation; and, on the other hand, decolonial thought, which broadens this critique by integrating the pluriversality of rationalities and the recognition of situated epistemologies from the Global South.

From this encounter emerges a vision of knowledge that is both emancipatory and pluralistic, where truth, justice, and plurality are in productive tension and constitute the foundations of a renewed ethics of knowledge. Cognitive justice can be seen as a space for dialogue – sometimes conflictual – between Frankfortian critique and decolonial thought, rather than as a synthesis already achieved. It opens a space for fruitful confrontation where critical reason,

pluriversality, and the recognition of situated epistemologies respond to each other without necessarily merging.

From this perspective, the goal is not to unify these traditions but to create the conditions for a shared ethical framework capable of placing humans – in their diversity, memory, and historicity – at the heart of knowledge production. In other words, to quote Santos (2016, p. 21), “thinking from the South does not mean withdrawing from the world but reformulating universality on the basis of plurality and dialogue between different forms of knowledge.” The aim is therefore to make knowledge no longer an instrument of domination but a space for repair, solidarity, and co-construction. The epistemic resilience of the researcher in a context of coloniality thus becomes one of the most concrete expressions of this cognitive justice, where critical reason finally meets pluriversal reason to pave the way for a truly restorative science.

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Reimagining academic journeys: collaborative autoethnography for well-being and belonging

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Abstract. Research showing raised levels of psychological distress and lowered well-being among doctoral students inspired the need to examine how doctoral candidates experience contemporary academic pressure. This collaborative autoethnographic study used Riff, an AI-powered chatbot, to facilitate reflexive dialogue and data collection. Reflexive thematic analysis identified three interconnected themes: (1) internal relationships and intrapersonal dynamics, (2) community and supportive relationships, and (3) navigating systemic tensions. The findings show how doctoral students' well-being operates across intrapersonal, interpersonal, and systemic levels. Particular attention is given to how contemporary academ-

ic structures – characterized by productivity demands, funding uncertainty, and competitive individualism – can shape doctoral experiences and mental health. This study provides insight into how doctoral students experience and respond to systemic pressures, highlighting the role of peer collaboration and supervisory relationships in shaping these experiences. Given established evidence linking social support to enhanced wellbeing and reduced mental health difficulties, increasing the understanding of its role and place within academic environment can inform the development of doctoral education and institutional practice. The limitations inherent to autoethnographic methods, including the situated nature of personal experience and questions of transferability, are acknowledged.

Introduction

A large body of research consistently indicates that doctoral students experience elevated levels of psychological distress and reduced well-being. Studies repeatedly show that PhD candidates face substantial stress (Levecque et al., 2017; Van Der Heijde et al., 2019; Dhirasasna et al., 2021; Piotrowski et al., 2024; Mavroglou-Foti et al., 2024; Jones-White et al., 2025), and that a considerable proportion present clinically relevant symptoms of psychiatric disorders (Levecque et al., 2017), most notably depression and anxiety (Dhirasasna et al., 2021; Keloharju et al., 2024; Piotrowski et al., 2024; Mavroglou-Foti et al., 2024; Jones-White et al., 2025). Between 2% and 12% report suicidal ideations (Piotrowski et al., 2024), and approximately one in two considers discontinuing their doctoral studies (Juniper et al., 2011; Pizuńska et al., 2020; Martínez-García et al., 2024; Mahsood et al., 2025). Importantly, doctoral students report significantly higher levels of distress compared to highly educated peers outside academia, even when controlling for educational attainment (Pizuńska et al., 2020; Piotrowski et al., 2024; Keloharju et al., 2024). Longitudinal evidence further suggests that although their well-being may be comparable to that of their peers before entering the PhD, it tends to decline as they progress through their doctoral training (Knüpfer et al., 2024; Keloharju et al., 2024). Key factors contributing to this deterioration include conflicts between doctoral studies and personal life (Levecque et al., 2017; Van Der Heijde et al., 2019; Dhirasasna et al., 2021; Martínez-García et al., 2024; Piotrowski et al., 2024), job and financial insecurity (Juniper et al., 2011; Levecque et al., 2017; Jones-White et al., 2021; Dhirasasna et al., 2021; Jones-White et al., 2021; Piotrowski et al., 2024; Martínez-García et al., 2024), and pervasive pressures of academic performance, including competitive atmosphere between peers (Juniper et al.,

2011; Levecque et al., 2017; Jones-White et al., 2021; Piotrowski et al., 2024; Mahsood et al., 2025) and relationships with supervisors (Mika, in press). As numerous scholars argue, the challenges faced by early-career researchers have implications that reach beyond the individual, affecting the functioning of academia as a whole (Van Der Heijde et al., 2019; Dhirasasna et al., 2021; Jones-White et al., 2021; Mavrogalou-Foti et al., 2024; Keloharju et al., 2024). Addressing these issues is therefore essential for future research and for the sustainability of the academic environment.

The purpose of the current study is to explore and reflect on the lived experiences of doctoral students navigating the challenges and pressures characteristic of contemporary doctoral training. The authors, themselves doctoral candidates, chose to critically examine and articulate their own experiences. Given that social support and positive interpersonal relationships are among the key factors associated with enhanced well-being and reduced symptomatology of mental health difficulties – both among doctoral students (Jones-White et al., 2021; Piotrowski et al., 2024; Martínez-García et al., 2024; Newlands et al., 2025; Mahsood et al., 2025) and in the general population (Turner, 1981; Siedlecki et al., 2013; Andersen et al., 2021; Zell & Stockus, 2024; Yeo et al., 2025), this reflective process was undertaken collaboratively.

Method

Research Design

In this study, we used collaborative autoethnography (CAE) to explore our experiences as doctoral students within our institutional and cultural contexts. CAE represents a qualitative research method involving (1) collaboration among researchers, (2) autobiographical reflection on self and personal experiences, and (3) ethnographic interpretation within broader sociocultural contexts (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013). This approach proved suitable for examining doctoral experience, because it allows researchers to pool individual narratives, identify shared (and divergent) patterns, and collectively construct meaning (Chang et al., 2013).

For data analysis, we used a *reflexive* thematic analysis (TA) approach as described by Braun and Clarke (2020). However, the exact process has been adjusted to the specific conditions of the current analysis and described in Figure 1. Reflexive TA distinguishes itself from other forms of thematic analysis mostly through its

explicit use of researcher subjectivity as an analytic resource rather than a source of bias (Terry et al., 2017). Within this framework, analysis emerges *through* (and not *despite*) the researchers' values, backgrounds, and interpretations, requiring transparent positioning of the research team (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

Overall, the research team consisted of six doctoral students from a single doctoral school at a Polish university, all having completed their first year of study at the time of data collection (08/2025). All were early-career researchers with published articles, national and international conference presentations, positioned within the same institutional hierarchy. However, the team represented diverse disciplinary backgrounds and paradigmatic orientations. Three members identified their primary discipline as psychology, one affiliated with pedagogy, and the other two with sociology. Methodologically, the team was also mixed: some researchers primarily operated within quantitative paradigms, others within qualitative frameworks, and several embraced interdisciplinary approaches. What is more, some members transitioned directly from master's programs, while others brought years of practical experience in formal and non-formal educational settings. Despite these differences in disciplinary training and methodological approaches, as well as personal circumstances, the researchers shared similar values, prioritizing collaboration over competition within academia. Such a common focus on cooperation, combined with awareness of the latest research findings on doctoral students' wellbeing, enabled this collective reflection on the team members' own experiences.

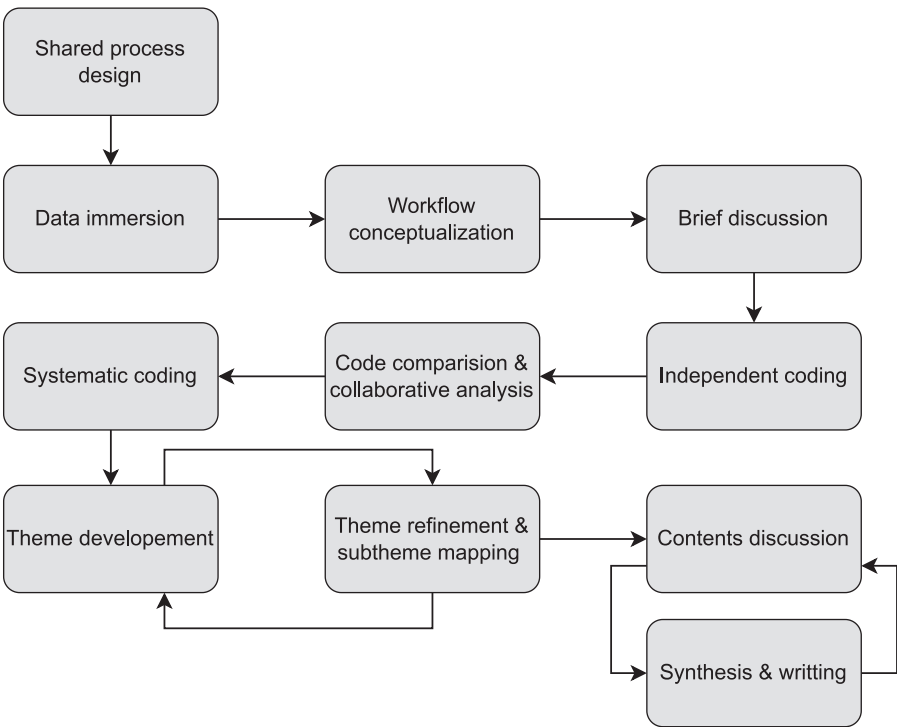
Data Collection

Data was collected through Riff, an AI-powered chatbot designed by Leticia Britos Cavagnaro to support reflexive process in individual and group context (Britos Cavagnaro, n.d.). Riff uses a Large Language Model (LLM) to generate contextually responsive questions based on user input. The chatbot was informed that participants would be doctoral students who had completed their first year at a European university.

Participation was voluntary, and (relative) anonymity was maintained through the Riff platform. Each participant received an email invitation containing a link to start a conversation with Riff. Participants engaged with Riff asynchronously, selecting their own timing and settings for participation. The resulting conversations varied in length (396–1127 words), reflecting different engagement levels and time constraints. All conversations were conducted in Polish, the participants' native language, and translated into

English by each respective author to preserve intended meaning. Additionally, it is important to note that these conversations were not initially intended for publication but rather for sharing reflections during a conference presentation about doctoral student well-being.

Figure 1. Data analysis process



Sharing our stories – analysis section

In this final stage, we selected extracts to illustrate our co-created themes in the written narratives. As noted, “This phase is not an add-on analysis. Writing is a key component of the analytic process for reflexive TA, because the analysis is *in* the writing around your data.” (Braun & Clark, 2022, p. 118).

Three themes were co-created during our group discussions: (1) internal relationships – dynamics within oneself, (2) community and supportive relationships, and (3) navigating systems tensions. These themes enabled us to explore the interwoven, dynamic, and complex nature of the lived experiences of doctoral students and to reflect on the elements impacting our well-being.

Internal relationships (dynamics within oneself)

This theme revolves around personal experiences related to inner feelings and conflicts. It examines the connections between various aspects of individual functioning and addresses feelings of being out of place, as well as self-imposed pressure. Additionally, it focuses on the conflicting thoughts surrounding the possibility of leaving doctoral school, while also acknowledging the sense of satisfaction derived from the knowledge gained throughout this journey.

To describe these experiences, we developed five sub-themes, which include: (1) managing multiple, challenging roles and life difficulties; (2) experiencing Imposter Syndrome and feelings of self-imposed pressure; (3) thoughts of giving up or not completing doctoral school; (4) growth and acquiring new knowledge.

Managing multiple, challenging roles and life difficulties

As doctoral students, we also function in other (equally important) areas of our lives, such as professional work: “Combining research, teaching, and professional work, not to mention your personal life – is very challenging. [O6]”. For others managing school and partnerships, marital relationships, parenting were difficult, as “the first year of my PhD was a big challenge in terms of organization and cost me a lot of effort due to the circumstances of my life that were unfolding in the background. [O5]”.

The beginning of the Doctoral School brought many challenges, requiring us to integrate and frequently negotiate these different areas of our lives. Some “chose to limit my work outside of the university to focus on my doctoral thesis [O2]” others were “combining doctorate with other work and activities, which were also often stressful and demanding [O4]”. For some of us, these tensions were particularly challenging and led to a decline in mental health and a worsening of certain mental conditions “Doing a PhD and working at the same time has had a negative impact on my mental health. My eating disorder has worsened, and I have developed autistic burnout, anhedonia, and even suicidal thoughts. [O3]”.

Experiencing Imposter Syndrome and feelings of self-imposed pressure

Interestingly, we all shared a feeling that can be described as imposter syndrome. According to Chrousos and Mentis, “those with imposter syndrome have an innate fear of being discovered as a fraud or non-deserving professional, despite their demonstrated talent and achievements” (2020, p. 749). This was clearly reflected in early experiences: “When the PhD studies began and I met my group;

I had impostor syndrome. I wondered how it was possible that I had been accepted among people with such impressive achievements. [O1]”. Several other students shared: “at the beginning I did feel pressure, probably I put it on myself. [O1]”, “I often felt like there was always something I did not know and needed to catch up on. This was stressful, and I felt out of place. [...] I felt pressure to achieve results [O2]” or being “afraid that I am not good enough. [O6]” The sense of pressure was clear in our statements; much of it was self-imposed: “I had to thoroughly outline step by step what I would do and when I would do it [Individual Research Plan]—and I’m still not 100% sure if my project will eventually look like this. [O3]”

Thoughts of giving up [dropping out] or not completing doctoral school

Throughout our first year at the Doctoral School, thoughts of giving up have arisen. “During that year, the thought occurred to me that I might not be able to finish doctoral school after all. I started to question whether I was truly suited for it and if all the effort was worth it. [...] I was concerned about completing the project in four years. [O2]”.

Some of these thoughts were about giving up due to a lack of certain qualities or because the cost was too high; others reflected fears of being expelled. “After the first year, I can see that choosing this path [doctorate] has cost me a lot and will continue to cost me, but dropping out at this stage could hurt more than continuing this path. [O5]”.

Growth and acquiring new knowledge

Despite the challenges faced, our statements highlighted some positives such as acquiring new knowledge: “The greatest support for me was, of course, the new knowledge I gained and which I was able to integrate with my existing knowledge [O4]”, and the potential for growth. “Looking back over the past year, it was a demanding time for me, but also a very rewarding one, not only in knowledge but also in the development of soft skills. [O1]”.

The journey within ourselves

The first year of Doctoral School was a challenging time. In our statements, we sometimes felt overwhelmed by the need to balance various aspects of our lives. Starting this journey also triggered several internal conflicts that we had to address, such as doubting our abilities and comparing ourselves to others, feelings of pressure and contemplating giving up. In our view, completing the Doctoral School is a highly demanding task.

During these challenging times, we have recognized the opportunity for growth, and acquisition of new knowledge has been beneficial for us. This journey has offered us valuable lessons that we can carry with us.

Supportive group and relationships

In the statements analyzed, a large part of our experiences as PhD students were directly concerned the environment and internal nature of the PhD group, as well as interpersonal relationships. During the analysis of the material in this theme, four main sub-themes were constructed: (1) perception of the doctoral group; (2) supportive relationships within the group; (3) support from family and friends; (4) shared experiences and sharing them.

Perception of the doctoral group

In the context of the perception of the PhD group, the statements pointed to the importance of realizing the individual resources of each of us and finding our place in the diverse class, consisting of people coming from different environments and research fields, with various experiences, values and ways of thinking. After a difficult start to the doctoral program and the current feeling of impostor syndrome: “[...] the turning point came when I realized that each of us, all six people, had different skills and competencies, that each of us is or is becoming a specialist in our own field. [O1]”

Many of us emphasized our positive perception of the group and appreciated the community support: “[...] I believe we are a supportive group. [O1]”, “It turned out that I met some wonderful people in my class. It was surprising how much we supported each other [...]. [O4]” and “It’s such a gift to have such a wonderful group! [O6]”.

A positive perception of the group by its members fosters creating a safe space, which is directly related to the sense of building an environment conducive to learning and development – key objectives of the Doctoral School, and in a broader context is rooted in learning as a social process.

Supportive relationships within the group

Our statements indicated that we recognized the value of supporting and complementing each other within the group. At the same time, we emphasized our awareness that such behavior is not a standard among doctoral students:

I feel that we create a very supportive group (which is by no means obvious among PhD students, where in certain areas there is competition and rivalry). Our collaboration and mutual support have positively impacted my well-being in the context of my doctoral studies. [O1]

Mutual support is related to substantive, scientific, organizational, and emotional issues. Our narratives stressed the importance of a mere awareness of each other's needs, gestures of encouragement and presence during the important moments. As described below, seemingly insignificant behaviors served as an important factor fostering our well-being and sense of social support:

(Presentations at seminars) was a stressful time for most of us. The presence of my group while I was presenting was extremely important to me. Supportive gestures I noticed during my presentation, such as thumbs up and smiles, as well as words of encouragement afterward, meant a lot. When someone from my group is presenting, I made every effort to be present and to support them as well. [O1]

Support from family and friends

Supportive relationships with people outside the Doctoral School, such as family members and close friends, were identified as key factors related to satisfaction and success. "The support of my [...] colleagues, and friends. [O6]" and "Important support for me [...] is the support of my family. [O1]".

Although the mentions of this kind of support system in the analyzed content were limited, during the discussion and coding process, its positive impact on our wellbeing became clear.

Shared experiences and sharing them

Shared experiences, challenges, common problems, and solutions served as a bonding factor, fostering supportive environment, learning and development were mentioned several times "[...] we also learned a lot from each other, thanks to our diverse experiences and skills. [O4]", "I felt that I was not alone in my feelings and that we were all in the same situation. [O1]" "Sometimes we ...exchanged details how to complete documentation. [O1]".

As mentioned above, it became the foundation for joint learning, deepening self-awareness, reflectiveness, and our sense of unity as a group. "The op-

portunity to learn and share this road with others [...] was incredible. It was a dream come true. [O6]”. Our well-being stemmed not only from individual successes and academic achievements, but also from the shared experience of the learning process and mutual support on the way.

Navigating systems’ tensions

The third layer captured the interaction with the institutional and formal aspects of our experiences. While the initial feelings of joy, pride and curiosity were present in all our narratives, they coexisted with omnipresent tension between our expectations and everyday experiences.

Our experiences highlighted the tensions between the bureaucratic system and human relationships supporting the learning journeys we share and reflect through our stories. We have created this theme building on three interconnected sub-themes: (1) shared experiences with administrative and bureaucratic systems, (2) tensions between the mechanical logic of academia and the living system dynamics of external lives, (3) mitigating role of the supervisors’ support system.

The burden of administrative and bureaucratic work

Across all collected reflections, the administrative tasks were pointed out as experiences draining our energy, time and causing significant distress.

“I was surprised by the amount of paperwork needed to be completed during the academic year. These tasks [...] significantly limited time I could dedicate to developing my doctoral dissertation concept. [O2]”. Several other experiences described similar challenges “What may have made it difficult were organizational problems and the stress that sometimes resulted from them. [O4]”. In contrast, there were also noticed the supportive elements of the core system functioning with respect to students’ professional work outside the academia “It’s great that all the classes are held on one day, as this is a huge help when it comes to professional work. [O6]”.

Despite the elements of logic, these experiences recall the metaphor used by Oskar Szwabowski of liberal university being as factory, draining the vitality of students’ obligations and task detached from the logic of scientific development (2014).

Learning to navigate academic worlds

The rigidity of academic structures appeared as our shared experiences. Underlining the mismatch between the logic of academic and external life.

I felt conflicted, as the assumed interdisciplinary nature of my work was not accepted...I had to forgo many initiatives at the doctoral school to create space for scientific reflection and writing... Ultimately, I concluded that I needed to carve out my own path for the coming years to complete my research project and fulfill all the requirements of my doctoral program. [O2]

This tension arising from the pressure to balance the responsibilities between academic and private life is present in all our shared experiences “I had to limit other activities to the bare minimum and chosen ones that support each other. However, this is difficult for personal and financial reasons. [O6]”. It led to the redesign and readjustment of both the external obligations as well as plans.

Supportive supervisors’ system

Our respective supervisors’ support was present as a mitigating factor in all our experiences: “This relationship is based on trust, support, and inspiration. [O1]”, “The supervisor is amazing and provides great support... [O6]”. The intrapersonal support system, co-created within our group of PhD students, was strengthened by our supervisors as “they supported me in my development. [O5]”.

Not only supervisors, but also other academic faculty, while being firmly embedded in the system, were acting like a bridge and moderators between us, other scholars and the academia “I also felt that my supervisor, whom I was just getting to know, and other lecturers had a warm, open attitude toward us. [O4]”.

In contrast, there were experiences showing lack of support beyond the supervisors group: “While some individuals were willing to support me and guide toward the right solutions, others seemed disinterested in viewing my work from my perspective, instead trying to adapt it to their own. [O2]”

Despite the systemic character of the student-supervisor relationship, it supports PhD students in navigating the rigid academic system.

Living in-between the systems

Our reflections on our experiences with system show us as PhD student as belonging in sort of a “liminal space.” “Sometimes, it felt as if the conversations were happening between the scientists, while I was being overlooked. I was as though they were there to talk to each other, while I was presenting my work. [O2]”. We were not in the position of undergraduate students anymore, yet we were still not fully accepted as independent researchers or academic teachers. The tension caused by this transitional, apprentice-like position was a significant cause for distress.

The system-level theme experiences relate to the interpersonal and intrapersonal ones, forming a complex, interwoven web of relations. Our discussions have raised new questions: How could the academic system be redesigned to provide this support? What would need to be in place for supervisors to fulfil their roles over the course of a doctoral student’s four-year study? And how might we co-create a shared experience that is developmental for supervisors and PhD students alike?

Reimagining our collective journeys

Drawing from our collective experiences on a level of internal relationships, several recommendations may be proposed. It is crucial to prioritise the development of relationships outside of the Doctoral School, communicate the challenges we face during this demanding phase of our lives, and be open to asking for help when necessary.

From the perspective of doctoral students as a group, we recommend developing formal and informal spaces for sharing experiences related to the doctoral program, such as *buddy systems* or *peer learning programs*, in which doctoral students could learn from each other, both in terms of content and in terms of coping with stress and academic challenges.

Sharing difficulties and uncertainties promotes learning and reflection. Showing young researchers that difficulties and failures are a natural part of the scientific process can strengthen doctoral students’ mental resilience, reduce isolation, and alleviate imposter syndrome.

Establishing shared academic rituals, such as celebrating the completion of research stages, group successes, as well as celebrating the inauguration and end of the academic year or mid-term evaluations together and highlighting

doctoral students' successes in a forum can be important factors in strengthening a sense of community and recognition in doctoral groups.

The system-level reflections inspired us to reimagine our future PhD journeys. From this perspective, we formulated recommendations in four interconnected groups: (1) structural and administrative reforms, (2) strengthening a culture of cooperation, (3) enhancing the relationship between research and didactics, and (4) sustaining the academic system as nested within broader life contexts.

Regarding structural and administrative challenges – while maintaining the good practice of scheduling all classes on a single day – we recommend stronger synchronization of administrative tasks, their logical sequencing, and core curriculum planning. Such alignment would allow learning experiences to directly support PhD-related administrative responsibilities.

To counter neoliberal productivity demands and competitive individualism, we suggest shifting academic culture toward peer cooperation and mutual support. This could be supported by designing shared learning spaces, collaborative projects, and collective reflection rituals. Collaborative autoethnography could be integrated into the curriculum as an institutionally secured space for collective well-being and strengthened peer–faculty cooperation. In the same spirit, the PhD open seminar – currently focused on formal presentations and progress reviews – could be reimaged as an early researchers' community of practice. Such a shared space could cultivate honest sharing of challenges and questions, generous exchanges of expertise beyond PhD metrics and reporting, and normalization of the developmental uncertainties of research work, while acknowledging the whole person as nested within broader life contexts.

The sustainability of the academic system could be further enhanced through increased flexibility in learning path design, recognizing diverse prior knowledge and experiences. Greater flexibility in accessing additional funding beyond scholarships could help address income challenges and expand professional development opportunities within and beyond academia. Opening didactic and project-related activities to PhD students could be professionally enriching, community-building, and supportive of supplementary income.

A shift from mechanical toward living systems thinking could be both possible and beneficial. Greater integration of the whole person within the PhD process – with emphasis on long-term developmental trajectories rather than short-term performance indicators – could support this transformation. Walk-

ing the questions together, rather than positioning PhD students as objects of review, could foster a culture of mutually beneficial development.

Reimagining the academic system not as a mechanical factory but as a collaborative workshop could support individual flourishing for the benefit of the academic community, the institution, and society, while honoring diverse developmental paths.

General discussion

Through collaborative autoethnography and using reflexive thematic analysis, this study set out to explore and reflect on our lived experiences as early career researchers at the beginning of their doctoral studies journey. Using the content of interviews we conducted with the Riff chatbot, we made a joint, reflective thematic analysis. Although grounded in personal experience, the themes that we have constructed from the analysis, speak to systemic patterns that affect doctoral students' wellbeing more widely – on the intrapersonal, interpersonal and systemic levels (Juniper et al., 2011; Levecque et al., 2017; Jones-White et al., 2021; Piotrowski et al., 2024; Mahsood et al., 2025) Our analysis further highlights the inherent issues the neoliberal system creates – productivity expectations, funding constraints, and academic precarity, but also points to ways in which this system and its consequences can be resisted. We believe that the best way to counter the pressure of competition is cooperation and mutual help – both as peer support and in the form of support received from the supervisor.

Since we are just at the beginning of our PhD journey, we hope that this reflexive examination of our experiences could be just the beginning of a broader initiative, fostering a deeper discussion on factors contributing to doctoral student's wellbeing. During our joint meetings, we discussed the possibility of continuing our project, expanding it to include other perspectives. Namely, we have considered creating a community of practice for early career researchers and doctoral students, combining this with a longitudinal study of the relationship between the support provided by this community and wellbeing. As we have noticed, the joint writing process was in a way a “therapeutic” experience for our group, providing an opportunity to share common doubts and problems we face daily as doctoral students. Studies have indeed shown that the adoption of CAE can function as a therapeutic endeavor for researcher-authors, facilitating self-reflection, mutual understanding, and collective healing (McPhail-Bell & Redman-Maclaren, 2019; Noel et al., 2023), as well as strength-

ening the relationships and building cooperation skills, which are extremely important in academic work.

We are also planning to continue the study within our group, repeating interviews with Riff at later stages of our journey—after the mid-term evaluation and before the thesis defense. We are curious to see how our experience will influence our answers, and whether the themes that would emerge would be different from those in this study.

Limitations

Our rationale for choosing collaborative autoethnography was that it had not only allowed us to bring intimate knowledge that outsiders might miss but also that collaborating with others who share similar experiences would add multiple insider viewpoints exploring shared experiences and thus creating richer, more nuanced understandings while maintaining the analytical rigor that comes from collective reflection (Chang et al., 2013; Braun & Clark, 2022). This method, however, has its limitations. As we are dealing with personal and sensitive topics, even though reflexivity is built into the method, we are still analyzing our own experiences, which makes it difficult to maintain critical distance.

Exposing one's personal experiences can be not only emotionally taxing but also could be professionally risky. During our meetings some of us expressed that they do not feel comfortable with this level of self-disclosure, because of the fear of potential consequences, especially in our competitive academic and professional environments. This means that some important insights may have been left out of the analysis due to self-censorship.

Lastly, there are sampling limitations. In CAE, the researcher-participants are essentially a convenience sample, which could potentially skew the analysis toward certain perspectives. It is in no way possible that we could adequately represent the population of doctoral students and generalize our results, as we are a small group from the same year, from the same doctoral school, representing one scientific field (social studies) from a relatively small, specialized (pedagogical) university. We also realize that our knowledge and high level of self-awareness regarding the wellbeing of doctoral students may have influenced the responses we gave to the chatbot.

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