GYERMEKNEVELÉS
TUDOMÁNYOS FOLYÓIRAT
JOURNAL OF EARLY YEARS EDUCATION

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Without Border.
Theory And Practice In The Teacher-Training

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Foreword of the Deans

It is with great pleasure and pride that I welcome readers to this special English-language issue Without Border: Theory and Practice in the Teacher-Training of the Journal of Early Years Education. This volume stands as a testament to the spirit of collaboration that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries – a shared commitment to exploring how teachers are prepared to meet the diverse and evolving needs of learners around the world.

Teacher education has always been more than the transmission of knowledge; it is an ongoing dialogue between theory and practice, reflection and innovation, local realities and global perspectives. The studies presented in this issue exemplify this dialogue.

The contributors – distinguished scholars and dedicated practitioners from the United States and Hungary – offer not only research findings but also pathways for real educational change. Whether through literature, inclusive pedagogy, or digital literacy, each paper illuminates the many ways in which teachers shape minds and build bridges across cultures.

I am particularly pleased that this publication continues our faculty's long-standing commitment to fostering international cooperation.

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the editors, authors, and reviewers whose efforts made this issue possible.

I hope that all readers will find the following pages inspiring and enlightening.

Dr. Éva Márkus
ELTE Eötvös Loránd University Budapest
Faculty of Primary and Pre-School Education

Dear Reader,

It is my privilege to introduce this special issue, the result of a collaboration between the University of Wisconsin–Platteville School of Education faculty and the ELTE TÓK at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest. This edition highlights the diverse pedagogical practices employed by faculty at both institutions to prepare future teachers for the complex realities of today's classrooms.

Teacher education is a demanding endeavor. Future educators must be equipped not only to teach academic content effectively but also to understand and respond to their students' cognitive and emotional needs. In addition, schools increasingly serve linguistically, culturally, and racially diverse populations, requiring teachers to adapt instruction to affirm students' identities and foster their growth as individuals.

While these challenges are significant, teacher education programs and their faculty work tirelessly to research and implement innovative practices that shape the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of tomorrow's teachers. This special issue showcases such innovations – ranging from literacy development and inclusive education to social-emotional learning, interdisciplinary approaches, technology integration, and music education. Each contribution reflects a shared commitment to preparing pre-service teachers for excellence in their future classrooms.

Equally important, this collection demonstrates the value of cross-national collaboration. Partnerships like this create opportunities for teacher educators to compare and contrast practices, learn from one another, and engage in constructive dialogue that strengthens the field.

At the University of Wisconsin–Platteville, we take pride in preparing teachers for the rural contexts where many of our graduates serve. Our program emphasizes a strong liberal arts foundation and excellence in teacher education through community engagement, project-based learning, and experiential opportunities. This collaboration enriches those efforts by fostering cross-institutional learning – highlighting both differences and commonalities and encouraging continuous improvement in teacher preparation.

We hope this special issue sparks meaningful conversations, offers valuable insights, and contributes to advancing pedagogical practices that benefit pre-service teachers not only at our two institutions but across the broader educational community.

Dr. Travis Nelson,
College of Liberal Arts and Education
University of Wisconsin-Platteville

Előszó / **Foreword**

Foreword

We are pleased to announce the publication of our latest issue. While our journal traditionally features studies in Hungarian, English, and German, this special issue is composed entirely of English-language papers. This shift reflects the international collaboration that shaped the issue, with many contributions coming from authors based in the United States.

The cross-cultural exchange represented here offers a unique opportunity to explore current topics in teacher education as examined by researchers in both Hungary and the USA. Through these articles, readers will gain insight into shared challenges, innovative practices, and the diverse ways educators apply research to improve teaching and learning. This issue highlights the connections that unite us as teacher educators – and the valuable lessons we can learn from one another.

The papers in this issue, while unified by their focus on teacher education, approach the topic from diverse perspectives. A significant number of studies delve into the field of literacy education. It is widely accepted that the internalization of a literary work is a collaborative process between author and reader. As readers' linguistic competence grows, they gain new experiences, shed biases, and develop morally, socially, and personally.

The transformative role of literature in teaching and learning is explored in Lindsay Hollingsworth and Douglas Adams's study, Preparing Preservice Teachers to Teach ELA & SS through a Thematic Book Club Project. The authors present innovative strategies that help future educators design interdisciplinary lessons. Their approach offers preservice teachers meaningful engagement with middle-grade novels while building skills in teaching reading fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension.

A similarly creative approach is featured in the study by Ágnes Bethlenfalvyné Streitmann and Katalin Palkóné Tabi, Kamishibai as a Medium for Course Innovation and Real-World Outcomes. This paper showcases the use of Kamishibai – a traditional Japanese paper theater – in a university course. Kamishibai transforms storytelling into a visual and performative experience using illustrated cards within a wooden frame. Its engaging format makes it especially effective for early childhood language acquisition.

Reading remains a lifelong gateway to diverse texts, including scientific literature, which often presents challenges due to its specialized vocabulary and style. Lindsay Hollingsworth's article, The Craft of Preparing Pre-Service Teachers of Reading in a Science-based Landscape, addresses this issue by offering teachers strategies to make science texts more accessible and engag-

ing. Her work equips future educators with tools to help students navigate complex informational texts.

Finally, Tamás Lózsi's study, Rhetorical Underlies of the Development of Reading Comprehension, responds to long-standing concerns about declining reading enjoyment and proficiency among younger generations. His research highlights how rhetorical techniques can be leveraged to strengthen reading comprehension and foster deeper engagement with texts.

Equally vital is preparing future teachers to meet the challenges of inclusive education – an issue that transcends national boundaries and creates a shared platform for professionals committed to promoting social equity in schools. Together, the presented studies underscore the multifaceted nature of inclusive education. From disability support and multilingual instruction to cultural preservation and social justice, they offer valuable insights into how teacher education can foster equity in diverse learning environments.

Erin Anderson's article, Building Inclusive Educational Competencies, examines how inclusive practices for children with diverse disabilities are implemented in rural schools across the United States. With a focus on equity, the study explores how an undergraduate course for preservice teachers introduces inclusive teaching methods, equipping future educators to create equitable learning environments that meet the varied needs of their students.

Expanding the conversation to intercultural understanding, Maya Lo Bello's paper, Building Blocks to Social Justice: Using Patchwork and Literature to Develop Intercultural Knowledge, demonstrates how literature and the arts can be powerful tools for fostering empathy and promoting social justice. Her approach encourages learners in her course to engage with diverse cultural narratives, cultivating the skills needed to support inclusive classrooms.

In a similar vein, Edina Haslauer's article, The First Step: Preparing Rural Preservice Teachers to Support Multilingual Learners, advocates for early and intentional preparation of educators to teach in multilingual environments. Her work emphasizes the importance of addressing the achievement gap faced by language-minority students, particularly in rural settings, and highlights strategies to empower teachers to support linguistic diversity.

Broadening the scope to cultural preservation, Milan Sztepanov's study, Child Participants in Serbian Folk Tradition – Folk Customs in the Service of Socialization and Community Education, introduces readers to a unique aspect of Hungarian history. Given Hungary's 13 recognized minority groups, including the Serbian community, the paper underscores the importance of maintaining cultural identity amid assimilation. Sztepanov highlights traditional Serbian folk costumes as a vivid expression of cultural continuity and explores how schools can foster identity development by preserving customs and language.

While equity and inclusion are foundational to creating fair and responsive learning environments, another equally critical dimension of teacher education is students' emotional well-being. Supporting mental health in schools is not only a pedagogical concern – it is a shared responsibility among educators, students, and families. The growing prevalence of mental health challenges among children and adults underscores the urgency of this topic in educational research and practice.

In their article, Future Skills in Education: Psychologists' Views on the Skills of the Future from the Perspective of Individual Well-being, Miklós Lehmann and his colleagues explore how education can equip students with the skills needed to lead balanced and fulfilling lives. The study emphasizes the teacher's role in fostering these competencies and integrating mental health awareness into everyday classroom practices.

Magdolna Szabadi's article, A Study about the Effects of Music Therapy, investigates the therapeutic potential of music in supporting emotional and cognitive development. Through empirical research, she demonstrates how music therapy can reduce stress and anxiety, aid emotional processing, and improve mood by influencing neurotransmitters such as endorphins and serotonin.

Rita Zsófia Biró's paper, Diagnostic Processes for the 0–4 Age Group in the System of Pedagogical Services, shifts the focus to early childhood education. Drawing on decades of experience, Biró presents diagnostic procedures used in early childhood education. Her insights offer valuable points of comparison with similar systems in other countries and highlight the importance of early intervention in promoting lifelong well-being.

These studies collectively emphasize that emotional well-being is not peripheral to education – it is central. By equipping teachers with tools to support mental health, we not only enhance student outcomes but also foster more compassionate, resilient learning communities.

No education journal would be complete without addressing the role of technology in teaching and learning. In their article, Supporting In-service Teachers in Selecting Digital Learning Materials Based on Didactic Criteria: Results of an Exploratory Study, Nikolett Sovák-Turzó and András Lénárd present findings from a study that examines how teachers evaluate digital learning materials using pedagogical criteria.

What makes their research particularly compelling is its didactic approach to reviewing digital resources available in Hungary. This topic is especially relevant in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the adoption of digital materials across educational systems. While this shift brought new opportunities for innovation, it also introduced challenges related to quality, accessibility, and instructional coherence. The authors argue that it is now essential to systematically review, evaluate, and improve these resources to ensure they support meaningful learning.

The Workshop section of our current issue features Judit Kovács, who presents a dynamic project from the Magda Szabó Bilingual Secondary School. In this initiative, students and teachers explore the English language through an immersive "Viking Age" project. Combining historical inquiry with language learning, the project offers a vivid, interactive experience that brings the curriculum to life.

This engaging and imaginative approach exemplifies how thematic, project-based learning can foster deeper student involvement and cross-disciplinary connections. We warmly recommend this practice to educators, confident that it can be adapted – either in part or in full – to a variety of school contexts.

By showcasing innovative classroom practices, this issue reinforces the importance of creativity, collaboration, and experiential learning in teacher education.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to our authors for their dedicated efforts and valuable contributions. Their work enriches the field and offers educators at all levels meaningful insights.

We also thank our readers and hope this special issue provides both inspiration and practical guidance in your educational endeavors.

This cross-continental collaboration – bridging research and practice across borders – demonstrates the power of shared inquiry. It is through such exchanges that we deepen our understanding, address common challenges, and move toward more inclusive and effective education systems.

We wish you a rewarding and thought-provoking reading experience.

Edina Haslauer and Agnes Klein
the editors

Literacy

Kamishibai as a Medium for Course Innovation and Real-World Outcomes

Bethlenfalvyné Streitmann, Ágnes[1] – Palkóné Tabi, Katalin[2]

Abstract:

This paper reports on the redesign of the *English Children's Literature* course for final-year students in the part-time English-language Kindergarten Educator BA programme at Apor Vilmos Catholic College. The course innovation combined a *Flipped Classroom* approach with a *University–Business Cooperation* (UBC) project, integrating theoretical knowledge, pedagogical skills, and professional practice within the constraints of limited face-to-face instruction. Central to the UBC component was the creation of a bilingual *kamishibai* tale, *The Little Red Hen*, accompanied by a teacher's resource, an *Activity Bank*, developed collaboratively by students and professional partners. Using a practical action research design, data were collected through interviews, questionnaires, course documentation, instructors' journals, partner communications, and students' reflections. Findings indicate that the Flipped Classroom facilitated autonomous learning while maximizing in-person sessions for collaborative application, and that participation in the UBC project enhanced students' creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and professional competence. Moreover, stakeholders' collaboration proved a significant driver of curricular innovation, producing an authentic teaching resource and expanding students' methodological repertoire in early English language development. The study demonstrates the potential of combining flipped learning with real-world projects to foster reflective, practice-oriented teacher education.

Keywords:

flipped classroom, kamishibai storytelling method, early second language development, University-Business Cooperation, action research

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Introduction

In part-time teacher education,[3] where face-to-face instruction constitutes only a third of total contact time, balancing practical training with theoretical instruction presents a substantial challenge. In redesigning the *English Children's Literature* course for final-year students in the part-time English-language Kindergarten Educator BA programme at Apor Vilmos Catholic College, we addressed this by incorporating a *Flipped Classroom* element and a *University-Business Cooperation* (UBC) project into the course, thereby integrating theory, pedagogy, and professional skills development within the constraints of limited in-person sessions.

In addition to addressing the inherent limitations of correspondence courses, there was also a professional rationale for undertaking this course renewal. We wanted to produce a bilingual *kamishibai* story based on a traditional English folk tale and specifically aimed at very young learners of English. The integration of kamishibai paper theatre has long been an established component of coursework at Apor Vilmos Catholic College. However, due to the lack of kamishibai stories based on traditional English folk tales specifically designed for very young learners of English, we undertook the creation of a bilingual kamishibai tale entitled *The Little Red Hen* which can be used as an effective teaching aid in the field of early English language development.

The authors of this paper, who also served as the course instructors, initiated a collaboration with two professional partners – Kriszta Kállai Nagy and the Csimota Publishing – both of whom have extensive experience in illustration and kamishibai tale publishing. Additionally, staff members of a partner institution, Angolpalánta Bilingual Montessori Kindergarten, were also involved in the final phase of the project to pilot the end-product, a teacher's resource material. This UBC project provided students with the opportunity to make a substantive professional contribution while fostering their creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication skills. Guided by the course instructors, students collaboratively developed an Activity Bank to accompany the kamishibai tale, designed to serve as a comprehensive pedagogical resource for educators in kindergarten and lower primary education. These outputs – the tale and the accompanying Activity Bank – represent specialised, purpose-built materials that contribute to the field of early English language development and exemplify the integration of creative production into initial teacher education. This study presents a practical action research that explores the processes and outcomes of this course innovation, implemented as a best practice in the renewal of initial teacher training.

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[3] In Hungary, part-time teacher education means that all formal instructional activities are delivered on Saturdays, but despite the condensed weekly timetable it is expected to meet the same learning outcomes, credit requirements and quality assurance standards as its full-time, week-day based counterpart.

Early Foreign Language Pedagogy

Early second language pedagogy has long recognized the value of contextualized learning through narrative-based approaches, particularly for young learners. Stories provide a rich, meaningful framework for language input and cultural understanding (Ellis & Brewster, 2014) and serve as an effective vehicle for integrating vocabulary and grammar within a holistic language learning framework (Pinter, 2017). Herbert Puchta and Karen Elliott (2017) emphasize that the mode of storytelling is crucial for the success of story-based instruction, while Mary Mayesky (2023) highlights the benefits of listening to and telling stories for vocabulary acquisition, expressive language, narrative understanding and comprehension of story structure, sequencing, and cause-and-effect relationships.

Selecting stories for young learners requires consideration of linguistic complexity, cultural relevance, thematic appropriateness, and engagement potential, while also offering teacher trainees clear selection criteria (Bland, 2019). Ellis and Brewster (2014) systematically outline such criteria, highlighting the psycholinguistic, sociological, and intercultural value of stories for whole-child development. In line with these principles, *The Little Red Hen* tale was chosen for its cultural significance and pedagogical potential. As a familiar English folk tale, it fosters positive attitudes toward the target language and culture. Its age-appropriateness lies in anthropomorphic characters and a concise plot, while its formulaic language – characterized by repetition, cumulative sequences, and rhythmic dialogues (Ellis & Shintani, 2014; Lüthi, 1986; Zipes, 2006) – enhances motivation, comprehension, and memory. Furthermore, the tale enables cross-curricular integration through art, music, and drama, and its moral dimension supports emotional development and holistic learning.

Kamishibai Paper Theatre in Education

Multimodal storytelling has increasingly gained attention in education, with kamishibai – a traditional Japanese method combining illustrated cards, oral narration, and theatrical performance – emerging as an effective tool to foster multimodal literacy. The format consists of a fold-out wooden frame (*butai*) that holds large picture cards with illustrations on the front and text on the back, each card representing a sequential part of the story. This design maximizes the audience's attention, as the large visuals ensure visibility for groups while simultaneously integrating text, images, and performance into a complex learning experience.

McGowan (2015) emphasizes the significance of spatial and kineikonic modes in kamishibai, highlighting its dynamic, performative potential rooted in its history as Japanese street performance from the 1930s. This was confirmed in practice when our students performing *The Little Red Hen* observed that images came alive only through engaging oral and gestural delivery. Through several rehearsals, they further enriched the performance with puppets and musical instruments, demonstrating the medium's creative po-

tential. The most effective insights, contributions of the students were later compiled into the Activity Bank.

Nozaka (2013) highlights kamishibai's communal character, which creates *kyokan*, a shared story-world experience between performer and audience. Unlike picture books, which are primarily suited to individual or small-group reading, kamishibai offers a theatre-like experience for groups, engaging learners through its distinctive format. In our project, students rehearsing *The Little Red Hen* observed that varying the speed of sliding the picture cards within the butai and modulating the rhythm of narration significantly enhanced the dramatic impact of the performance. Such performative techniques not only intensified the audience's (the other participating students) engagement but also fostered a sense of community.

As Ishiguro (2018) demonstrates, pedagogical kamishibai (*kyouiku*) capitalizes on arts-based and discovery learning while also fostering collaborative story-making. This theoretical framework is reflected in our training programme: Although in the *English Children's Literature* course our students worked with ready-made illustrations prepared by a professional illustrator prior to the project, the *Early English* module had provided opportunities for them to design their own kamishibai picture cards for preschool-related stories. This creative task not only fostered artistic expression but also enhanced collaboration and peer learning,

Bloom's Taxonomy

To instruct students in early language pedagogy through literature employing visual storytelling techniques – with particular emphasis on kamishibai – our course was designed utilizing several pedagogical approaches. When thinking about the renewal of methodology in higher education, it is essential to keep in mind the expected learning outcomes in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes (Kennedy, 2006), and the relevance of coursework for students' future careers (O'Neill & Short, 2023). Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy (1956) provided an excellent framework for guiding students from acquiring basic subject knowledge to applying it creatively. Bloom understood learning as a process in which thought processes are built hierarchically on top of each other, each level assuming knowledge of the previous level. His 6-level taxonomy was rethought by Lorin W. Anderson, David R. Krathwohl and their colleagues (2001), the application of which was instrumental when restructuring the syllabus from lower-order skills (Remember, Understand) to higher-order skills (Apply, Analyze, Evaluate, Create).

Flipped Classroom Approach

Due to the limited contact hours in our part-time *English Children's Literature* course, it is a recurring challenge how to effectively provide students with a solid foundation in theoretical and literary-historical knowledge while maintaining an emphasis on creative pedagogical methods. This was addressed

through the widely adopted Flipped Classroom methodology, whereby students engage independently with course materials outside of class, and then deepen their understanding during instructor-led in-person sessions. In accordance with the flipped classroom methodology, students in the *English Children's Literature* course first engaged with digital materials via Google Classroom, accessing literary texts, secondary readings, videos, and presentations on both prose and poetry. This pre-class engagement reflects Talbert's (2023) framework of flipped course design, which emphasizes shifting lower-order cognitive activities – such as information acquisition – to individual study, thereby freeing in-class time for deeper application and interaction. The prose block explored foundational works of British children's literature, folk and literary tales, and storytelling strategies for early English instruction, while the poetry module The poetry module provided a historical overview of the main authors of children's poetry, and addressed the methodology of teaching verse in preschool contexts, with a focus on nursery rhymes, finger plays, tongue twisters, jazz chants, and rhyme-based games.

Building on Şahin and Fell Kurban's (2016) findings on optimizing face-to-face learning for Generation Z learners, in-class sessions prioritized collaboration and creativity through an escape-room activity, rhyme-writing tasks, and student-led workshops. These sessions promoted critical and reflective thinking consistent with Olivier's (2019) *Thinking Tools Programme*, which highlights cognitive engagement over content transmission. Similarly, the *British Prose Literature Timeline* board game and students' performances of tales using visual storytelling aids translated theoretical knowledge into experiential learning. The final *Little Red Hen* kamishibai project integrated literary theory, visual storytelling, and preschool pedagogy, demonstrating how flipped instruction fosters autonomy, creativity, and professional competence. This holistic design builds on the pedagogical principles outlined by Torres Zúñiga's *Flipping the Pages of Children's Literature* (2024), confirming that pre-class preparation and active classroom engagement jointly enhance future pre-primary English teachers' critical understanding and pedagogical innovation.

What is important to emphasize regarding the flipped classroom method is that, while it has been extensively examined across various educational contexts, our review of the relevant literature revealed that research specifically addressing its implementation in English children's literature courses remains notably limited, indicating a significant gap in the current academic discourse. This lack of child-literature–specific research highlights a clear gap in the literature, and positions the present practical action research study as a contribution to this underexplored area.

University-Business Cooperation (UBC)

UBC has been a strategic priority for the European Commission's Directorate General for Education and Culture for over a decade. It fosters collaboration be-

tween academia and businesses to bridge theory and practice for mutual benefit. A 2016 study assessing UBC in European higher education institutions (HEIs) introduced the *UBC Ecosystem Framework*, identifying four key areas: UBC *processes*, *influencing factors* (barriers and drivers), HEI *support mechanisms*, and the *contextual impacts* of the UBC activity on the individuals, the organizations, and their environment (Balzhan et al., 2017). The UBC process includes three stages: 1. *Inputs* – Resources are needed to enable cooperation. 2. *UBC Activities* – Fourteen UBC activities are recognised, arranged into the categories of *education*, *research*, *valorisation* and *management*. For our study, the educational aspect is the most important, containing the following five activities: *curriculum co-design*, *curriculum co-delivery* (e.g. guest lectures), *mobility of students* (i.e. student internships/placements), *dual education programmes* (i.e. part theory, part practical), and *lifelong learning for people from business* (e.g. executive education, industry training and professional courses). 3. *UBC Results* – They can be common outputs, outcomes, and impacts. Although a UBC can enhance teaching and research for academics, and drive innovation and competitiveness for businesses (Davey et al., 2018), it benefits students the most who gain real-world experience while developing essential skills for their future careers.

Despite its obvious potential for both higher education and business, research shows that UBC remains underrepresented in European HEIs, with Hungary lagging behind, one of the reasons reportedly being inadequate financial and organizational support from academic management (Balzhan et al., 2017). Our project, as an initial UBC effort, has successfully addressed these challenges and received strong institutional support in funding, personnel, and facilities.

Collaborative Learning

Enhancing students' collaboration skills was central to the course redesign, as these are crucial for their future professional roles. Collaborative learning, grounded in Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, emphasizes co-construction of knowledge through shared inquiry, dialogue, and engagement (Benke, 2020). Research shows that such environments improve critical thinking (Gokhale, 1995), motivation (La Rocca et al., 2014), and active participation through peer interaction, negotiation, discussion, and reflection (Chang-Tik et al., 2022). Additionally, collaborative learning fosters 21st-century competencies by developing knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values through teamwork (OECD, 2018).

Reflective Practice

Collaboration inherently entails the skill of reflection, as partners must exchange and critically evaluate their ideas to reach consensus. Reflective practice in professional development has been valued since the early 20th century, notably by John Dewey, who distinguished between general thinking and reflective thinking aimed at justifying one's ideas (Candy, 2020). Over the subsequent decades, vari-

ous models have elaborated on reflective practice as summarized by A. Pendrey (2022): J. Luft and H. Ingham's Johari Window (1955) explored self-awareness through four facets: open area, blind spot, hidden area, and unknown area. D. A. Schön (1983) distinguished between two modes of reflection: reflection-in-action, which occurs during professional experiences, and reflection-on-action, which takes place afterward. D. Kolb's reflective cycle (1984) outlined four stages: learning from the concrete experience, reflecting on it, conceptualizing the observations, and experimenting with the newly conceived method. S. Brookfield (1994) emphasized viewing situations from multiple perspectives through four 'lenses': Self Lens, Child's Lens, Colleague's Lens, and Literature Lens. Finally, G. Gibbs' six-stage model (1998) advocated starting reflection by evaluating emotions connected to an experience.

Reflection supports pre-service teachers' self-development – including awareness of values, learning styles, and growth areas – and professional skills such as problem-solving, experimentation, and collaboration (Thompson, 2022). For educators, reflection is equally important: reflection-in-action enables real-time adjustments to teaching, while reflection-on-action provides insights to refine methodology (Schön as cited in Candy, 2020).

In action research, the dynamic exchange of explicit and tacit knowledge between students and instructors necessitates reflection. Thus, reflective practice was integral to our research, mainly following Schön's approach while incorporating elements from other models. As shown later, this process involved analysing successes and challenges to refine teaching methods.

Methods

Research Hypotheses

This action research, conducted within the framework of course innovation, sought to examine the following hypotheses:

a. The Flipped Classroom approach can effectively complement and support knowledge acquisition and application within a part-time training programme characterised by limited face-to-face instructional time.
b. Implementing storytelling knowledge in real-world projects provides students with greater educational benefits than relying solely on classroom-based contexts.
c. Collaboration with stakeholders in kamishibai publishing fosters innovative approaches in children's literature courses, enhancing pedagogical practices and curricular development.

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in the *English Children's Literature* course, a compulsory component of the part-time English-language Kindergarten Educa-

tor BA programme. The course consists of 20 contact hours, organized into four cooperative teaching blocks and co-taught by the two authors. It combines literary-historical foundations with practice-oriented methodology for teaching English as a foreign language to preschool-aged learners. In the 2024–25 academic year, the syllabus was revised to follow a flipped learning model, with students engaging in digital preparatory tasks via Google Classroom prior to interactive, application-focused sessions.

Our program typically runs with a small number of 5–10 students. The 2023 course consisted of 8 students. In the planning phase, non-random convenience sampling was applied to interview four students from the 2023 course, which helped identify potential challenges with earlier methodology, including 2-2 students with and without previous work experience. In the implementation phase, non-random purposive sampling was used to involve all the three students (out of six) of the redesigned 2024 course who agreed to participate in the research. In addition, five external partners participated in the study: two representatives of Csimota Publishing, one illustrator, and two kindergarten teachers from Angolpalánta Kindergarten.

Design

A practical action research approach (Mills & Gay, 2019) was employed to evaluate the redesigned *English Children's Literature* course. This methodology was selected as it enables the systematic study of teaching practice while simultaneously improving instructional design. The research design involved planning, implementation, reflection, and refinement.

At the start of the course, students were informed of the research aims and procedures. Verbal consent to participate was obtained, with the option to withdraw at any time without disadvantage.

Data Collection

The research utilized six instruments: (1) structured interviews with students, (2) a group questionnaire, (3) course documentation, (4) instructors' journals, (5) verbal and written communication with partners, and (6) students' oral reflections. These instruments were selected to obtain comprehensive data from all participant groups, thereby enabling the identification of potential areas for future course improvement.

Interviews

Seven student interviews were conducted in two phases: four pre-course interviews with students from the 2023 *English Children's Literature* course and three post-course interviews with students from the revised 2024 course. The pre-course interviews, guided by a 15-item questionnaire, evaluated the original course content and delivery. The post-course interviews, held online with

five questions, explored student perspectives on the Flipped Classroom, collaboration with external partners, editorial work, professional development, and the final product. Interviews were documented through audio-recorded transcriptions or detailed real-time notes taken by the instructor-researchers.

Group Questionnaire

In addition to individual interviews, students took part in an anonymous mid-course group reflection on the Flipped Classroom component via a six-item questionnaire in a shared Google Document. Using colour-coded entries, they could view and respond to each other's feedback anonymously. This format elicited both positive experiences – such as achievement, creativity, and enjoyment of online tasks – and concerns, including time constraints, study overload, and unclear instructions, offering valuable guidance for future course improvement.

Course Documents

Data were also gathered from students' assignments submitted via Google Classroom, the college's official platform. While the 2023 documents were used to redesign the course, the 2024 documents were coded and analyzed in line with the research questions.

Instructors' Journals

The instructor-researchers' reflective journals of their coursework were also used for data collection. These reflections were prepared individually by the two instructors, based on their lesson plans, within a short time after each session. Drawing on the reflective practice advocated by D. Schön, these documents captured how the instructors flexibly reassessed the classroom realities and made adjustments accordingly (reflection-in-action) as well as how they could evaluate their decisions with hindsight (reflection-on-action).

Verbal and Written Communication with Partners

The preparation and implementation of the UBC component required intensive communication with external partners. An initial in-person meeting six months before the course clarified collaborative objectives, followed by several video conferences, email exchanges and in-person meetings during and after the course. Communication was primarily managed by the instructors, though students were also invited to contribute ideas for the forthcoming kamishibai tale in a joint session with the instructors and a publishing house representative.

Students' Oral Reflections

Finally, insights into students' experiences with the UBC project – an integral element of the course – were also gathered from two students' contribu-

tions to the roundtable discussion at the annual *Early Childhood Education Conference* in Vác, held in collaboration with our external partners.

For a thorough evaluation, data were analysed through iterative coding rounds. Initial coding, based on the 2023 course documentation, identified key themes that shaped the pre-course interview questions. As interviews and subsequent data collection progressed, additional themes emerged and were incorporated to remain responsive to student perspectives. These pre-course codes guided the course redesign, which was later tested and evaluated using data from the implementation phase. Ultimately, five codes were established that comprehensively capture the key themes of the course innovation, aligned with initial expectations:

1. Managing constraints imposed by the part-time course format, introducing the Flipped Classroom method
2. Collaboration with peers, instructors and stakeholders
3. Using story-telling techniques, such as verbal performance and visual aids
4. Assessment of students' knowledge
5. Professional development regarding subject knowledge and competencies

Results

Managing Constraints Imposed by the Part-Time Course Format, Introducing the Flipped Classroom Method

The first code examined students' perceptions of the part-time course format and the Flipped Classroom component. Most planning-phase students did not view limited contact hours as a disadvantage, relying on their prior bilingual or international early childhood experience and earlier Early English modules as preparation. However, students found the content dense, often revisiting online materials primarily to complete assignments. As one student reflected, "If we had received the secondary literature in advance, we could have prepared better both linguistically and in terms of content. We would have been more familiar with the material, retained it more effectively, and recognised connections more easily" (S1).

To address this, a Flipped Classroom element was added. Feedback was mixed: independent study was sometimes challenging, and not all students attended the optional online orientation. Some suggested clearer guidance on prioritizing resources (S7). Despite these challenges, students found the tasks engaging, appreciating in-person sessions for consolidating pre-class learning: "The class provided an opportunity to apply and further deepen the theoretical knowledge acquired in advance through practical activities" (S7). Although the instructors' journals also mentioned that disparities were observed in the students' levels of independent learning, altogether they found student preparation sufficient for the purposes of the rest of the course. n

relation to a card game activity, one of the instructors reflected: "All students were able to speak meaningfully about the works and authors featured on their cards. An added value that emerged spontaneously during the activity was that students shared their personal connections and emotional attachments to certain works or their film adaptations, which proved to be inspiring for their peers as well" (I1). The other instructor emphasized the importance of creative work: "They wrote their own poems, which turned out to be surprisingly creative. Moreover, they became so encouraged by the process that they even contributed several rhymes to the supplementary materials prepared for the kamishibai story" (I2).

Collaboration with Peers, Instructors and Stakeholders

In post-course interviews, students highlighted the instructors' coordinating role, professional experience, and feedback – including advice on what might or might not work – as particularly valuable, placing high importance on instructor-led, in-person instruction.

Their main achievement was effective collaboration in the editorial workshop. Presentations of individual mind maps with envisioned uses were highly appreciated (S7), feeding into a joint project plan from which the best activities were integrated into the Activity Bank. Students reported that brainstorming clarified concepts, inspired new perspectives, developed their critical thinking skills. The instructors' journals highlighted students' professional attitude in the editorial process: "It was rewarding to observe how students were able to draw on and integrate the knowledge they had gained over the course of their studies" (I1). "Students worked independently at home on the parts of the project, each bringing their own ideas and perspectives. During the last session, the collaborative brainstorming, creativity, and teamwork proved highly engaging and motivating for the entire group" (I2).

Evaluations of work with external partners were mixed. Students valued the ideas, guidance, and practical insights into kamishibai offered by the Csimota representative (S5), but some felt their input had little impact on finalizing the tale. One student expressed disappointment that suggestions – including those on visual presentation – were not incorporated, as the representative arrived with pre-prepared images (S2). Suggestions for improvement included involving students in story selection to enhance ownership and adding a teacher feedback platform on the publisher's website (S5).

Stakeholder communication was handled by the two instructors. In the planning phase, email exchanges with the publisher and illustrator focused on adapting wording and illustrations for young learners. In the post-course phase, the teacher-researchers contacted Angolpalánta Kindergarten to pilot the resource material and worked with the publisher to finalize the Activity Bank, which was later uploaded to the publisher's website.

Using Story-Telling Techniques

In the research phase, students built on prior knowledge of storytelling methods – acquired in the Early English module and through Flipped Classroom study – by performing pre-selected folk and literary tales in pairs, tailored to the developmental and linguistic needs of specific preschool age groups. These activities incorporated visual aids such as story cards, story maps, and story mountains. Although pairs and techniques had been assigned, post-course interviews indicated that students found the process highly creative, stimulating their imagination and expanding their methodological repertoire. Several participants expressed a preference for more autonomy in selecting techniques, which they believed would have further enhanced engagement (S6).

A particularly valued element was the workshop with the Csimota Publishing representative, who performed a kamishibai story and demonstrated how to use story cards effectively to create dramatic impact and capture children's attention (S7). Students emphasized the importance of active participation, appreciating the opportunity to rehearse and present a story themselves, which allowed them to assess the feasibility of their ideas and explore how kamishibai could be applied in early childhood contexts (S7).

Pre-course interviews had indicated that students considered greater emphasis on verbal performance techniques important when presenting children's literature texts (S3). However, in the research phase it was again not possible to devote as much time to this aspect as planned.

Assessment of Students' Knowledge

Pre-course interviews indicated that students valued assessment as a motivator for engaging with online self-study materials. One student noted, "Targeted learning, such as preparing for a test, motivates people to learn" (S1), while another reported accessing supplementary materials primarily when completing assignments (S3). In response, a formative online Redmenta practice test was implemented at the end of the self-study period, requiring 100% completion within 24 hours, with unlimited attempts allowed; some students, however, perceived it as summative.

To evaluate students' initial knowledge within the Flipped Classroom framework, diagnostic assessment was conducted in the first face-to-face session using gamified activities – an escape room for children's poetry and a card game for children's prose. Formative assessment continued through written assignments and presentations, supported by a point-based system (Prievara, 2015) that allowed task choice and personalized learning paths. Although a maximum of 130 points was available, grading was scaled to 100 points (≥90 = highest grade), and all but one student exceeded 100 points.

Post-course interviews revealed that students were more motivated by the creativity and relevance of activities than by point values. However, the instructors' journals pointed out that it was useful to give nuanced reflection: "the

point-based grading system proved useful in a few cases – such as the short presentations – where it allowed us to reflect, in numerical terms, when a task was not completed perfectly" (I2). One student reflected in the anonymous group reflection that the Redmenta test "alleviated the stress factor, thus making study easier," highlighting the first face-to-face revision session as particularly valuable. Although students were not fully aware of this, the instructors regarded the test more as part of the learning process than as a formal assessment.

Professional Development Regarding Subject Knowledge and Competencies

Pre-course interviews indicated that students viewed the *English Children's Literature* course as effective preparation for using stories and rhymes in future teaching. One participant described the knowledge gained as "surface-level" (S2) but valued practical assignments, such as mind maps and activity plans, over engagement with older literary texts. Students also reported improvements in problem-solving and critical thinking through discussions and peer exchange.

The final teaching material demonstrated professional-level expertise, including an introduction in Hungarian and English to early foreign language pedagogy; an *Activities while reading* section with three to four tasks per kamishibai card (Figure 1); and additional ideas in the *Further project activities* section were linked to six core content areas in early childhood education: story and rhyme, mathematical concepts, knowledge of the outside world, movement, arts and crafts, and music. As can be seen in Figure 2, the activities included here promote the holistic development of children.

Figure 1

Excerpt from 'Activities While Reading'
(Source: Streitmann & Tabi, 2025, p. 8)

Slide 1	**Identifying the Little Red Hen's home:** Point to the farm: *This is the Little Red Hen's home.*
• identifying the Little Red Hen's home • recognising animals and their habitats • counting animals • talking about the foods of the Little Red Hen	Further ideas: **Recognising animals and their habitats:** During the second or third reading, point to the animals: *What animal is this?* [eliciting the names of the animals in the picture] *Where do they live?* [eliciting the habitats of the animals] **Counting animals:** Point to the animals and get the children to count them. **Talking about the foods of the Little Red Hen:** There are different bugs and worms in the picture. Point to them, rubbing your belly and saying: *Yummy! Look here are the bugs and worms, chickens love to eat them. These are the favourite foods of the Little Red Hen.*

As can be seen, the list of activities and an index image are featured in the first column for orientation, while the second column presents detailed descriptions of the activities, including verbatim teacher instructions, which can be particularly beneficial for novice early years EFL teachers.

Figure 2

Excerpt from 'Further project activities'
(Source: Streitmann & Tabi, 2025, p. 21)

20

Cross lateral movements

At this age cross lateral movements (e.g. touching the right hand to the left knee) are fundamental for early childhood development. They play a crucial role in developing the brain and body coordination.

o *Pretending to plant seeds*
Squat and touch the ground with the opposite hand (right hand to left side, left hand to right side).

o *Pretending to be the Little Red Hen*
Flap one arm like a wing while tapping the opposite knee with the other hand. Switch sides with each step or hop.

o *Gathering the wheat*
Reach diagonally across the body to "pick" the wheat from one side and bring it down to an imaginary basket on the opposite side. Alternate hands and sides.

o *Pretend to turn a big millstone*
Extend arms forward and make large circular motions horizontally as if your arms were two big millstones, crossing arms over each other with each turn.

o *Carrying the bread*
While holding a loaf of bread in the one hand, march in a circle touching the opposite knee with the other hand at every second step.

21

Ask the children to match the pictures to the correct places.

Hen with fork-painted feathers

Children can decorate a pre-cut cardboard chicken shape with paint. They paint the feathers of the hen with a fork dipped in paint, and add eyes, beaks, crests and legs.

After having piloted the material, the staff of Angolpalánta Kindergarten described it as rich and workable, noting that the tale offers substantial educational potential, sufficient to support three to four weeks of meaningful and imaginative activities.

Post-course interviews indicated that the collaborative editorial process – primarily completed as homework and in an instructor-facilitated workshop – was highly motivating and professionally valuable. One participant described the workshop as "an occasion where they could finally participate competently; it was a real professional challenge" (S5). Students valued contributing to a project with tangible outcomes, reporting gains in creativity, methodological competence, and planning skills.

Discussion

A central aspect of innovating the *English Children's Literature* course was the adoption of the Flipped Classroom model, which proved our first hypothesis that this approach has the potential to enhance and facilitate both knowledge acquisition and its application in a part-time training context with restricted face-to-face contact hours. In line with Talbert's (2023) instructional guide, the course was redesigned to shift the initial acquisition of knowledge into self-directed, pre-class learning and to devote in-person sessions to the collaborative consolidation and practical application of content.

Student feedback gathered during the research phase, however, revealed the challenges of adapting to this model. Independent study was not uniformly perceived as effective, as several students struggled with time management and prioritisation of materials. This indicates that while flipped learning fosters autonomy, it requires strong scaffolding, especially for students less experienced in self-directed study. A clear roadmap outlining which resources to prioritise and how to approach them would have eased the transition. The optional online orientation session proved insufficient, since non-attending students missed essential guidance. Fortunately, students who were absent from the discussion received support from their peers, who shared the necessary information, enabling them to complete the tasks as well. This demonstrates the crucial role of student collaboration, particularly in part-time programmes that employ the flipped classroom approach. Nevertheless, we are planning to introduce a compulsory two-lesson orientation, accompanied by more explicit instructions to ensure all students begin the course with adequate preparation.

Clear and explicit teacher instructions prior to the in-class sessions are crucial to prevent task misinterpretation. Although the course syllabus – uploaded to the Classroom in advance – explicitly specified that students should adapt and perform a tale according to their selected preschool age group and language level, the task description in the "Assignments" section

placed greater emphasis on the preparation and submission of the visual storytelling aids. As a result, the student presentations demonstrated a high degree of creativity and quality in terms of visual design, but the adaptation of the tale's text to the chosen age group and language proficiency level, as well as the oral delivery of the story, proved less successful. Future guidelines given in the Classroom should emphasize these aspects more explicitly.

The volume of uploaded materials presented another difficulty. Students initially found the quantity overwhelming, highlighting the importance of carefully balancing breadth and depth of preparatory resources. In response, we are planning to reduce the number of items while retaining pedagogical variety. Importantly, despite these challenges, students consistently described the tasks as interesting and the assessments as non-threatening, underscoring that once engaged, they appreciated the design of the flipped learning environment. Several reflections emphasised that the first in-person session was crucial, as it enabled the consolidation of knowledge gained independently and provided opportunities for active, collaborative application.

In retrospect, we acknowledged that the course design may have been overly ambitious, particularly regarding the allocation of prose literature materials. To address this, the subsequent year group received the prose content earlier – at the conclusion of the *Early English* module – allowing students to prepare gradually for the third-year *English Children's Literature* course. This adjustment aims at aligning student workload with the expectations of a flipped learning model.

Ultimately, our findings resonate with Olivier's observation (2019) that the core challenge of the Flipped Classroom lies in shifting students from passive reception of content to active engagement through problem-solving, critical thinking, and creative application. In a part-time training context, this transformation is demanding, requiring sustained effort from both instructors and students. Yet, the benefits are substantial: limited contact hours can be used more productively for interactive learning, while preparatory work builds the foundation for autonomy and professional competence. For these reasons, we see the Flipped Classroom approach not as a one-time innovation but as a methodology to be embedded sustainably across teacher education programmes.

Our second hypothesis that implementing storytelling knowledge in real-world projects provides students with greater educational benefits than relying solely on classroom-based contexts has been supported by both student reflections and the quality of the final output, the Activity Bank. The integration of coursework with practical outcomes aligns with findings in recent research, which suggests that project-based tasks connected to authentic contexts strengthen motivation and contribute to professional growth (Balzhan & Carolin, 2022). In our case, the development of the Activity Bank, a 22-page teaching resource for early foreign language education, illustrates

how previous knowledge and experience can be effectively mobilised and expanded when students are engaged in purposeful and collaborative work.

The project highlighted the advantages of drawing on students' accumulated competences in early childhood pedagogy, early English language development, and storytelling techniques. Notably, many of the students were already practicing kindergarten teachers, which enabled them to contribute concrete classroom experiences. Their familiarity with children's needs, interests, and behaviours enriched the design process and helped situate the activities within realistic pedagogical scenarios. This dual identity as students and professionals fostered deeper involvement, since they could see immediate relevance and possible classroom application. The significance of this approach lies in the way professional expertise and academic knowledge were mutually reinforcing, leading to higher levels of confidence and ownership in the learning process.

Motivation was a recurrent theme during the project. Students reported a sense of responsibility and genuine enthusiasm, noting that the stakes felt higher than in traditional coursework. The anticipation of publishing the kamishibai story with an accompanying methodological guide, and of having practicing teachers test the material in a partner kindergarten, created a form of professional accountability. This echoes earlier observations that authentic assessment and the promise of real-life impact can transform learning into a professional rehearsal, where students perceive themselves not merely as learners but as contributors to the field.

Formative assessment in the form of a point system also contributed to students' professional growth. Although all students scored above 100 points – seemingly rendering the system unnecessary – the large number of assignments created variety in the points achieved. This, in turn, provided meaningful feedback and gave students more freedom to follow their own learning paths, thereby reinforcing their sense of responsibility for professional development.

The collaborative process also developed skills beyond the subject domain. Students practiced critical thinking by evaluating activity ideas, communication skills by negotiating with peers, and systemic thinking by connecting individual contributions into a coherent whole. Such skills are closely tied to entrepreneurial competences (Lubinszki, 2022), which are increasingly valued in teacher education as they promote adaptability, initiative, and a readiness for societal engagement. The project thus functioned as a bridge between academic training and broader professional roles, positioning students as reflective practitioners.

Equally important was the role of the instructor as facilitator. Rather than directing the work, instructors provided guidance, feedback, and reassurance, while leaving space for student initiative. This dynamic created a constructive atmosphere of trust, where experimentation and dialogue were encouraged. The relational dimension of the project – instructors and students

working together as partners – proved particularly valuable. It not only enhanced the quality of the final product but also modelled a collaborative professional culture that students can later replicate in their own institutions.

Finally, the structure of the renewed course, with its Flipped Classroom element followed by in-depth collaborative sessions, proved effective for integrating subject knowledge and higher-order application. Students moved from individual preparation to group creation as suggested in Bloom's revised taxonomy of learning objectives (Anderson et al., 2001). The resulting Activity Bank, complete with bilingual methodological guidance, reflected professional-level competence and underscored the validity of our initial hypothesis: that real-world projects anchored in existing methodological knowledge can significantly enhance both the learning process and its outcomes.

It has been proven that the application of action research design is useful in initial teacher education because it democratizes research by ensuring the inclusion of academics, students and external stakeholders. Thus, the innovation process can yield more relevant solutions to real-world problems through supportive tools and active engagement while also fulfilling the principle of equity (Zank, 2020).

Our hypothesis that collaboration with stakeholders in kamishibai publishing fosters innovative approaches in children's literature courses, enhancing pedagogical practices and curricular development has been substantiated by the outputs, outcomes, and impacts of this project, in alignment with the objectives of UBC (Davey, 2018). Entering into a structured partnership with external stakeholders not only provided our students with authentic learning opportunities but also created tangible outcomes that enriched the course content. The bilingual kamishibai tale, the accompanying Activity Bank, and the related teaching materials stand as evidence of how cooperation with external experts can result in innovative resources, while also enhancing students' professional preparedness.

By engaging Csimota Publishing and illustrator Kriszta Kállai Nagy in the co-design and co-delivery of the curriculum, we aligned our course with three recognized UBC activity areas: *shared resources in management*, *curriculum co-design*, and *curriculum co-delivery* (Balzhan et al., 2017). This triangulation between university, publishing industry, and creative arts introduced students to professional practices rarely accessible in traditional teacher training contexts.

The innovation potential of such collaboration became visible through multiple channels. First, the presence of external experts in class created authentic professional encounters. The publisher's representative, for example, not only presented the company's approach to kamishibai but also contextualized it within the broader process of visual storytelling, thereby bridging theoretical knowledge and industry practice. Secondly, the round table at the Early Childhood Education Conference in Vác provided a platform for shared reflection where students, educators, and professional partners

publicly discussed the joint project. This non-formal setting broadened the scope of curriculum co-delivery and reinforced students' sense of professional agency.

Most significantly, collaboration enabled both staff and students to acquire new knowledge and competencies that directly contributed to course innovation. Working with the kamishibai format in a focused way allowed us to experiment with multimodal storytelling in early English language development and to discover new ways of fostering vocabulary growth, narrative comprehension, and sequencing skills. Through this collaboration, we explored how to adapt traditional formula tales to exploit repetitive structures as a pedagogical tool (Pintér, 2017). Furthermore, engagement with the kineikonic mode (McGowan, 2015) deepened our understanding of multimodal meaning-making in teaching contexts. Building on these insights and experiences, we may pursue new directions for applying kamishibai in collaborative story-making and discovery-based learning, which enhances the methodological repertoire of the course and exemplifies the innovative possibilities of the pedagogic kamishibai emphasized by Ishiguro (2018). These advancements clearly illustrate how stakeholder collaboration can become a driver of curricular renewal.

Nevertheless, the process was not without limitations. Students did not participate in the pre-course development of the kamishibai tale, as this phase overlapped with summer and was largely restricted to professional-level editorial and artistic work. More importantly, external partners were reluctant to allow student involvement in the creative processes underlying illustration and publishing. While understandable from a professional standpoint, this constraint limited students' exposure to the full range of design activities and represents an area for improvement in future collaborations.

From the stakeholders' perspective, the project was also fruitful, possessing innovation value. Although for Csimota Publishing, the collaboration did not constitute a radical innovation – as they had previously developed materials with external partners – yet, this was their first venture into producing a teaching aid for early foreign language development, thereby opening new market opportunities. For the illustrator, the project represented a unique professional challenge – linking kamishibai illustration with early language acquisition – which contributed to her artistic growth. Thus, while the degree of novelty varied, all parties gained valuable insights, confirming the mutual benefits of such partnerships.

In sum, the project demonstrates that stakeholder collaboration serves as a fertile ground for course innovation. It generates authentic products, exposes students to professional expertise, and expands the pedagogical repertoire of educators. At the same time, it highlights the need to negotiate carefully the boundaries of collaboration, particularly regarding student involvement in professional creative processes. Taken together, these findings strongly support our hypothesis: stakeholder engagement is a catalyst for course renewal and can significantly enrich teacher education.

Conclusion

Although not all of our ideas and plans were realized during the action research, or not in the way initially envisioned, we consider it worthwhile to retain both the content-related and methodological innovations within the syllabus of the *English Children's Literature* course in the future. We also intend to continue our collaboration with professional partners in the coming academic years. While a new kamishibai tale will not be prepared with Csimota Publishing in the next academic year, further discussions with the publisher are already underway. Finally, the dissemination of the UBC project's final product also remains central: Csimota Publishing has already started distributing the tale, and sales figures will provide an engaging indicator of its wider impact.

Committed to the renewal of initial teacher education, we plan to transfer the accumulated knowledge and the tested methodological innovations from this project into other courses. For example, during our Erasmus semester in the previous academic year, *The Little Red Hen* was integrated into the *Storytelling and Drama* course with international students. Their positive reception underscored the relevance and adaptability of this approach in intercultural educational contexts. In addition, we have begun disseminating our professional experiences at national and international conferences, and we intend to share these practices with other institutions across both public and higher education.

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Preparing Preservice Teachers to Teach English Language Arts & Social Studies through a Thematic Book Club Project

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Abstract:

This study describes an interdisciplinary book club project designed to prepare preservice teachers to integrate English Language Arts (ELA) and Social Studies instruction through thematic learning. The project merged reading and social studies methods courses, engaging undergraduate teacher candidates in collaborative book clubs centered on middle-grade novels. Participants read and discussed texts with strong themes of place, space, and social justice, then developed instructional plans for transitional readers in grades 3–5. The project emphasized fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension skills while fostering spatial awareness and critical thinking through literary and geographical analysis. Findings suggest that preservice teachers gained pedagogical insight, enhanced collaboration skills, and recognized the value of interdisciplinary teaching. The study highlights the potential of thematic book clubs to break down educational silos and promote equity-focused, standards-aligned instruction.

Keywords:

interdisciplinary teaching, preservice teachers, book clubs

Introduction

In an effort to prepare preservice teachers to be collaborative and intentional in their interdisciplinary planning, we merged our methods of teaching reading and teaching social studies courses for a final interdisciplinary group project at the end of the semester. Recognizing that educators are tasked with a multitude of demands and expectations can often find themselves working in a silo and disconnected from their colleagues (Little, 1990; Ronfeldt et. al., 2015), we wanted to create an experience for preservice teachers that encouraged them to work closely with group members and to approach

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instructional planning through an interdisciplinary lens. The collaborative project was structed as follows: first, teacher candidates participated in a collaborative book club with a middle-grade novel of their choice; and second, they created instructional plans to teach the novel to early adolescent readers in grades 3–5.

The interdisciplinary book club project presented an authentic opportunity for our preservice teachers to engage with middle-grade novels and practice skills and strategies related to reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension – the very same skills that they will promote in their future classrooms. Book clubs serve as an educational strategy addresses young adolescents' intellectual, social, emotional, and moral development (George, 2004). The opportunity to give pre-service teachers first-hand experience as readers and members of book clubs precented a critical pedagogical opportunity. Specifically, book clubs can provide spaces that foster collaboration and lively conversations among peers (Harmon & Wood, 2001). Additionally, this thematic unit presented the chance for preservice teachers to also step back from the experience and think like teachers to design meaningful and engaging activities that could be used to engage transitional readers in the novel study. In this way, we provided preservice teachers with a common pedagogical experience and an opportunity to create instructional plans.

Statement of the Problem

We recognize that the current landscape of education defined by accountability privileges reading and math proficiency and that these disciplines are emphasized more than other subject areas, specifically social studies (Schwartz, 2024). Our goal was to model for preservice teachers how social studies themes topics and themes including geography, equity, and social justice, could be incorporated into book clubs. Through participation in a small group book club, middle level readers can explore social studies themes while engaging skills in comprehension, vocabulary development, and speaking and listening skills. We created a thematic book club project prioritizing novels that weaved social justice themes with a strong sense of place and space. Additionally, we valued the process in which preservice teachers read a middle-grade novel and dialogued with one another about the complex characters, developing plot, and challenging themes presented. These conversations simulated an experience like ones they'll share in upper elementary and middle school classrooms as they engage readers with literature.

Literature Review

Interdisciplinary Book Clubs

George (1983) advocates for using book clubs as a tool for engaging transitional readers, those who are proficient in foundational reading skills and who are developing fluency and comprehension. These readers are becoming more independent and are eager to explore more complex stories and a variety of genres. By participating in book clubs, transitional readers engage in a dynamic reading process that fosters discussions with their peers. Daniels (2002) emphasizes the importance of "choice" for preservice teachers in which book they will read and the power of "voice" as they engage in social interactions with their peers around the book. According to Daniels (2002), book clubs motivate preservice teachers to read for targeted discussions with their peers. Through this process, they should feel a sense of ownership towards their book club and enjoy benefits such as deeper reading comprehension and improved communication skills as they discuss. Just as they are being used with preservice teachers, book clubs can be differentiated to meet the needs of all learners, creating a sense of equity and inclusion in the classroom.

The Pedagogy of Leading Interdisciplinary Book Clubs

As faculty in a teacher preparation program, it is important to us that our preservice teachers gain the experience of participating in a book club and understand how they, as future teachers, can structure book clubs to engage their own students. Thomas Angelo (2017) describes this type of instructional approach as being on the dance floor, or active participants, and in the balcony, or reflective practitioners. When on the "dance floor," the preservice teachers are engaging in book clubs. When on the "balcony," they thoughtfully reflect on how book clubs can be an instructional strategy to promote interdisciplinary learning and essential literacy skills. While in the "balcony," we ask the teacher candidates to complete the following: select powerful excerpts of place and space in their novels; select Tier Two vocabulary terms essential for comprehension; and to consider graphic organizers that could support preservice teachers' understanding of the novel's story elements. Through this dual approach, they acted as both participants of book clubs and planners fostering robust learning experiences.

Book Talks and Choice

To begin a book club unit, it is important to select a few different texts and offer preservice teachers' choice in what they read. These book talks are an effective strategy to use when starting a book club. Also, book talks capture interest and increase motivation for readers (Atwell, 2007). They are

a form of a book review to get preservice teachers interested in reading a specific book. By providing a short and persuasive description of a book's plot, characters, and themes, teachers can spark curiosity and interest for preservice teachers and enhance their motivation to read. Book talks can include a description of why or how the book was selected, a summary of the story, and a powerful excerpt. Once preservice teachers have heard the book talks, it is time for them to select which book they are most interested in reading in a small group book club. Providing readers with a choice in materials improves engagement (Allington, 2011; Gallagher, 2015). When given a choice, preservice teachers are more likely to read more resulting in enhanced self-efficacy and promoting a deeper connection between the reader and the text. These book talks model how they can pitch books to their future students.

English Language Arts Skills: Fluency, Vocabulary, and Comprehension

We want preservice teachers to view book clubs as a way to engage transitional readers with authentic opportunities to engage their reading skills, specifically reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension development.

Fluency

Reading fluency is an essential skill for young readers, as it is a bridge from word recognition accuracy to reading comprehension (Pikulski & Chard, 2005). Specifically, reading fluency is the ability to read with accuracy, speed, and expression. Transitional readers benefit from daily practice reading texts and applying automatic word recognition and decoding strategies to read them fluently. As reading becomes more automatic and effortless, the reader's brain can focus on the meaning of the text and less on deciphering the words on the page. Allington (2010) advocates for building fluency instruction through book clubs. Further, Allington (2012) emphasizes the importance of providing time for preservice teachers to engage in successful independent reading. Classroom book clubs encourage preservice teachers to read extensively from self-selected books which dramatically increases their total reading volume. For transitional readers, it is essential that readers pick books that match their independent reading level, meaning that they can decode 98% of the words. By offering a variety of books and a range of reading levels to preservice teachers, they can best match readers to appropriate texts in their future classroom.

Our preservice teachers learn that oral reading fluency, at its best, should "sound like talking." Mem Fox (2008) who vividly describes the art of oral reading fluency:

> We can do at least seven things with our voices to keep our listeners engaged. Six of these seven vocal gymnastics are contrasts: loud and soft; fast and slow; and high and low. And we can p-a-u-s-e. The words on the page will tell us which of these to choose.

The students learn the importance of pacing, expression, and voice modulation to bring a passage to life as well as strategies to encourage young readers to engage in fluency practice. They learn methods to promote fluency such as or rereading a poem or meaningful passage in a book. Reader's theater performances also provide developing readers with a wonderful opportunity to bring a script to life through their oral reading of it.

Vocabulary

Students were introduced to the three Tiers of Vocabulary framework (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2013) including basic words (Tier 1), academic language for mature language uses (Tier 2), and low-frequency discipline-specific words (Tier 3). Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2013) support the use of book clubs provide meaningful opportunities for preservice teachers to engage in vocabulary development activities. Teachers can provide direct instruction on Tier Two and Tier Three words in the novel by pre-selecting these words and teaching them explicitly. Students can actively use new vocabulary words from the text as they engage with the text, record "new to them" words, and dialogue with peers Vocabulary learning can also be reinforced through follow-up engagement activities such as word maps or writing prompts to reinforce their thinking and application of vocabulary terms.

Comprehension

Students' comprehension of text is organically encouraged throughout the reading of the novels and the book club discussions. To explicitly teach comprehension as one of the critical reading skills, the class explored the importance for readers to understand narrative text at a literal, inferential, and evaluative (Barrett in Clymer, 1968). Additionally, the preservice teachers learn that the act of reading is not neutral, and that the reader approaches the text with a critical lens (Freire, 1985).

Through book club participation preservice teachers authentically engage with comprehension skills and strategies. Students learn about narrative story elements including characters, setting, rising action, solution, and theme (Stein & Glenn, 1979). Additionally, they can practice reading comprehension strategies (Durkin, 1978) such as summarizing, questioning, making predictions and inferences. Through book clubs, preservice teachers can collaboratively make predictions about the plot and/or how a character would respond to unfolding events. They also make connections between the book and the world, another text, or themselves. Pre-service teachers

come away from the project knowing that book club participants can be active learners who look for unknown words, comprehension breakdown, or clues as to the direction the plot will take. Later, as they near the conclusion of the book, preservice teachers can reflect on the predictions they made or the actions of the characters and share their thoughts and personal opinions about the story and its conclusion.

Social Studies Connection: Space and Place

With a goal of bridging literacy and social studies, we intentionally brought a focus on place and place into the unit by selecting texts that had significant settings and by providing explicit instruction in human geographical principles. We believed that literature presented a good opportunity to broaden our preservice teachers' understanding of geography to include spatial analysis. Before delving into the spatial elements associated with the novels' settings, we offered a few definitions to ground their inquiry. First, we introduced Yi Fu-Tuan's (1977) classic definitions of space and place. For Tuan (1977), "'Space' and 'place' are familiar words denoting common experiences. We live in space…Place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other…Space and Place are basic components of the lived world; we take them for granted" (p. 3). To concretize the terms, we offered our local landscape as an example. We said that when one drives through Southwest Wisconsin, they see fields and farms dotting the landscape all the way to the horizon. For the motorist, the fields pass by–conjuring an experience of openness, or space. However, for the individuals who maintain and care for the fields and farms, the landscape has a sense of "felt value" (Tuan, 1977, p. 4). Because of this highly localized experience, the fields and farms are places.

After discussing the interconnected and slippery concepts of Space and Place, we narrowed our focus to place by having preservice teachers read excerpts from Tim Cresswell's *Place: An Introduction* (2004). While we pulled several quotes from the text's introduction for a discussion, preservice teachers especially resonated with Cresswell's conversation of the College Dormitory room. Early in the introduction, Cresswell posits the dorm room to transform space into place. Specifically, Cresswell asks the readers to,

> cast your mind back to the first time you moved into a particular space – a room in a college accommodation is a good example. You are confronted with a particular area of floor space and a certain volume of air. In that room there may be a few rudimentary pieces of furniture such as a bed, a desk, a set of drawers and a cupboard. These are all common to all the rooms in the complex. They are not unique and mean nothing to your beyond the provision of certain necessities of student life. Evan these bare essentials have a history. A close inspection may reveal that a former owner has inscribed her

name on the desk in an idle moment between classes. There on the carpet you notice a stain where someone has spilt coffee…These are the hauntings of past inhabitation. The anonymous space has a history – it meant something to other people. Now what do you do? A common strategy is to make the space say something about you. You add your own possessions, rearrange the furniture on the wall, arrange a few books purposefully on the desk. Thus space is turned into place. Your place (pp. 1–2)

Prior to launching in the discussion, we paired Cresswell's (2004) passage with the following selection from James Agee and Walker Evans's Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (1949) and asked preservice teachers to reflect and discuss the following questions: 1. What role does place (and to a lesser extent) space play in the opening chapters of the novel? 2. Does spatial equity play a role in the first chapters, if so, what rhetorical devices does the novel use to make you feel as Cresswell states, "there" (description, dialogue, place/time signposts). 3. How does the book club as a pedagogical tool allow for space to share? 4. How could you bring the discussion to life with your preservice teachers? Ultimately, we wanted to see how space and place were not only important to the novels, but play a significant role in their own lives. The book club offers opportunities to talk about setting and characters' connections to familiar places, such as their town, home, and landscape. It also allowed for nuanced discussions about movement through spaces as settings changed throughout the novels.

Research to Practice

The overarching goal for the book club project was to create a collaborative book club experience for undergraduate preservice teachers preparing for teaching careers in elementary and middle school. To frame our study, we asked the guiding question, "How can we model a collaborative ELA and Social Studies unit that will destabilize educational silos? More specifically, how can we encourage pre-service teachers to think critically about interdisciplinary problems and in turn help their future preservice teachers do the same through juvenile literature written for transitional readers in grades 3–5?"

To prepare for the unit, we met to discuss goals, develop a scope and sequence, and select middle-grade novels with a strong sense of space and place. The following middle-grade novels were selected for the project based on their notable quality and accessibility for our preservice teachers:

- *Esperanza Rising* (2002) by Pam Munoz Ryan
- *Moon over Manifest* (2011) by Clare Vanderpool
- *Rain Reign* (2014) by Ann M. Martin
- *The Truth as Told by Mason Buttle* (2020) by Leslie Connor
- *Where the Watermelons Grow* (2020) by Cindy Baldwin

We taught the unit during the last four weeks of the semester. We enacted a 50/50 Co-Teaching Model, in which we collaboratively planned, delivered, assessed and reflected consistently throughout the unit. We opted to team teach our methods courses and met with preservice teachers for a total of 16 class periods (eight 75-minute-classes in English Language Arts, and eight 75-minute-classes in Social Studies).

Academic Standards and Skills Addressed in the Unit

This standards-based unit was designed to align with the Wisconsin Standards for English Language Arts, which align with the Common Core State Standards. The following standards in the 3rd-5th grade band were central to the unit. Additionally, the project aligned with key Standards for Social Studies, a set of standards aligned with the National Council of the Social Studies Standards. The relevant standards are listed in the figure below.

Figure 1

English Language Arts Standards to Guide the Book Club Project

English Language Arts	
Fluency	Reading Foundational Skills RF4: Read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension.
Comprehension: Key Ideas and Details	Anchor Standard R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly or implicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
Vocabulary: Craft and Structure	Anchor Standard R4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

Figure 2

Social Studies Standards to Guide the Book Club Project

Social Studies	
Standard SS.Inq1: Wisconsin students will construct meaningful questions that initiate an inquiry.	SS.Inq1.a.i Develop a list of open- and closed-ended questions on a topic or issue.
Standard SS.Geog4: Wisconsin students will evaluate the relationship between identity and place.	SS.Geog4.a4: Describe how certain places may have meanings that distinguish them from other places...Identify and describe how people may view places in the community differently.

Book Club Introduction

We began the project by giving book talks about each of the five selected novels to the class. As we gave the book talks, we physically displayed each novel while giving a summary of it to the class. The cover art for each novel was also displayed on the screen in front of the class along with a relevant hashtag for each book to hook the pre-service teachers into the book.

Following the book talks, preservice teachers were given a moment to think about their first choice and to come to the front of the class to select the book. We made sure that we had more copies of books than preservice teachers so that all could choose the book that most appealed to them. Providing readers with a choice in materials improves engagement (Allington, 2011; Gallagher, 2015). We discussed if a classroom or school has a limited number of books, that their future students could record their first, second, and third choices on a piece of paper and the teacher could match readers to their top choices to ensure that everyone gets one of their top choices.

Following the book talks and selection, the preservice teachers organized into book clubs by joining peers who selected the same book as they did, and their first book club meeting commenced. One title, *The Truth as Told by Mason Buttle*, was popular by the preservice teachers so we split the very large book club into two smaller ones to maximize participation opportunities.

Our first book club meetings began with each student taking a turn sharing why they picked the selected novel. They quickly transitioned into their book clubs also created an electronic space where they would record individual thoughts and group discussion themes throughout the project. Here, they recorded their thoughts on choosing the book and co-constructed a reading timeline. They were provided with book club meeting dates and times and determined how many pages needed to be read for each meeting so that they could read and discuss the entire novel in the allotted time. The first book club meetings concluded with a reminder of what the reading assignment was for the next meeting.

Figure 3
Sample Book Club Timeline

Timeline

We will read 53 pages before every class period.

Read up until...

- April 17: 1 - 57
- April 22: 58 - 99
- April 24: 100 - 157
- April 29: 158 - 213
- May 1: 214 - 262

Engaging English Language Arts Skills

A goal of the project was for preservice teachers to engage with text in authentic ways and simultaneously explore strategies for teaching fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. We used class time to define of the essential reading skills, engage the preservice teachers in tasks to encourage their exploration of each skill, and challenge to "mine" the text of the novel for an opportunity to teach the skill to developing and transitional readers.

Reading Fluency

We emphasized that reading fluency is an essential skill for young readers. Reading longer texts, such as novels, promote reading fluency as readers engage in text. Many of our students share that they don't have time for leisure reading in addition to the coursework they complete. The opportunity to read a middle-grade novel encourages them to engage critical reading skills for their future students. As the readers engage in reading their novels, we ask them to be on the lookout for impactful passages in the book – these passages could tell a critical event in the plot line or include particularly lovely word choices or use of imagery. Students can note or mark these passages and come to book club prepared to share these along with a rationale of why they selected the passage.

Vocabulary

We designed vocabulary mini-lessons that reinforced the notion to preservice teachers of critical importance that vocabulary has on comprehension. The students learn methods for teaching vocabulary knowledge for students and were asked to select Tier Two academic language terms from their texts and plan engagements for students. For example, the preservice teachers were asked to infer the meaning of an unfamiliar word provided in the context of a sentence. We displayed the following sentence on the board for preservice teachers:

Exhausted, the Man Pandiculated Before Crawling into Bed

We led preservice teachers through an inquiry discussion asking them to hypothesize the meaning of the unknown word, pandiculate, by sharing what they know. Students recognized that the unknown word is a verb and situate it within the context of being tired in the evening. On the next slide, students viewed several pictures depicting humans and animals as they pandiculate or engage in a full-body stretch. Through this activity, we modeled how preservice teachers can intelligently determine the meaning of an unknown word by drawing on their background knowledge, utilizing contextual clues, and viewing images.

Following this activity, book club participants were prompted to "mine" their novel for Tier 2 words that may challenge their fourth-grade readers. I asked them to select two important terms from the book and to analyze one using the Frayer Model, a graphic organizer developed by Dorthy Frayer and her colleagues at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1969. The Frayer model encourages vocabulary learning by asking students to generate a student-friendly definition of the target word, provide examples and non-examples of the word, and use the word in a sentence. Additionally, they learned an instructional routine recommended by Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2013) and were asked to plan a vocabulary mini lesson following this routine using an essential Tier Two vocabulary word from their text. The vocabulary routine includes the following steps:

1. Present the target vocabulary word in context. (We recommend sharing a poster with the word and an accompanying picture to support visual learners.)
2. Provide a student-friendly definition.
3. Provide an example of the word in context.
4. Prompt student engagement by asking students to generate their own examples of the word. Ask them to state the word in their examples. (Aim for 7+ exposures to the word).
5. Ask students what the new word is and what it means.

As a class, we debrief the value of the vocabulary activities, and the preservice teachers plan explicit instruction for teaching the target vocabulary terms from their book.

Comprehension

We organically encouraged students' comprehension of text throughout the reading of the novels and the book club discussions. Students also enacted comprehension strategies as they engaged with reading the novels and discussing it. Our students learned about narrative story elements including characters, setting, rising action, solution, and theme. At times they made predictions about the plot and/or how a character would respond to unfolding events. They also made connections between the book and the world, another text, or themselves. Students were invited to use sticky notes to ask and record questions they had about a word, an idea, or the story itself. As they neared the conclusion of the book, preservice teachers reflected on predictions they made or actions of the characters and shared their thoughts and reflections about the story and its conclusion. They also reviewed many examples of graphic organizers and selected formats that best fit the story arc and themes from their novel.

Spatial Analysis in Texts

We began the social studies portion of the book club project by asking the following question: Why Geography? For many of our pre-service educators, geography was limited to cartographic creation and inquiry. We believed that literature presented a good opportunity to broaden our preservice teachers' understanding of geography to include spatial analysis. What is spatial analysis? How would preservice teachers engage with it during reading?

To help preservice teachers expand their sense of place, we asked the following guiding question: How do you create a socially just narrative of a place if you are not deeply connected to the place? For much of the social studies, and geography in particular, it is essential to build contextualize the relationship between places and experiences (Solnit, 2010). In order to help round out the context, we used the example of Los Angeles. By reading salient excerpts from Ross Macdonald's *The Chill* (1963) and Sallias's *Drive* (2005) and pairing them with contemporary maps, images, of the city we were able to create an imagined geography (Gregory, 1994) of the city. We were careful to note that our imaginary was one of a multiplicity that could be created. Using one Los Angeles imaginary, we communicated to the preservice teachers that as social studies educators, it is our responsibility to create socially just narratives and geographical imaginaries of places and events that their future preservice teachers may not have a personal connection. In doing so, we encourage our future preservice teachers to critically engage with the sedimented world(s) that they help shape. Just as Derrick Gregory (1994) states, "history is never innocent, it is always history for" (p. 6), we reminded our preservice teachers that the same could be stated for geographical imaginaries. From there we were able to have a discussion about developing context.

To help preservice teachers round out the context of the novel, we encouraged our pre-service teachers to look up the author's biography, evaluate salient regional and world events that may have influenced the writing of the novel, and what other texts were available around the same time that their novel was published. By engaging in these activities, we emphasized the following: all authorial choices are political, as they deliberate choices, the authors are embedded in a particular cultural milieu. We were then able to build on the authorial contextualization to evaluate the setting (time/place(s)) of their novel. Several of the novels took place in the contemporary context that they were written or had a nebulous setting timeframe. In these instances, we asked the preservice teachers to watch for signposts, such as events and/or technology.

The National Council of the Social Studies is committed to ensuring that social studies is aligned with social justice. Just as contextualizing the milieu in which the author was writing is significant, so too are the social issues that the novels addressed. We discussed how teaching social issues, such as

poverty and mental health awareness could be generative for developing empathy. Students worked in their book clubs in discussing what they already knew about the social issue and spent time in class conducting preliminary research on the issue. After building their content knowledge, they connected the issue and content knowledge to a standard and sketched an activity for future preservice teachers.

Concluding the Unit

Once preservice teachers completed their novels, we changed our focus from reading and engaging essential skills of fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension to the pedagogical work of teaching the book to middle-grade readers. We asked the preservice teachers to prepare a final project in which they a) summarized the book to the class along with a recommendation and b) suggested activities to engage middle grade preservice teachers with the novel. We provided preservice teachers with time in class to collaborate on these projects while we observed their interactions and were available for support. We also offered preservice teachers with a survey to share their feedback on the book club project and opportunity to engage in thematic learning across their methods courses in reading and Social Studies. The professors analyzed the survey results by reading through them to identify common themes including successes and challenges. Qualitative analysis was used to find patterns and interpret their meaning (Stringer, 2017).

In their reflections on learning to teach reading through a book club project, preservice teachers reported enjoying the benefits described by Daniels (2002) in his book, Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs & Reading Groups, They reported feeling motivated to read the book, enjoyed the social connection to their peers, engaged their reading skills, and were provided an opportunity to experience different perspectives from their book club members. One student stated, "I think [the book club project] went well. It was nice being able to engage in peer discussion and share our ideas and thoughts. We noticed and interpreted things differently, so it was interesting to see what the others' thought."

Students also reported enjoyed the opportunity to participate in book clubs as they were simultaneously learning how book clubs can be an effective instructional strategy to teach middle grade readers. One student stated, "I found it beneficial to discuss [the book] with my peers. I specifically enjoyed discussing the teaching side of the book and how we would implement [the teaching of the book] in the classroom. Another student addressed the practical and relevant nature of participating in the book club. They stated, "I enjoyed it, I thought it was nice to read a story that middle school students would actually read. I also enjoyed coming up with ideas for lesson plan that I would actually use."

To wrap up the social studies portion, we started by asking preservice teachers to reflect on the following quote:

Simply assigning a piece of historical fiction, however, is not sufficient to encourage the kind of thinking that is a goal of social studies. Rather the use of historical fiction requires careful selection, opportunity for discussion and reflection, the provision of time and resources for further inquiry, and a teacher willing to encourage careful analysis of books from the dual perspectives of literature and history" (Freeman & Levstick, 1988, p. 330).

To reflect holistically on the quote, we asked the preservice teachers to think about the following questions: 1. How are the disciplines of English Language Arts and Social Studies different and/or similar? And 2. What do the authors mean by further inquiry? After initial reflection we spiraled the social issues by having them engage in an expanding context. We wanted them to communicate the provenance of the theme, by connecting it to text to self, text to text, and text to world. We then concluded by asking them to reflect on how their theme addressed how place was integral to the text.

Discussion

Assessment played a significant role in the collaborative book club project. The authors agree that the greatest method of formative assessment used was observations of preservice teachers at work through our anecdotal notes. The great value of team teaching the unit was the opportunity for us to engage deeply with the preservice teachers by observing and participating in their knowledge construction.

Students were invited to create a shared electronic space to record the "tracks" of their work. Many groups opted to create a Google Slide space. In this space, they recorded summaries of their book club discussions and kept records of the artifacts they created during their minilessons. They also used this space as they began to design and envision their final project. The instructors regularly viewed these Journals to monitor the progress of the group.

As a final summative assessment for the unit, the small book clubs were tasked with presenting a summary of their novel to the class along with their recommended teaching methods to engage preservice teachers in Social Studies and Reading methodologies as they read the book. The small groups presented their ideas to the class during finals week along with exemplars of instructional activities recommended.

Reflections

Participants completed a final reflection on their experience with the book club project. The responses indicate that the preservice teachers saw great value in the project that blended learning in social studies and reading. One student shared, "A big thing I will take away is that it's possible to support both literacy and social studies. I would have never thought you could teach both at the same time." This sentiment resonated with the authors as we acknowledge the opportunity that thematic units present for providing preservice teachers with greater opportunities to engage with social studies content. Another student had a similar takeaway, stating, "There are many different ways to teach social studies, and it doesn't just need to be done through a textbook…. Project-based learning is very effective and can provide an opportunity to teach reading strategies." A final student remarked on the opportunity the project provided on the development of cognition. The student shared that the collaborative book club project taught her "how to ask preservice teachers' questions that involve critical thinking and how to lead discussions about the book." The same student valued the development of activities to support reading the book to "expand knowledge and allow growth."

Limitations

The interdisciplinary book club project had some limitations. Select preservice teachers shared they had difficulty engaging with the middle-grade texts. We could address this by initially addressing the choice of books to mimic the type of texts they will use with their future transitional readers. Additionally, inherent in assigned group work is the reality that not all group members contributed equally. In some cases, we observed that the group leaders shouldered the responsibility for tasks and discussion and that some group members participated to a lesser extent.

Conclusion

The book club project provides two significant learning opportunities for preservice teachers. First, by contextualizing a book club study with a geography and place focus, preservice teachers are simultaneously meeting social studies standards through the construction of inquiry and spatial awareness skills white also engaging literacy skills of fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The authors argue that a design such as this can bring social studies, as a discipline, to the forefront and allow greater engagement by preservice teachers with the discipline. Second, the interdisciplinary nature of the spatial equity book club promotes preservice teachers' critical thinking, community building and collaboration skills, and helps them to make connections between disciplines. Our goal for future teachers is to consider both co-teaching as well as strategic interdisciplinary work in their future classrooms.

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The Craft of Preparing Pre-Service Teachers of Reading in a Science-based Landscape

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Abstract:

In response to declining literacy rates and the growing emphasis on evidence-based instruction, teacher preparation programs in the United States are increasingly aligning coursework with the science of reading to equip future educators with the knowledge and skills necessary to support early literacy development. This article explores the efforts of a regional comprehensive university in the Midwest to prepare pre-service teachers through a structured reading methods course and an integrated elementary field experience. Drawing on foundational theories, the program emphasizes explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, and morphological analysis. Coursework combined with authentic field placements in high-performing rural schools, allows pre-service teachers to apply pedagogical strategies in real-world contexts. The article highlights the importance of bridging theory and practice, fostering teacher identity, and ensuring that future educators are well-prepared to meet the diverse literacy needs of young learners.

Keywords:

early literacy, explicit instruction, preservice teachers

Introduction

In an increasingly digital and textually rich society, literacy remains a cornerstone of academic and personal success. Yet, recent data reveals a troubling trend: fewer than one-third of fourth-grade students in the United States can read at grade level with accuracy, fluency, and comprehension (NCES, 2024). Performance on the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) declined by two percentage points from 2022 and four points from 2019, underscoring a persistent challenge in early literacy education.

In response, policymakers and educators have turned to the "science of reading" – an interdisciplinary body of research that examines how profi-

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cient reading and writing develop, why some students struggle, and which instructional practices are most effective (The Reading League, 2025). This movement has prompted state education departments and school districts to prioritize evidence-based pedagogical practices aligned with the science of reading. Concurrently, teacher preparation programs are reevaluating and redesigning literacy coursework to ensure that preservice teachers are equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to support all developing readers and writers.

Statement of the Problem

For decades, the field of literacy education has been shaped by a contentious debate over the most effective methods for teaching reading (Adams, 1997; Castles, Rastle, & Nation, 2018; Kearns, 2020; Seidenberg, Borkenhagen, & Kearns, 2020; Solari et al., 2020; Tortorelli, Lupo, & Wheatley, 2021). Advocates of whole language instruction emphasize student choice and contextual learning, encouraging children to engage with texts that interest them (Goodman, 1997). In contrast, proponents of phonics advocate for explicit instruction in the relationships between sounds and letters—phonemes and graphemes – using decodable texts to reinforce these foundational skills (Flesch, 1955; Chall, 1967).

The current shift toward the science of reading supports the latter approach, emphasizing systematic and explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, and morphological awareness as essential building blocks of proficient reading (Petscher et al., 2020). As the science of reading gains traction, teacher preparation programs must ensure that preservice teachers receive rigorous, research-based coursework and meaningful field experiences that reflect these principles.

Despite growing consensus around the science of reading, research indicates a persistent disconnect between evidence-based literacy instruction and teacher preparation programs, particularly in English-speaking countries (Castles, Rastle, & Nation, 2018; Solari et al., 2020). To bridge this gap, schools of education must prioritize instruction for preservice teachers that emphasizes English orthography, foundational reading skills, and pedagogical practices that support developing readers.

This paper reviews relevant literature and presents the efforts of one regional comprehensive university in the Midwest to prepare preservice teachers to effectively teach reading and language arts to early childhood and elementary-aged students within their first reading and language arts methods course. Situated in a rural region of the Midwest, our School of Education strives to promote broadly trained and flexible preservice teachers for placements in rural schools.

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Literature Review

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English Language Orthography

The English language orthography is complex and has been described by scholars as opaque (Hudson et al., 2021) and quasiregular (Kearns, 2020). English orthography is less transparent than other alphabetic scripts (Ziegler et al., 2010). In other words, English is a difficult language to read because of its spelling and pronunciation irregularities. English as a language has systematic relationships between sounds and spelling patterns; however, these relationships are complicated and are governed by syllable structures, etymology (word origins), and morphology, the study of the structure and form of words (Ehri, 2020). The following table illustrates English words that may pose challenges to developing readers.

Table 1

Examples of Challenging English Words

Word	Challenge
knight	Silent letters and irregular spelling
enough	Unusual phoneme-grapheme correspondence
psychology	Greek origin with silent letters
colonel	Non-phonetic spelling
receipt	Silent 'p' and complex etymology

To decode words in English, readers must learn to hear individual sounds in words (phonemes), overlay the sound onto the letter(s) or grapheme that represents the sound, and apply the phoneme-grapheme correspondences to read words (Ehri, 1995, 2014, 2020). This complex visual task takes time to master and can pose difficulties for beginning readers of English. When children begin to learn to read, they draw on established oral-language skills, including knowledge of word meanings. They learn to associate visual symbols, including patterns of lines, curves, and dots on a page, with individual sounds that can be blended together to represent words. In order to teach children to read words, teachers and preservice teachers, which is the specific focus of this article, need to have a foundational understanding of English orthography in order to effectively teach students.

Explicit Instruction in Early Literacy

Our brains are hardwired to learn language, but not to read the written word. Although research agrees that skills in decoding are essential for readers, scholars have not agreed on the best method to teach code-related skills to promote word reading for students (Tortorelli, Lupo & Wheatley, 2021).

One great influence on the teaching of reading was Jeanne Chall, who asserted in her book, The Great Debate (1967), tenets of reading instruction that all programs should embrace. She called for phonics instruction alongside emphasis on reading for meaning, language instruction, and connected text. According to the author, explicit phonics instruction is more effective than implicit phonics instruction, and approaches that are systematically organized and explicitly taught result in better word recognition, spelling, vocabulary, and reading comprehension for readers, especially for those at-risk of experiencing reading difficulties.

Like Chall, the National Reading Panel report (2000), which provides a framework for schools and teachers related to reading instruction, also supports the use of explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and systematic phonics instruction as key components of effective reading. Explicit instruction is an approach where the teacher clearly and directly explains concepts, or skills to students with step-by-step guidance and modeling. The report highlights the importance of the five pillars of reading instruction, including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. According to the report and other prominent reading researchers, early reading instruction should include instructional routines and practices that facilitate knowledge of phonics, which emphasizes correspondences between sounds and print (Seidenberg, Borkenhagan & Kearns, 2020).

The goal of reading is to be able to comprehend text. To do so, readers need to recognize words, fluently read them, and compute their meanings rapidly (Castles, Hastele & Nation, 2018). Recent studies agree that knowledge in the areas of phonemic awareness, phonics, and morphological awareness are the essential building blocks for proficient reading (Moats, 1994, 2009; Hudson et al., 2021) and should be prioritized when planning instruction for beginning and developing readers. A review of existing literature related to the teaching of reading reveals that explicit instruction in foundational reading skills provides developing readers with the greatest opportunity to learn to read proficiently (Hudson et al., 2021).

Just as phonemic awareness, phonics, and morphological analysis are critical skills to developing readers, so must they play an essential role in the education of preservice teachers who need to understand early literacy concepts and methods to teach early literacy skills to developing readers. These topics can be explored through traditional methods used in higher education courses, including readings, lectures, discussions, and modeling or demonstrations. Moreover, recent studies have also demonstrated that preservice teachers learn content through engagement with technology such as podcasts, videos, and webinars in addition to traditional coursework. Research revealed that preservice teachers who engaged with a podcast to teach early literacy skills significantly outperformed their peers who read articles (Carlisle et al., 2016; Driver et al., 2014, Kennedy et al., 2013). Like the podcast method, another study found that video tutorials and online study guides

focused on phoneme-grapheme correspondence in addition to coursework provided large effects on measures of phonics knowledge (Gormley & Ruhl, 2007). Given these findings, podcasts and videos could be a more engaging means to deliver content knowledge related to phonemic awareness, phonics, and morphology to preservice teachers.

The Science of Reading

The science of reading draws on key ideas and findings from seminal educational theories that assert how children learn to read and how best to teach reading. The findings from the National Reading Panel described above play a central role in the philosophy, as do other seminal theories and models, summarized here.

The alphabetic principle (Liberman, Shankweiler, & Liberman, 1989) asserts that there are systematic and predictable relationships between graphemes in written language and the phonemes they represent in spoken language. Readers who understand that letters represent the sounds heard when words are spoken, demonstrating knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correspondence, grasp the alphabetic principle. The students enrolled in the methods course, respond well to the Figure 1 created by Lane (2024) that illustrates how readers draw on early literacy skills to match sounds to letters with increasing levels of automaticity and systematically learn to read words and longer texts with fluency.

Figure 1
The Road to Fluent Reading
(Source: Lane, 2023)

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A second important theory included in the science of reading is the simple view of reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986), which defines reading comprehension (RC) as the product of two independent components: listening comprehension (LC) and decoding (D). The model is often presented as the equation LC X D = RC. According to the theory, young children draw upon their listening comprehension vocabulary while decoding print to decode and comprehend written words. The simple view of reading model is elaborated upon by Scarborough's reading rope (Scarborough, 2001), which illustrates how sub-skills of listening comprehension and decoding intertwine to promote skilled reading. Figure 2 depicts the skills that are included under each strand of the rope.

Figure 2

Scarborough's Reading Rope
(Source: Really Great Reading)

THE MANY STRANDS THAT ARE WOVEN INTO SKILLED READING
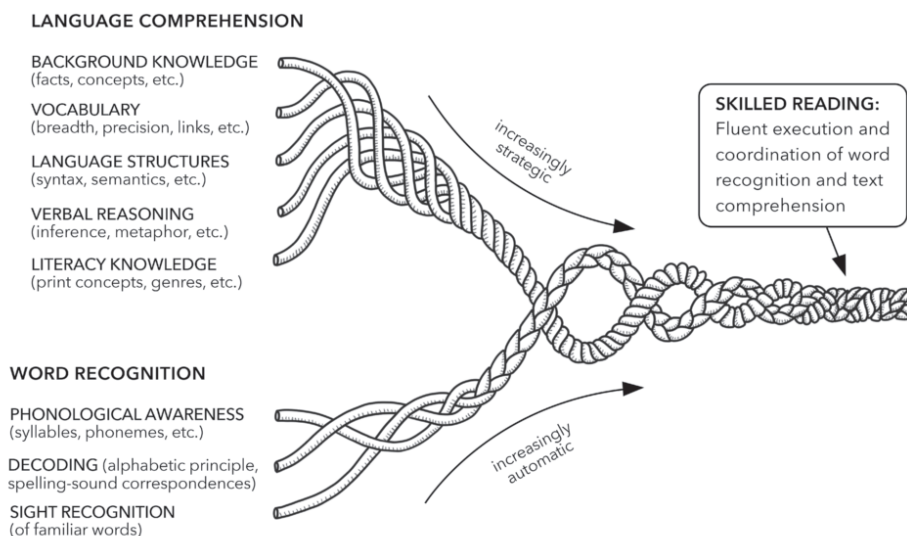
A third model, the four-part processor (Seidenberg & McClelland, 1989), illustrates how the brain processes words through the activation of four different areas of the brain as it engages in the complex task of reading. Various areas of the brain are at work to recognize print, understand the meaning, and apply it in meaningful contexts. Figure 3 depicts the four processors and the tasks that each one addresses.

Figure 3

The Four-Part Processor
(Source: Seidenberg & McClelland, 1989)
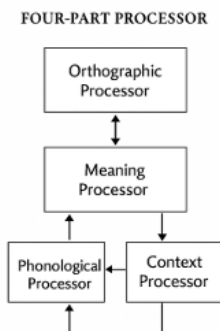
Finally, the science of reading privileges Ehri's theory on word reading development (1995), which describes four phases that readers progress through as they learn to read words. In the pre-alphabetic phase, children rely on visual cues, such as logos or shapes, to recognize words without understanding the letters. As they progress to the partial alphabetic phase, they begin to use some letter-sound relationships, often identifying just the first and last letters of a word. In the full alphabetic phase, children can decode words by applying complete letter-sound correspondences, allowing them to sound out words accurately. Finally, in the consolidated alphabetic phase, readers recognize larger units like syllables, morphemes, or familiar letter patterns, which enables more fluent and efficient word recognition. These phases illustrate a gradual shift from visual memorization to skilled phonological decoding and automatic word reading.

Figure 4

Ehri's Phases of Word Reading Theory
(Source: Thrive Literacy Corner 2022)
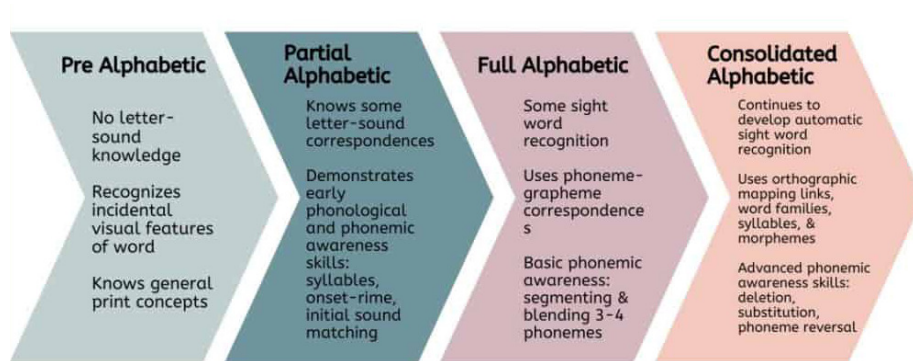
To best prepare future teachers of reading who are knowledgeable of both content and pedagogy, state legislatures, departments of education, and school systems are recommending and even mandating that the theories and models included in the science of reading be introduced to preservice teachers through coursework and field experiences. In our home state of Wisconsin, a state law known as ACT 20 was enacted to improve early literacy skills in Wisconsin public schools through a mandate for a science-aligned reading program for children in grades pre-kindergarten through third (2023 Wisconsin Act 20). Similarly, professional development trainings and workshops in the science of reading are also commonplace to enhance teachers' understanding of the teaching of reading and, in turn, bolster students' reading proficiencies and academic progress.

High Quality Teachers

All students have the right to an education and to have access to knowledgeable and qualified teachers of reading (International Literacy Association, 2019). Teachers play a crucial role in the education of children. Growing readers' achievement is influenced by factors such as the teachers' knowledge of the components of reading, the teacher's ability to plan and manage instructional routines, and the quality of the reading program (Hudson et al., 2021). Additionally, effective teachers have a depth of knowledge related to literacy content and pedagogical knowledge. Additionally, they understand how to be socially just and culturally responsive in their practice to serve all students in their classrooms (Wetzel et al., 2020). One of the most powerful predictors of academic success for students is the teacher in front of the class (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

Recent studies have demonstrated that teachers have an insufficient understanding of foundational reading skills necessary for providing effective instruction to students (Hudson et al., 2021). This finding, coupled with stagnant or declining reading scores, has fueled the science of reading movement to ensure that teachers have the requisite knowledge of how to teach reading and to make ILA's vision of knowledgeable and qualified teachers of reading for all students a reality.

Recommendations for Teacher Preparation

It is essential that teacher preparation programs prepare the next generations of teachers with knowledge, skills, and pedagogy to support the developing readers they encounter in their classrooms. To develop this skill, preservice teachers need preparation that includes both knowledge of code-related content and pedagogical methods as well as opportunities to practice teaching it in meaningful ways to students (Tortorelli, Lupo & Wheatley, 2021). A common design in the United States is to provide preservice teachers with a combination of coursework to learn how to teach the content, and field

experiences to provide them opportunities to teach elementary students as they prepare for future careers in teaching.

To support developing their reading content skills, reading methods coursework should prioritize early literacy content, including phonemic awareness, phonics, and morphology in its curriculum. Preservice teachers benefit from explicit instruction and practice with these skills and should have a strong grasp on the phoneme-grapheme correspondence. One recent study in England found that preservice teachers struggle to teach early literacy skills that precede phonics (Hendry, 2020). Preservice teachers were challenged to identify, segment, and blend phonemes in words and lead students in these activities. The phoneme-grapheme correspondence is a critical skill in learning to read and is an example of a skill that preservice teachers need to have mastery over so that they can support developing readers to apply decoding skills to read print. A second skill that should be taught explicitly is morphology, which plays a critical role in word learning, spelling, and vocabulary development (Tortorelli, Lupo & Wheatley, 2021).

The literature related to teacher preparation as it relates to the teaching of reading recommends that preservice teachers gain opportunities to practice teaching reading, to adapt to diverse student needs, and to reflect on the impact of their instruction on student learning (Tortorelli, Lupo & Wheatley, 2021). In one study, large effect sizes were realized for pre-service teachers in the experimental group who tutored elementary students with reading difficulties compared to the control group who did not have an opportunity to apply their skills with students (Peltier et al., 2020). High-quality field experiences are critical to effective pre-service teacher education programs. Opportunities to teach phonemic awareness, phonics, morphological skills, and other literacy areas support pre-service teachers to develop the knowledge of reading skills and pedagogical practices necessary for effective instruction (Ehri, 2022).

A best practice, according to the literature, recommends fostering strong connections between coursework and authentic opportunities to apply pedagogical skills through field and field placements (Hindman et al., 2020). The authors call for a variety of intentional, hands-on experiences with guidance that show preservice teachers how to promote foundational literacy skills to developing readers in the classroom. A promising model places preservice teachers in elementary settings and provides them with opportunities to teach reading with explicit feedback and coaching from professors, university supervisors, or expert teachers. Multiple studies have found that opportunities to observe and teach students with support and feedback lead preservice teachers to refine, reflect on, and improve their knowledge of reading skills and pedagogical practices aligned to the Science of Reading (Hendry, 2019). In an integrated review of available literature related to preparing preservice teachers to teach reading, the authors recommend stronger connections between reading methods courses and the enactment of reading practices

in the field (Tortorelli, Lupo, & Wheatley, 2021). A review of the research reveals the critical importance of high-quality field-based experiences under the direction of cooperating teachers and/or university supervisors who are experts in teaching early reading (Hudson et al., 2021). Intentional training accompanied by opportunities to practice under expert guidance produces the largest effect on teachers' content knowledge (Hudson et al., 2021).

Research to Practice

Students in our educational program take their first of two reading methods classes, Teaching Reading and Language Arts in Elementary School, as a part of a block of classes that includes an elementary field experience in local elementary schools. Through this design, students learn the nuts and bolts of teaching reading explicitly in their college class, and then can observe, support, and reflect on these skills in practice as they complete their experience in an assigned classroom. This section outlines the structure of the course and the aligned field experience as well as the intentional design of instruction and learning experiences, so that the students recognize the great importance of literacy skills and learn methods to teach reading and writing to children in grades prekindergarten through fourth grade.

Reading Methods Course

At the onset of the semester, students are prompted to reflect on what it means to be literate. The students initially define the term literate as meaning the ability to read and write, and they are correct. However, our discussion often morphs into the complexity of becoming literate, which begins with a strong oral language background, including listening comprehension and an ability to decode text. Literacy also requires individuals to apply reading and writing skills in various contexts and for various purposes. Literate citizens can comprehend information in written text and, conversely, convey information themselves through writing. This initial conversation sets the stage for the reading course and the concurrent field experience. The course instructor emphasizes the essential need for all children to have access to excellent teachers and effective literacy instruction so that they establish the building blocks needed to engage in complex literate behaviors throughout their lives.

The course is structured through a developmental lens, focusing first on oral language development and emergent literacy skills and moving to decoding and code-related instruction to lead to fluent reading before concluding with vocabulary and comprehension instruction. The science of reading guides our work with heavy emphasis on explicit and systematic instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics.

In recent semesters, I have structured the class in a flipped model where students are responsible for learning content through online course modules,

designed to support the preservice teachers to learn critical content for teaching reading and apply it in meaningful contexts. Students are assigned readings with reflection guides and video modules to complete as homework prior to class. Through this practice, students can build background knowledge related to reading skills prior to the course. This practice ensures that class time can be used to work intentionally on pedagogical skills to teach reading and important instructional routines to establish in the classroom. Table 2 illustrates essential reading skills and methods of teaching them to developing readers.

Table 2

Reading Skills and Methods Emphasized in Reading Course

Essential Literacy Skill	Pedagogical Methods/Assessments
Oral language development	Morning Meeting routines to encourage that students greet one another, share news, engage in an oral language activity, and read a morning message about the day
Phonological awareness: including word awareness, rhyme recognition, alliteration, syllable identification, and onset and rime manipulation	Phonemic Awareness Assessment administered to peers and to a student from their classroom
Phonemic awareness: including phoneme identification, isolation, blending, segmentation, addition, substitution, and deletion	Video lesson sample using the University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI) Reading Foundations toolbox
Phonics: including alphabetic principle, decoding, orthographic knowledge, encoding, and fluency	Video lesson sample using the University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI) Reading Foundations toolbox
Vocabulary building to develop lexical and morphological knowledge.	Word of the Day and Vocabulary instruction sequences

Perhaps the most significant instructional piece takes place during the second class meeting of each week. Students are invited to share with the class how they have observed or taught the reading skills they've learned in the course during their field experience. These opportunities to share, are where the "magic" happens. Students share anecdotes from their field experience and how they connect to course learning. They get to share aloud how they are supporting literacy instruction in the classroom. They recognize the "why" behind routines such as morning meeting or daily phonics instruction as they either observe or teach them. They've shared that they administered fluency assessments and were able to analyze them to determine students' strengths and needs as it relates to decoding skills. From the perspective of the instructor in higher education, it is particularly rewarding to observe the students connect the dots and share with one another as they engage in the important work of developing their teacher identities.

Elementary Literacy Field Experience

The elementary literacy field experience is an essential and valuable component of our teacher preparation program. The students engage in an 80-hour elementary literacy field experience in area schools providing them with authentic opportunities to support the literacy development of young children through instruction in reading and writing. We selected three partner schools to house the field experience students. Geographically, the schools are near the university, with the closest one being a couple of blocks away and the farthest one being 10 miles from campus. The schools educate children in grades prekindergarten through fourth grade which matches the focus of the course on teaching elementary-aged readers and writers. Finally, the schools are all designated as high-performing schools. The Department of Public Instruction in Wisconsin generates school and district report cards and publishes them annually. Our partner schools are consistently rated either "Meets Expectations" or "Exceeds Expectations." The score reflects data on multiple indicators for multiple school years across four priority areas: Achievement, Growth, Target Group Outcomes, and On-Track to Graduation. Additionally, one of the schools was recognized as a Blue Ribbon School based on its high performance in testing and success in closing achievement gaps. In 2021, it was selected by the US Department of Public Instruction as one of 325 schools across the nation for high academic performance. Our program is proud to place students within local high-performing schools and to provide them with opportunities to teach reading and writing in an authentic context.

The faculty and school partners worked together to plan the logistics related to offering field experiences on-site at their schools. Team members discussed master schedules to determine best times to offer the field experience experiences to ensure that the college students could support literacy instruction. Although there was some work involved to set the program up, the partners agreed that the placement of the program at the school was essential for the university students to learn about the teaching of reading and gain an opportunity to apply their skills.

An important aspect of the program involved faculty who were willing to serve in two roles: as instructor of the course and supervisor of the field experience. The dual roles ensured that the faculty was developing authentic course assignments that could be completed during the course and gaining an understanding of what field experience experiences looked like in the classroom during both informal and formal observations of teaching. The consistent presence of the faculty in the school building was also helpful with regular communication with classroom teachers and university students about progress, potential barriers, and proposed solutions.

Each student is assigned to a classroom and works with a mentor teacher. The mentor teacher is a valuable resource and serves as a model of effective

instruction, a co-collaborator as students begin to plan and teach lessons, and an evaluator of instruction. Through their work with children, preservice teachers can support a variety of diverse learning needs including students with identified disabilities and others who are emergent bilinguals.

The field experience experiences begin early in the academic semester. Instructor observations of university students arriving at their assigned schools reflects feelings of excitement and nervousness just as the elementary aged students do on their first day of school. The field experience students meet with the principal and their university supervisor to discuss expectations and procedures such as entering the building, checking in, and the school's emergency plan prior to the start of the field experience. The preservice teachers take a tour of the school to find their way around and learn expectations for students related to moving through the building and entering and exiting for recess.

Beyond their immediate classroom community and mentor teacher, the PSTs became acquainted with professionals in the school community, including the principal, administrative assistants, classroom teachers, special education teachers, librarians, and paraprofessionals. The PSTs gained true insights into the work of school professionals and got to know them and the community they served through the sharing of experiences.

In the mediated model, where field experiences are coordinated with the outcomes of the university course, future teachers are supported in meaningful training to prepare them for the myriads of complex teaching situations they will encounter in elementary classrooms. Preservice teachers complete weekly time logs where they provide brief summaries of their work in the classrooms along with reflections on what they are learning about teaching. The time logs are shared with their university supervisor so that the document can serve as a two-way dialogue and provide a more in-depth glimpse into their clinical experience.

Discussion

As our understanding of the skills and strategies essential for proficient reading continues to grow, it is critical that this knowledge be integrated into teacher preparation programs. Doing so ensures that future educators are equipped to support children in developing strong oral language and early literacy foundations – key components of becoming skilled readers. Research indicates that enhancing teacher knowledge of early literacy skills can lead to improved student outcomes at the word level (Hudson et al., 2021). Therefore, it is imperative that teacher education programs include comprehensive instruction in language and literacy development.

Our program is designed to provide preservice teachers with both content knowledge and pedagogical strategies related to reading and writing instruction. These are reinforced through meaningful field experiences with

developing readers (Hindman et al., 2020). In the current iteration of our reading course and field experience, students engage with content through assigned readings and interactive online modules that both deliver instruction and assess understanding. Classroom sessions focus on high-level content review and the application of pedagogical practices to support literacy development. The field experience component allows students to practice teaching under the guidance of a mentor teacher and university supervisor, bridging theory and practice in authentic classroom settings.

Limitations

While the National Reading Panel identifies five core pillars of reading instruction, this paper focuses on three early literacy components that have received increased attention in recent research: phonemic awareness, phonics, and vocabulary development.

Additionally, the discussion centers on preparing preservice teachers to instruct a general student population. It does not specifically address the needs of linguistically diverse learners or students with identified learning disabilities. Furthermore, while the paper aligns current practices in one teacher preparation program with recommendations from the literature, it does not present empirical data to evaluate the effectiveness of the approach.

Conclusion

Preservice teachers benefit from explicit instruction in early literacy components such as phonemic awareness, phonics, and morphemic analysis. It is recommended that this instruction be paired with concurrent field experiences that allow pre-service teachers to observe literacy instruction, tutor individuals or small groups, and teach whole-class lessons. Reflection is a critical part of this process, enabling preservice teachers to evaluate their instructional practices and consider their impact on student learning. Analyzing student work samples further supports instructional decision-making and planning.

Our program has made intentional efforts to teach foundational reading content and provide preservice teachers with meaningful opportunities to apply their knowledge in elementary classrooms. These experiences help bridge the gap between theory and practice, preparing future educators to support the literacy development of young learners.

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Rhetorical Underlies of the Development of the Reading Comprehension

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Abstract:

The study investigates the extent to which text processing procedures employed in educational settings are grounded in rhetorical principles and how an enhanced understanding of rhetoric can facilitate a more deliberate and, consequently, more effective development of reading comprehension skills. The research aims to illustrate, through the analysis of contemporary texts, the application of rhetorical principles in terms of structure, argumentation, and style. Additionally, the study explores the rationale behind considering school text processing procedures and models as manifestations of rhetorical analysis. A teacher who recognizes the engagement in rhetorical analysis with students during text interpretation can more effectively and intentionally enhance students' reading comprehension across both traditional (written, printed) and media texts.

Keywords:

rhetoric, reading comprehension, text genres, structures of text, persuasion

Introduction

The development of reading comprehension skills is a critical concern in mother tongue education. This paper primarily investigates the relationship between rhetoric and reading (as well as listening and visual) comprehension.

While rhetoric is often perceived as merely ancient oratory, it encompasses more than that; it is the science of public communication, particularly persuasive communication. Rhetoric has been a fundamental component of Western culture since antiquity, and even contemporary (media) texts are crafted in alignment with its principles. Consequently, rhetoric can facilitate the interpretation and analysis of texts. In the theoretical section of this paper, I first provide a concise overview of the science and history of rhetoric. Subsequently, I identify certain rhetorical elements embedded in

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first-language education. In the research component of the study, I address the following questions:

1. Is rhetoric truly present? If so, how is it taught in modern and postmodern texts?
2. Building on the above, how can rhetoric contribute to the enhancement and development of reading comprehension?

The Science of Rhetoric

The Greek *tekhné rhetoriké* and *rhétor* are derived from the word rhema (meaning word), and rhema from the verb *eiro* ('I say'). Similarly, the Latin *ars oratoria* and orator are derived from the verb 'to say, to speak' (Corbett & Connors, 1999, p. 15).

The technical term *rhétor* first appears in Aristophanes' works. Plato uses rhetoric, the art of persuasion (Gorgias 453a), which he defines as "rhetoric in its entire nature an art which leads the soul by means of words" (Phaedrus 261a).

Book 9 of the Iliad offers significant insights into the rhetorical practices of Homer's era, particularly through the episode where the Greeks dispatch an embassy to the aggrieved Achilles in an attempt to persuade him to rejoin the battle. Each of the three emissaries delivers a speech to Achilles, who in turn responds to each, resulting in a total of six speeches. The speeches of the three ambassadors exemplify the three modes of persuasion, which were formally articulated much later. Odysseus (Ulysses) delivers the first speech, employing rational arguments and appealing to their shared interests to convince Achilles. Phoenix invokes religious considerations and asserts his right to counsel Achilles, drawing on the paternal relationship he shares with him. Ajax, characterized as a straightforward soldier, initially expresses frustration to Odysseus ("Hence let us go – why waste we time in vain?") and then addresses Achilles directly ("Then hear, Achilles! be of better mind"). This episode demonstrates that, in addition to persuasion through reason (logos), arguments based on character (ethos) and emotional appeal (pathos) were utilized and taught during Homer's time (Kennedy, 1999, pp. 8–11). Notably, Achilles appears most responsive to emotional appeals: he reacts angrily to Odysseus' arguments, promises Phoenix to reconsider his stance, but ultimately changes his mind only after Ajax's direct confrontation (Adamik, 2000, pp. 13–14; Kennedy, 1994, pp. 13–14).

The earliest manuals of rhetorical theory emerged in Sicily following the establishment of Syracusan democracy in 467 BC, although these works did not survive. Ancient tradition credits Corax with having founded rhetorical theory. He developed an advisory speech structure that employed probability-based reasoning to this end. The three-part structure of the speech – comprising the introduction, narration, and conclusion –is also attributed to him. His student Teisias expanded upon this by describing judicial speech

and adding a fourth component: proof. It has been posited that Corax and Teisias may have been the same individual, as the term 'corax' translates to 'crow', which could have served as a nickname for Teisias (Adamik, 2000; Cole, 1991; Kirby, 1996; Usher, 2002).

The first scientific description of rhetoric was provided by Aristotle. He defined the object of his work as „as the faculty of observing the available means of persuasion in any given case (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1925)". The utter summary of ancient rhetoric is The Institutio Oratoria of Quintilian. According to his definition the rhetoric is „science of speaking well" or science of speaking righly" (Quintilian, 1920/1996, pp. 315–316). The „right" means the squareness on the one part and the professional goodness of the speech on the other part (Adamik, 2010). In ancient times, every public figure (lawyer, politician) was a rhetorician, and studying rhetoric meant a higher education.

The rhetoric developed by Aristotle was supplemented by later Greek texts. Theophrastus (372-288) discussed stylistic virtues and genres, Hermagoras (2nd century BC) developed the theory of stasis, and other authors developed the theory of presentation and memory development. The theory of stasis, as explained in *Rhetorica ad Herennium* and Cicero's *De Oratore*, is a major innovation in Hellenistic rhetoric (Fanthan, 2006). These works have not survived, and we know about them only from fragments and references in other works.

The works of Greek authors were used and further developed by Roman rhetoricians. The first Latin rhetorical manual, *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, or Rhetoric dedicated to C. Herennius (Ret. Her. 80s BC), was also based on Greek sources. Tradition associates it with the works of Cicero, but a comparison with them shows that it cannot be the work of Cicero. The humanist Raphael Regius identified the author as Cornificius.

One of the most famous Roman orators is Cicero, whose speeches are also important historical sources that the historian must view with criticism due to their bias. At the same time, they document Cicero's development in rhetoric well and generally reveal the rhetorical techniques of the time (Lintott, 2008).

In addition to his speeches, his works on rhetoric theory are very significant. *De inventione*, linked to *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, was considered a textbook of rhetorical education for centuries and thus served as the basis for literary activity (Adamik, 2012).

Classical rhetoric reached its peak in Quintilian (35–100 AD): *Institutio oratoria* (Oratory Training). The *Institutio* systematises, evaluates, and supplements Greek and Roman works, raises both synchronic and diachronic aspects, and creates unity between theory and practice. In fact, it is the predecessor of today's university textbooks or academic handbooks (Ueding, 2011).

According to classical rhetoric, the five tasks of the orator are invention (*inventio*), arrangement (*dispositio*), elaboration (*elocutio*), memorisation (*memoria*), and delivery (*pronuntiatio*, action; Barthes, 1970). It can be seen that (maybe apart from memorisation) the same tasks must be performed by the creator of any text.

Invention (inventio) involves the collection of materials and the planning of the argument. The author of the text ("orator") can use arguments from outside rhetoric (e.g. laws, statistics, and testimonies) or create them himself. So-called arguments within art can come from logic (logos), from the credibility and personality of the speaker (ethos), or from the emotions of the audience (pathos). Rhetorical arguments can be inductive; rhetorical induction is an example, or deductive, rhetorical deduction is the enthymeme. An enthymeme is a form of syllogism in which one of the premises is not necessarily true but is instead probable. It is also characterized as a condensed syllogism, where one of the premises or the conclusion may be omitted, requiring the audience to infer the missing component through reasoning (Aristotle, 1925; Quintilian, 1920/1996, 2015; Corbett & Connors, 1999).

The basic forms of reasoning are intuitively learned in early childhood. When a child asked for permission to do something on the grounds that another child was also allowed to do it, he used an example (including a model, cf. Perelman-Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1958, pp. 488–495). An enthymeme is a truncated syllogism, in which the audience must be mentally complete with a premise or conclusion. When a small child wants to eat chocolate after brushing his teeth in the evening, his parents often argue that he must brush his teeth again afterwards. Building on this experience, the resourceful child uses an enthymeme (personal experience): "*I would like to brush my teeth again.*"

From the author's perspective, arrangement (disposition) refers to the formation of the structure of the text. The so-called three-part structure (introduction – discussion – conclusion) learned in primary school comes from the 5th century BC rhetorician Korax (Adamikné, 2013). The most complete system is created in antiquity counts with seven potential parts of speech: introduction, narration, proposition, proof, refutation, conclusion, and digression (Quintilian, 2015).

Elaboration (elocutio), or style, is based on the virtue of propriety: the invention of appropriate words and sentences (Ret. Her., 1954). Propriety primarily refers to correspondence with an addressee.

In ancient rhetoric, memorisation (memoria) meant the learning of elaborate speech for which various mnemonic procedures were invented (cf. Ret. Her., 1954; Quintilian, 2015). Memory is the basis of learning.

In rhetoric, delivery (*pronuntiatio*) refers to the planning and implementation of the oral presentation of speech from pronunciation to the use of text phonetics to body language. In written text, this includes appearance,

font, font size, and illustrations. Media texts also include the planning of editing, camera movement, and other background elements (e.g. music).

In the Middle Ages, rhetoric was one of the seven liberal arts (*septem artes liberales*), but it was pushed out of higher education and replaced by theology, law, and medicine. Since the social and political life of medieval states did not favour oratory, rhetoric assisted in administrative matters by drafting and interpreting letters, laws, and documents (Adamik, 2003). This is partly why rhetoric became a theory of prose works, in addition to oratory (cf. Acsay, 1889; Kindrick at al., 1980; Corbett & Connors, 1999).

Some modern definitions state that rhetoric is the science of communication in public and to the public, dealing with issues of public interest (Wacha, 2000; Heath & Ihlen, 2018). According to one of the most well-known rhetorical course books, the classical rhetoric for modern students by Edward P. J. Corbett and Robert J. Connors (1999, p. 1) "rhetoric is the art or discipline that deals with the use of discourse, either spoken or written, to inform or persuade or motivate an audience, whether that audience is made up of one person or a group of persons."

Currently, media experts say that rhetoric is a practice and critique at the same time (Silverstone, 1999).

Rhetoric and the First Language Education

The most complete description and systematisation of ancient rhetoric can be found in Quintilian's work, *Institutio oratoria*, or Oratory (the title has also been translated as The Education of the Orator). Later, rhetoricians did not change the system but rather examined its individual elements in more detail, so Quintilian's work is a good guide for presenting the system of rhetoric. The institution deals with the process of becoming an orator. It should be noted that, in antiquity, the word orator had a broader meaning: it meant a public figure. Quintilian's Oratory describes the subject in twelve books (chapters). The first book deals with the upbringing of young children, and the second book with the beginnings of rhetorical education. Then comes the more narrowly defined theory of rhetoric, with five books dealing with exploration and arrangement and four books dealing with style, memorisation, and presentation. The twelfth book goes beyond the discussion of craft and techne, as its topic is the ethics of the orator.

If we compare the development areas of mother tongue/first language education (based on Hungarian curricula) with the areas of oral education, we find correspondences everywhere. The following table shows the results of these comparisons:

Table 1

Development areas of first language education and areas of oral education (Source: Lózsi, 2021, p. 33)

Assignments of the school development	The orator's education
Communicative competence	Elementary education, elocution
Reading comprehension	Elementary education, elementary rhetorical exorcises
Writing, composition	Elementary education, invention, arrangement, style
Development of learning ability	Elementary education, memorization
Linguistic knowledge	Elementary education
Literary culture	Elementary education. Retiring
Moral sense	Morals of the orator

Quintilian describes the principles, methods, and content of educating the orator–that is, the whole person–from the cradle to retirement. The focus of the manual is rhetoric, which provides material for higher education in antiquity (Quintilian, 2015).

The first two books deal with everything that precedes specific (advanced) rhetorical studies: how to raise a small child, what a nanny's speech should be like, whether to choose private education or school, and how to deal with children of different abilities, but here it also deals with grammar, correct pronunciation, recommended reading, music learning, and gymnastics. This is why the term "raising a small child" appears in almost every row of the table, since the first (and second) books are about upbringing and education prior to higher education.

In the first and partly second chapters of the Institutio, Quintilian (deals with sounds, syllables, parts of speech, grammatical knowledge, language habits, spelling (native language knowledge), as well as what young children should read, what older people should read, which authors (orators, historians) should read, and who is preparing to become a rhetorician (literary culture). In addition to linguistic and literary education, he also discusses other subjects, especially music, geometry, and gymnastics (Quintilian 1920/1996, 2015).

While rhetoric was a component of higher education in antiquity, Quintilian's contributions addressed the comprehensive education of the individual. Over the centuries, rhetoric has consistently been incorporated into educational curricula to varying degrees. In contemporary Hungary, rhetoric is explicitly included in the secondary school curriculum; however, as previously noted, its elements have been integrated into various aspects of native language education.

Subject Matter and Method

One of my goals was to demonstrate the presence of rhetoric in recent texts. With this objective, I chose two texts representing genres which children can often meet. Either of them is a fairy tale, more precisely a tale novel which is the *Winnie - the - Pooh* by A. A. Milne. The other is the real (post)modern media text of a commercial video.

The selection of a fairy tale as a subject appears self-evident: the fairy tale genre represents the initial literary form encountered by young children, serving as the foundation for their reading comprehension through listening and subsequent reading. "*Winnie – the – Pooh*" exemplifies a classic fairy tale, having been translated into numerous languages, maintaining global readership, and inspiring various animated adaptations.

The commercial in question exemplifies a postmodern media text, characterized by its multimedia nature, where visual and non-verbal auditory components often surpass verbal elements in significance.

According to a prior survey, a child within the European Union is exposed to an average of 140,000 television advertisements by the age of 18 (Sas, 2007, p. 140). It has long been recognized that advertisers frequently target children, as they represent future consumers, develop brand loyalty from an early age, and exert considerable influence over their parents' purchasing decisions. Melissa Müller (1997) refers to them as the "little kings of the world of goods." This context elucidates the selection of commercial products. The *Doritos* commercial serves as a pertinent example, with its primary character being a child.

The method used was rhetorical analysis. Rhetorical analysis is a relatively new field in rhetorical applications. Relativity stems from the fact that, in antiquity, when the practice and theory of rhetoric (in that order) were born, analysis was not yet written about, although it was probably practiced at the same time. Quintilian (2015) mentioned how earlier orations could be used in education and gave aspects to analyse, such as the strengths and weaknesses of the speech, the speaker's ingenuity and sense of style, characteristics of division, argumentation, and style.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, rhetorical analysis played a particularly important role in enabling us to critically approach the continuous attempts to influence us (Corbett & Connors, 1999, pp. 24–26).

Corbett (1969, pp. XI–XIV) wrote in the introduction to the collection of Rhetorical Analyses of Literary Works that rhetoric is more interested in the process than in the final product. Rhetorical analysis examines the text as it emerges from the communicative triangle formed by the mutual relationship between speaker/writer, subject-matter, and listener/reader; it focuses on the text but also takes into account the author and the audience (Corbett, 1969, pp. XVII–XXII, Corbett & Connors, 1999, p. 2).

Martha Cooper's 1989 book on the analysis of public discourse, which is still useful today, recommends rhetoric as the main tool of analysis. The

practice of public persuasion was based on rhetoric even among ancient Greeks (Cooper, 1989).

In Hungarian, Mrs. Anna Jászó Adamik (A. Jászó, 2012), partly based on Cooper's work, proposed a set of analytical criteria, the scheme of which is as follows.

1. Establishing rhetorical situation
2. Establishing the (speech) genre
3. Establishment of the structure
4. Whether the argument is logical or emotional.
5. Establishing the inductive and/or deductive nature of thought processes
6. Using both external and internal arguments.
   a) External arguments: authority, testimony, statistics, maxims, precedent, and signs.
   b) Internal arguments: arguments taken from general and special sources.
7. Using topos or general sources of argument: arguments based on definition, comparison, relations, circumstances; special sources of argument: arguments of speech genres
8. Establishing whether there was an argumentative error or manipulation in the text.
9. Determining the genres, stylistic virtues and stylistic devices,
10. Determining the manner of presentation.
    a) Spoken text: speech and body language;
    b) In the case of written text: punctuation, graphene structures, typography
11. Impact on the audience;
12. Speaker's ethos

Rhetorical analysis is built on the system of rhetoric, which is based on the five tasks of the orator (speaker and writer).

The range of aspects of rhetorical analysis also follows the tasks of the speaker, so we can discuss six main aspects:

1. Establishing rhetorical situation.
   I examine the phenomena described by Bitzer (1968) and others in the context of the rhetorical situation (exigence, audience, constraint) as well as other contextual factors (for example, besides the audience, it identifies the other participants of the communication).
2. Defining the genre (speech genre).
   The examination of the genre means the classification of the examples into the system of speech types according to specific aspects of rhetoric.
3. Exploring the structure.
   On the one hand, it can mean finding the classic parts of speech equivalents in any text. However, it can also mean using other structural models, such as Cooper's (1989) three-tiered structural examination. In this paper, I will limit myself to identifying the classical parts of speech, partly

due to space limitations and partly because they are the most emphasised in school education (e.g. in composition classes).

4. Examining the argument.

It can cover several areas:

   a) identification of the processes used to create presence,
   b) examination of sources of reasoning (special and general sources of reasoning),
   c) the disclosure of the appearance of reasoning types (associative/dissociative, enthymeme, example, ethos, pathos).

5. Examining the style.

The examination of style means, on the one hand, the identification of the genre and, on the other, the identification of various decorative elements (tropes, figures). The style is not clearly separated from reasoning. The creation of the presence (or highlighting the topicality and importance of the items to be proven) serves the impact reasoning and relies heavily on the style.

6. Examining the manner of presentation.

Proper diction can help the orator present their arguments effectively to the audience. In this paper, I do not intend to analyse the performance mode of examples in detail; I only provide a brief overview of the most important characteristics.

Based on the specific aspects of the analyses and the nature of the analysed text, some aspects may be emphasised, while others may be omitted. Cooper (1989) notes that it is almost impossible to exhaust all analytical possibilities because a message may include a mosaic of a whole series of sub-messages.

The hypotheses I propose are as follows:

   H1. Rhetorical analysis is applicable to the examination of any text, including media texts.
   H2. The texts under analysis, namely the fairy tale and the commercial, are inherently rhetorical, thereby offering a rhetorical response to a rhetorical situation.
   H3. The outcomes of rhetorical analysis facilitate a deeper understanding of the texts.

Results: The Hidden Rhetoric

The Rhetorical Situation

The concept of rhetorical situation appears in modern rhetoric. A rhetorical situation is a set of persons, relationships, interests, and constraints that prompts the speaker to speak (Bitzer, 1968; Brinton, 1981; Miller, 1984).

Although it was not known that in ancient times, various types of speech were abstracted from the main characteristics of situations. The doctrine of speech genres is so much a part of our culture that all text genres to this day can be traced back to them (Plett 2000, 2001).

"Rhetorical situation may be defined as a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence (Bitzer, 1968, 6)".

The concept of rhetorical situation is similar in many ways to the ancient principles of conformance and propriety (Greek: *kairos* and *prepon*; Latin: *aptum* and *decorum*), since it was already known at that time that the subject and style of speech were determined by the situation. Instead of constraints, the expression of interest may be more appropriate (cf. Brinton, 1981, pp. 234–247).

In the case of literature (e.g. Winnie – the – Pooh), we can examine the situation of storytelling and listening/reading as well as the situations within the work. In the former case, the person is the storyteller (narrator) and the listener/reader. The storyteller and narrator can be two different persons, since in the situation of "storytelling", the actual storyteller tells or reads a previously completed story, in which case the narrator within the story is different from the physical storyteller. If we read the story ourselves, we encounter only the internal narrator. Of course, the internal narrator is not necessarily the same as the creator of the story.

In the case of a commercial, the sender is ultimately the client of the advertisement (the company offers a product or service). However, this sender always addresses the recipient indirectly, as both the advertising agency and character or narrator of the given advertisement are between the two.

In both cases, the addressee is a particular audience (cf. Perelman, 1982) who read the novel or watched a commercial. Both texts assumed an ideal recipient. Due to its genre, *Winnie – the – Pooh* primarily addresses children, while the commercial addresses potential consumers (members of the target group). The recipient is the person (usually thousands of people) whom the advertiser wants to convince to purchase.

The audience of an advertisement is nothing more than the recipient of the advertisement–the target group of consumers. Of course, the advertisement can reach other recipients, but only those who can be influenced by the message and are able to make a decision on the matter are considered an actual audience.

According to the theory of the rhetorical situation, the speaker is prompted to speak by the need to discover some deficiencies that he believes he can correct with the help of speech. The creator and teller of a tale are guided mostly by the intention to teach or delight. Delight (entertainment) is the goal of all kinds of art, including literature and storytelling. *Winnie – the –*

Pooh first delights and teaches the second. Literary works, especially tales, achieve an (emotional) educational effect through identification with characters. Reading literature (listening to tales) is also indirect social learning (cf. Nagy, 2006; Molnár, 2006).

Every advertiser wants to sell some kind of goods (product, service, party, candidate); that is, in the case of advertising to the customer, the need refers to the sale of the goods. Sales are a basic need for the producers of the products, but for the audience, it is not a sufficient reason to speak, so the creators of advertisements construct other embedded needs. In the case of the analysed *Doritos* advertisement, the need for the producer/distributor is to maintain brand awareness. The constructed need is an expression in which the best gift is a Doritos bag.

The Genre

Genre is not just a literary category; all kinds of texts have some kind of genre. In my opinion, all contemporary genres (including literary ones) can be traced back to rhetorical speech types and/or parts of oratorical speech.

Classical rhetoric distinguishes three types of speech: forensic (legal, judicial), deliberative (or advisory), and epideictic (or demonstrative). Speech types are distinguished based on their topic, specific tense (what time they refer to), and purpose or specific source of argument (Aristotle, 1925; Knape, 2000, pp. 36–37, Corbett & Connors, 1999; 2. table).

Table 2

Speech genres

Speech genre	Topic	Time	Goal/specific source of argument
Forensic	accusation/defense	past	justifiable/unjustifiable
Deliberative	persuasion/dissuasion	future	useful/harmful
Epideictic	praise/blame	present	honour/dishonor

Genres are created by recurring elements of the rhetorical situation and by common typological interpretations applied by the participants, which are the conditions for successful communication. Genres are social constructions that name repertoires of actions linked to certain circumstances and identify possible speaker intentions (Aczél, 2008). 21).

Heinrich Plett (2000, 15, 2001, 17) derived speech genres from the speech situation (especially in terms of topic and function) and examined them from the following aspects: topic, text function, moods, primary time frame, and text types. What is new compared to ancient aspects is the emphasis on moods and the listing of text types belonging to the speech genre.

The characteristics of a tale (e.g. the writing of A. A. Milne) are based on the following:

a) theme: some (usually miraculous) fictional story,
b) text function: delight and/or teaching
c) emotions: joy, excitement
d) primary time frame: past
e) Text types: fairy tale, fable, tall tale, etc.

In terms of text function and emotions, the characteristics of other literary genres are the same as those of fairy tales. The theme of all epic and dramatic genres is also a fictional story, and the primary time-plane of the epic is the past.

It also becomes clear from the above that fairy tales, but also literary works in general, can be classified primarily as epideictic speech since their specific sources of argument are beauty or ugliness (honour or dishonour). Second, the literature also teaches that in this respect, it is close to deliberative speech. Of course, good literature only teaches a sideline; this is not its primary function.

Advertisements can also be epideictic speeches in terms of the topic, as they often contain praise for a product (or the condemnation of a competing product). However, taking all three aspects into account, we can primarily classify them as deliberative speeches since they aim to persuade people to purchase a product or service in the future by trying to convince them of the usefulness of the given product.

Advertisements list the advantages of the offered product or perhaps present the disadvantages of not using them. They encourage us to buy the offered product or service, or warn us of the consequences of not buying. In the commercial used as an example, we can see the advantages of Doritos chips in the joy of a little girl. The argument of harmfulness also appears when one of the guests brings a pony as a gift, instead of Doritos. Since the purchase can take place in the future relative to the time of the speech, the primary timeframe in advertisements is the future. Plett (2000, p. 15; 2001, p. 17) specifically mentioned advertising among the text types of deliberative speech.

The Structure of The Texts

According to classical rhetoric, the second task of the orator is dispositio, or arrangement. Aristotle considered the thesis and the proof to be obligatory parts of a speech, and all the parts were structured as follows for him: introduction, thesis, proof (which includes refutation), conclusion. The most complete system is found in Quintilian's Rhetoric: introduction, narration (statement of facts), thesis, proof, refutation, conclusion, digression.

This six- or seven-part scheme is so successful that, in addition to speeches, it was also the basis for the structure of diplomas, sermons, and many

literary works, and can even be seen in action, for example, in Verdi opera arias or James Bond films. Of course, not all parts must be included in every text. A digression is a part of speech that does not seem to be about the main topic of the speech; in literary works, its equivalent is an episode. The order of the parts of speech is not strictly defined either.

Due to the specifics of the genre (!), the whole novel of *Winnie - the - Pooh* is a narration, but within this narration we can also explore other speech or rather text parts. The introduction outlines the basic situation, i.e. the internal rhetorical situation of the tale. The title of the first part of the book is also: Introduction. Then in the description of the first chapter we can read: "… in which we are *introduced* to Winnie-the-Pooh and some Bees, and *the story begin*". Then follows the narration, i.e. the various adventures of the inhabitants of 100 Aker Woods.

However, during the story there is also argument and refutation, especially in the dialogues between the characters. And there are some implicit thesis and argumentation for them due to teaching function of the novel. Theses can be the importance of love and friendship etc. At the end of chapter 10 we can read a classic ending, which the chapter title again refers to: "… and we say *good-by*".

The *Doritos* commercial is short (only 28 seconds), but the classic parts of text are still recognizable. The first image and sentence ("Happy Birthday!") can be considered an introduction. The narration, the theses, and the proof are mainly visual: the little girl opens her birthday presents, which she is very happy about, since each package contains a bag of chips (with different flavours). The arrival of the guest who brings a different type of present (a pony) is the refutation: the little girl is not happy about the pony, and says to her parents with her mouth twisted in tears: "That's not Doritos!" The last scene with Doritos logo and the crunching sound correspond to the ending.

Table 3

Parts of Speech in the examples

Part of speech	Winnie-the-Pooh	"Doritos" commertial
introduction	Introduction, Chapter One	visual + "Happy Birthday!"
narration	stories	
thesis	implicit	Doritos is the best present
proof	embedded in the stories	partly visual
refutation	embedded in the stories	"That's not Doritos!"
conclusion	"…we say good-by"	last scene
digression		

Argumentation, Persuasion

"Wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And wherever there is 'meaning' there is persuasion.' (Burke, 1966, p. 305)."

The first half of the remark was stated by Aristotle (1925, p. 3): "Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion."

According to rhetorical tradition, there are two main types of evidence: extra- and intra-rhetorical. Extrarhetorical evidence is not invented by the speaker; it already exists. Such evidence includes witnesses, documents, authorities, statistics, maxims, precedents, and signs (Adamikné, 2013; Corbett & Connors, 1999).

The evidence within rhetoric that the orator must find and create is of three types: it can affect the audience's intellect (logos), moral sense (ethos), and emotions (pathos; Aristotle, 1925).

The word logic is a derivative of the word logos, so logos are logical reasoning. Basically, two types of inferences and accordingly two types of logic are usually distinguished. Inferences in which the truth of the premises necessarily entails fully guaranteeing the truth of the conclusion are called deductive inferences (arguments). These are the strongest and best arguments that are imaginable. Deductive inferences are addressed using formal logic. Inferences in which the truth of the premises only makes the truth of the conclusion probable but not necessary are called inductive inferences (arguments; Seech, 1987; Hurley, 1988).

The rhetorical equivalent of deductive reasoning is enthymeme. An enthymeme is a syllogism that is usually truncated, meaning that it lacks a premise or conclusion and whose premises are not certainties but probabilities. A truncated syllogism is more effective in persuading people than a fully developed one because the audience has to add the implicit part to their mind (*en thymo*: existing in the mind; Adamikné, 2013).

Rhetorical induction is the example. In addition to a simple example, this includes models, precedents, and analogies. An example is an argument from one particular to another, stating something about a new matter based on an old matter. The purpose of the illustration is to make a rule or generalisation by presenting a specific case. Thus, an example precedes the case, an illustration follows it, the purpose of an example is to generalise, and that of an illustration is to illustrate or clarify. A model justifies an action by demonstrating that it corresponds to a model. The countermodel argues against this pattern. An analogy illuminates the relationship between the two terms through the relationship of two other terms (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1958).

Among the sources of arguments, we distinguish between general and special sources of arguments. General sources of arguments can be used in any type of speech, such as definitions, comparisons, relations, and circum-

stances. Special sources of argument are characteristic of a particular type of speech (see Table 2; Corbett & Connors, 1999).

For Aristotle, ethos contributes to the power of proof by making the speaker appear trustworthy and credible for his audience. This effect should be achieved through speech, not by the speaker's prior reputation. Three things can make someone acceptable: wisdom (*phronesis*), virtue (*arete*), and goodwill (*eunoia*; Aristotle, 1925; Ueding, 2011).

Regarding pathos, Aristotle (1925, p. 35) says that "the Emotions are all those feelings that so change men as to affect their judgements." The orator must know each emotion, how it can be aroused, what kind of people it is aimed at, and what makes people feel it.

The methods of arousing emotions include *deinosis* and *phantasy*. *Deinosis* (magnification, exaggeration) is what creates an emotion in the audience that is not there or greater than what already exists. *Phantasy* (imagination) is what makes images of distant things appear as if they were present and seen with our eyes (Quintilian, 2015, cf. Perelman, 1982).

Texts always contain arguments. In this regard, the first question we should ask our students is what the text is trying to convince them. This will also help us find the often-implicit proposition (see parts of speech).

Literary works primarily want to convince the readers of themselves, that is, that they are worth reading. Second, they have some teaching (i.e. persuasive) intentions. In our previous example, in A. A. Milne's Winnie-the-Pooh, persuasive intention was aimed at accepting the importance of love and friendship. The characters of the novel are modelled in many ways (one example). They embody a typical human trait (using an exaggeration tool). The friendship between Christopher Robin and Winnie-the-Pooh and the animal characters is a model of friendship itself. Their adventures model different life situations, thus promoting situational learning by making the reader/listener empathise with the characters and compare their own experiences with what they read.

These stories contain arguments. Consider Winnie's reasoning regarding deceiving bees as an example.

'When you go after honey with a balloon, the great thing is not to let the bees know you're coming. Now, if you have a green balloon, they might think you were only part of the tree, and not notice you, and if you have a blue balloon, they might think you were only part of the sky, and not notice you, and the question is: Which is most likely?'

In this argument, the bear cub uses a deductive inference method.

Premise 1. If you have a green balloon, they might think you were only part of the tree (…), and if you have a blue balloon, they might think you were only part of the sky. (General statement: proposition)

Premise 2. (not linguistically expressed): If they think you are a part of the tree or the sky, they do not care about you.

Conclusion: They did not notice this. (= You can easily get the honey.)

Advertising is persuasive by its nature. The main argument of the Doritos commercial is an example (an illustration according to Perelman's categories): The main character, a little girl, loves Doritos chips so much that she wants to get them for her birthday. Guests know this too, except for one person who is a counterexample. In addition, emotional reasoning (pathos) plays a significant role: the little girl's joy and disappointment (when someone brings pony instead of chips) serves to convince viewers.

Style and Delivery

One of the five tasks of the orator is to develop an expression or style (elocutio). Style is based on the virtue of propriety–the invention of appropriate words and sentences. The task of style is to bring things and thoughts completely to the listener, and with the help of style, we can make things present to the receivers, which is the basis of argumentation (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1958; Quintilian, 2015).

Ancient rhetoricians have discussed three styles: simple, moderate (medial), and sublime. The simple style is characterised by descending to the level of everyday speech and not using many figures of speech; however, humour is one of its most distinctive features. This simple style is often a means of establishing identification, indicating that the speaker, typically a character and not an external narrator, is one of those to whom he is speaking. The moderate style is more ornate than the simple style, but not as ornate as the sublime. The sublime style is characterised by rare words, superlatives, rhetorical questions, thought and word formation, and rhythmic clauses (Adamik, 2010).

Among the sample texts discussed, the verbal utterances of the Doritos commercial are simple, as they use everyday situations. However, visual presentations are more ornate. Winnie the Pooh can be considered more of a medium style due to its genre and age.

Delivery is also one of the five tasks of the orator and has been considered the most important task by ancient rhetoricians. Later, it lost its role with the spread of writing, but today, the spread of radio and television has brought an age of so-called secondary orality, which is why it has become more important again. The two most important elements of delivery are voice and body movement. In the case of written (printed and electronic) text, delivery corresponds to the appearance of the text (font, font size, layout, colours, etc. Adamikné, 2013).

Conclusions: Comprehension and Rhetoric

Comprehension refers to the understanding of both spoken and written text. However, the term itself is often used in a narrower sense, such as in reading comprehension. Reading skills enable readers to gain experience, information, and knowledge.

According to the cognitive approach, the reader is not a passive recipient but actively constructs meaning based on his or her existing knowledge: meaning is the result of cooperation between the text and the reader. While reading, the reader formulates hypotheses and predictions regarding continuation of the text. As a result of reading, one's knowledge system is modified and transformed (Haas & Flower, 1988).

A large-scale study conducted in the United States also showed that examining and raising awareness of text structure has been proven to improve comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). Rhetoric and text studies address the structure and construction of texts, of which rhetoric is a (more) practical discipline.

Rhetoric is an integral part of Western (ancient-Judeo-Christian) culture; most texts are created (consciously or unconsciously) according to rhetorical rules, and knowledge of rhetorical rules is necessary to understand them.

At the beginning of text processing, we can examine the elements of the rhetorical situation and context. The question of who the sender or speaker is can be answered slightly differently if we are talking about a literary or informative text. In both cases, the primary sender (speaker) is the author, but in the case of literary, that is fictional texts, we also find a virtual speaker between the author and the work, "whom" we call the narrator in the case of epic works, and the lyrical self or lyrical subject in the case of lyrical works. I think it is important to make our students aware as soon as possible that these two are not the same, even in the case of the so-called authorial (i.e. first-person singular) narration.

The author of Winnie-the-Pooh is A. A. Milne, but because of the fictional nature of the story, we cannot say that Milne actually witnessed the stories in which his son's toys came to life. The narrator, "who" saw what happened, is also fictional.

What could be the reason for speaking, that is, what needs or compulsion? The real author could have been motivated by the desire to delight and teach (being literature, delight is primarily a desire), which is an internal urge. External factors could have been prosaic reasons, such as the publisher's urge or the need to make a living. However, we can only guess the real author's real reasons, but we cannot know. By contrast, we can read the need to prompt the narrator to speak from the text. If we ask our students what prompted the narrator of Winnie-the-Pooh to speak, we can discover the basic situation that appears in many literary works. The narrator could say "I heard/saw a good story, let me tell it!" This can be parallel to the general human communication need. In human society, chatting and storytelling are often not intended to convey information but rather to foster social relationships, similar to how gossiping works in monkey groups (Johansson, 2005).

It is also worth clarifying the elements of the rhetorical situation in advertising or other everyday (non-literary) texts so that our students can understand the intentions expressed in the text.

It is also worth considering the aspects of (rhetorical) genre classification when processing specific texts, instead of simply stating the genre according to the age of the students. This is partly useful because in this way, we can make them understand the basics of the development of genres, that is, how situation types require similar texts. On the other hand, we can show that our students (from elementary school to high school) show how determining the text type/genre promotes deeper text understanding. After all, the nature of the text also influences the way of reading and can help make the reader's purpose explicit (cf., reading strategies).

The doctrine of parts of speech is most recognisable in school composition teaching, first when teaching tripartite divisions. Later (from 5th grade), it is expected that the discussion will consist of several paragraphs. The different paragraphs can be matched to the individual parts of speech. The essay genre studied in high school includes theorem and proof. However, identifying parts of a text is useful not only for text creation, but also for text interpretation because the individual parts have different functions.

Kenneth Burke (1931/1968) defined five types of form: syllogistic progression, qualitative progression, conventional form, repetitive form, occasional or minor forms. Cooper (1989) distinguished three levels of text structure: large, medium, and small. A large structure essentially means a traditional tripartite division (introduction, discussion, and conclusion), as well as syllogistic and qualitative progression. The intermediate level concerns the internal structure of the individual parts (primarily the discussion) and the logical pattern of the thought process, that is, the repetitive and conventional forms. Finally, the small structures of the text can be explored, for example, figures of speech, word pictures, and individual arguments, that is, occasional or smaller forms. In my opinion, initially, the analysis according to the parts of speech is the most appropriate, since this is related to the teaching of composition, and the awareness of the basic function of the individual parts of the text also helps with interpretation. However, in high school, it may be worthwhile to examine the structure of the text using the above.

Texts therefore contain more or fewer arguments. In this regard, the first question we should ask our students is what the text wants to convince them. This will also help us find the often-implicit proposition (see parts of speech).

Exploring the argument in different texts (of course, appropriate to the age group and school type) not only promotes a better understanding of the given text but can also help our students recognise the hidden persuasive (manipulative) intention. Examining the arguments of the texts read (heard) can also help in the learning and teaching of text creation, since it is expected early on to formulate and support one's own opinion, and later to write an argumentative essay.

The type of style in which different texts are spoken is related to the rhetorical situation and genre, so recognising the sort of style contributes to a

higher level of text comprehension by identifying the author's and narrator's intentions as well as the genre's characteristics.

The discussion of figures of speech and word pictures is also part of this style. In the lower grades, the task of text processing lessons is to interpret figures of speech and word pictures so that students understand their actual meaning. In upper grades and high school, some of them must be known by name and definition, but here too, the most important goal is for students to understand why the text uses a different way of expressing itself than usual.

To summarise, let us compare the steps of school text reading and the main aspects of rhetorical analysis. The different text-processing models used in schools are the same as their basic structure. By studying the table below, we can easily conclude that our students essentially perform rhetorical analysis in text-processing lessons.

Table 4

Text reading and rhetorical analysis
(Source: Lózsi, 2021, p. 39)

Text reading	Rhetorical analysis
Preparation, evocation,	Emplacement in the rhetorical situation; Defining the genre (speech genre)
Reading the text	
Dividing the text into parts/the stucture of the text	Exploring the structure: dividing the text into phases
Examining the text from different perspectives	Examining the argument. Examining the manner of presentation.
Examining the language and style of the text	Examining the style
Synthesizing, highlighting the essence	The structure of the argument and train of thought of the entire text
	Defining the genre (speech genre)

From the above, it can be concluded that the methods of reading and analysing texts used in school practice show many similarities to rhetorical analysis. Elements of rhetorical origin are present in the teaching of reading comprehension, but also in other areas of first language education; however, teachers themselves are often unaware that what they are teaching is rhetoric.

The conscious introduction of rhetorical aspects into education could have a fruitful effect on text analysis and, to a certain extent, make the development of reading comprehension more effective.

It would be desirable to bring back the teaching of rhetoric in teacher training so that native language teachers (or any other teacher) can more consciously develop their students' reading comprehension, and indeed their mother tongue-communication competences in general.

Accomplishment

In conclusion, the hypotheses have been substantiated. The criteria of rhetorical analysis are effectively applicable to both the fairy tale and the commercial.

Both texts under examination were crafted in response to a rhetorical situation, and within them, the components of the rhetorical situation, as well as other rhetorical elements such as parts of speech, argument, and style, were identifiable.

In Western civilization, rhetoric is pervasive in the creation of nearly all types of texts, including digital messages, regardless of whether the creator consciously employs rhetorical techniques. As the principles of rhetoric have facilitated the creation of texts, they can similarly aid in their comprehension. The discipline of rhetoric can enhance text comprehension through its insights into rhetorical situations, structures, persuasion, and style.

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Resources

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Inclusion, Equity and Social Justice

Building Inclusive Educational Competencies

Anderson, Erin[1]

Abstract:

Special Education services throughout the United States have changed and evolved over the past fifty years. The passing of landmark statue, Public Law 94–142 was enacted in 1975 and was later amended and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990. With this law, schools are mandated to provide students with identified disabilities with a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in their least restrictive environment (LRE). This paper begins by framing special education inclusive policies and procedures in the United States before proceeding with the benefits, challenges and barriers that educators and schools often report occurring within schools and districts with regards to inclusion. Next, the paper will proceed with highlighting how inclusion looks in rural schools. With this framework, the paper will then focus on how inclusive educational competencies are introduced and embedded within an undergraduate introductory course for preservice teachers to prepare future teachers to meet the needs of their students.

Keywords:

inclusion, preservice teachers, effective teaching practices

Introduction

In the United States, prior to the 1970's it was common for students with identified disabilities to be segregated and placed in separate classrooms or even separate schools, away from their typically developing peers in the general education classroom. That all changed when in 1975 Congress enacted Public Law 94–142. This statue was later renamed and updated to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA as it is commonly referred to. This landmark legislation mandated that all fifty states provide students with identified disabilities with a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in their least restrictive environment (LRE).

Students with disabilities in the United Stated today receive a range of special education and related services to assist them in receiving educational benefits and are based solely on the individual student's needs. Per the 2020-

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2021 school year, 66.17% of school aged children received special education services inside a general education classroom for at least 80% of the school day (US Department of Education, 2022). Conversely, 2.64% of all school aged children received services in a separate school (US Department of Education, 2022). That means that for many students their LRE is in the general education classroom for most if not all of the school day.

Given the number of students with identified disabilities that are now spending much of the school day in the general education classroom it is imperative that teachers design inclusive classroom environments that meet the varied needs of their students. For this paper, the definition of inclusion that is used is taken from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (2025) and notes that inclusion is intentionally designing and implementing practices that provide all students, including those with identified disabilities with equitable access to learning opportunities, environments, and experiences that foster feelings of belonging, participation, and achievement.

Additionally, teachers need to be proficient with inclusive teaching practices to promote the inclusivity of students with identified disabilities who each have their own individualized education program (IEP) which is a plan that is developed collaboratively by a team of different stakeholders including parents, teachers, specialists, and administrators to best support the students' individual needs in the classroom. This paper highlights the benefits, challenges and barriers that teachers and schools report occurring within schools with regards to inclusion. Next, the paper proceeds with highlighting how inclusion looks particularly in smaller rural schools. With this framework, the paper then focuses on how inclusive practices are introduced and embedded within an undergraduate introductory college course for preservice teachers.

Statement of Problem:
What Research Tells Us About Inclusive Educational Practices

As of the 2023–2024 school year, 7.9 million students in the United States were being served under IDEA, which is the equivalent of over 15 percent of all public-school students (U.S. Department of Education, 2023–2024). For a teacher this means that roughly one out of every six students in their classroom will have an identified disability. The IDEA requires that every FAPE-eligible student with a disability receive an IEP that includes information on how the student's disability affects their involvement and progress in the general education curriculum and includes goals that meet the student's needs to enable the child to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum (IDEA section 614(d)(1)(A)(i), 34 C.F.R.300.320(a)(1)(i) and (2)(i)).

Benefits of Inclusion

A large body of research has focused on the positive effects that inclusion has on students with identified disabilities. Two large longitudinal studies of students with disabilities provide evidence that participating in inclusive education can yield positive impacts on students' academic outcomes. The Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS) followed 512 students with disabilities from elementary to middle school and from middle to high school from 2000 to 2006 (Wagner et al., 2005). It found that students with disabilities who took more classes in the general education classroom had better reading comprehension and higher performance on mathematical skills when compared to students who were in separate settings. The National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) followed 11,270 13- to 16-year-old students over ten years and found that students with disabilities that took more academic classes in the general education classroom experienced greater growth on measures of academic skills when compared to students who were in separate settings. Furthermore, a study that focused on high school students found that within inclusive classrooms students had higher grades and were better prepared for secondary education and future jobs (Cole et al., 2022). Inclusive classrooms have benefits that go beyond just academic outcomes for students with disabilities. They may help foster students' self-confidence skills, promote social and emotional development and improve their social interactions with peers (Marder et al., 2003; Newman, Davies & Mercier, 2005). Many inclusive classrooms acknowledge the diversity of the students as an asset and provide an atmosphere of acceptance of differences. Creating a culture of acceptance and understanding ultimately fosters a learning community of belonging where students can share ideas and thoughts.

Inclusive classrooms clearly benefit students with identified disabilities, but what about their typically developing peers? A recent review of the literature indicated that there are mostly positive or neutral effects on the academic outcomes of typically developing students in the lower grades (Kart & Kart, 2021). Furthermore, students without disabilities also have social benefits which include a reduction of fear, hostility, prejudice, and discrimination as well as an increase in tolerance, acceptance and understanding when in an inclusive classroom. Years of evidence indicates that inclusive education has the potential to be effective for both students with and without identified disabilities, however a recent literature review by Fuchs, Gilmour, and Wanzek (2025) concluded that its not about *where we teach*, but *how we teach,* when it comes to effective inclusion. This supports the need for teachers to build inclusive educational competencies.

Barriers and Challenges to Inclusion

Given the positive effects that have been shown for all students in an inclusive classroom, one may wonder why some schools and teachers maybe

resistant or reluctant to implementation. One of the reasons that has been reported is a lack of teacher support or training in implementing effective inclusionary practices in classrooms. A large study indicated that around one-fifth of general education teachers who taught students with disabilities reported that they did not have adequate support, and one-third felt that they were not adequately trained to support students with disabilities in their classrooms (Blackorby et al., 2004). Teachers require high-quality preparation and ongoing professional development to ensure that they have the skills and knowledge necessary to support the academic and functional skills of all students that are in their classes. This includes the use of utilizing evidenced-based strategies, co-teaching models, and collaborative planning time. One could argue that when teachers receive appropriate training both during their preservice education as well as during their in-service years of teaching it positively influences their attitudes, beliefs, and confidence towards inclusion (Dignath et al., 2022).

Administrators have been called the "gatekeepers" of inclusive education (Danforth, 2017), which means that they play a pivotal role in shaping the culture, policies, and practices of their schools. When school principals establish inclusive values and expectations within their schools it directly influences how teachers and other staff perceive and implement inclusive practices in their own classrooms (DeMatthews et al., 2023). Additionally, school principals are often the ones making key decisions regarding staffing, professional development, scheduling, and resource distribution. These decisions can either support or hinder inclusive education. Furthermore, teachers benefit from ongoing support to effectively implement inclusive practices. Principals who support and empower teachers to help foster inclusive environments often do so through mentoring, providing time for collaboration, and professional development support. It is imperative that school principals lead the school and its teachers with a strong inclusive stance that values diversity, equity and a sense of belonging for all students regardless of ability.

Rural Inclusive Education

Rural schools within the United Stated are often characterized by a diversity of community, economic, and cultural contexts (Schafft & Biddle, 2014). The National Rural Education Association (NREA) pushes back on defining rural education by geography or demographics but rather notes the unique needs and challenges that rural schools often experience which includes but is not limited to limited resources, geographic isolation, and smaller school size. There are close to 9.3 million students currently enrolled in a rural public school (Showalter et al., 2019) with changing demographics in recent years having schools experience an increase in racially and linguistically diverse students (Johnson et al., 2018). In rural schools today, about one out of seven

students qualify for special education services (Showalter et al., 2019). Evidence suggests that rural students are less likely to receive special education or early intervention services when compared to their urban counterparts, so this number is likely higher than noted (Zablotsky & Black, 2020). Additionally, students with disabilities in rural schools are more likely to be educated in the general education classroom than their urban and suburban counterparts (Brock & Schaefer, 2015; Jung & Bradley, 2006). This is largely because rural schools often have limited placement options, meaning there may not be a more restrictive self-contained special education classroom or specialized school in the district which can lead to more inclusive educational placements. Rural schools often promote inclusive education practices by focusing on forming positive relationships within the local community, integrating equitable teaching practices and advocating for more equitable school policies (Tieken, 2014).

Despite these aspects of inclusive education in rural schools, they face some unique challenges to inclusive education. Rural schools face difficulties with complying with federal special education policies that do not always consider the varying contexts of rural communities to include limited access to resources, and personnel shortages (Rude & Miller, 2018). There is a national shortage of special education teachers (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Tomas, 2016) across the United States, but it impacts rural districts especially hard. Researchers have concluded that rural districts face more barriers in hiring and retaining special education teachers than their counterparts. These barriers include providing lower teacher salaries and reduced benefits which ultimately leads to fewer applicants for the vacant positions (Burton et al., 2013). Furthermore, teacher preparation programs are typically not focused on training future teachers to teach in rural schools (Azano et al., 2019) and often lack a place-based pedagogical emphasis (Reagan et al., 2019). Limited access to resources that special education teachers in rural districts face include larger caseload sizes (Berry & Gravelle, 2013), limited opportunities to collaborate and discuss challenges with other special education teachers as for many they are the only one in their school or district (Weiss et al., 2014), and a lack of access to ongoing professional development that is centered around special education (Collins, 2008). Given these identified challenges, it is imperative that preservice teachers receive appropriate training to work with diverse populations of students within rural schools.

Research Design

Multiple sources of data were collected and analyzed to be included within the inclusive educational competencies that are discussed in the results section. These sources of data collection included anonymous student surveys collected at the beginning of the semester to better understand preservice

teachers' prior knowledge related to course objectives. Individual written responses to book/media club discussion prompts which highlighted students evolving conceptions of disability and inclusion. Mid-semester anonymous course evaluations provided insight into things that were working and not working within the course as well as opportunities to make suggestions for changes. Finally, data collected within students final, "What I've Learned" projects provided me with an opportunity to see what students themselves noted as key pieces in building their inclusive competencies. Across these data sources, patterns and trends were highlighted and helped to identify the inclusive educational competencies that are discussed below.

Results

(Building Preservice Teachers Inclusive Educational Competencies)

At the University of Wisconsin Platteville, the School of Education faculty and academic staff prepare future Kindergarten–9th grade teachers to be equitable and inclusive practitioners. Many of the college students come into their college classes from rural communities within the region, with desires to return to their rural communities to teach. Preservice teachers within our program are required by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction to take one 3 credit special education emphasized course (15-week semester) which is called Introduction to Inclusion during their bachelor's degree program. They receive additional course work to address community-based learning, equitable education, and social justice in rural spaces as well as the required methods courses to receive their state teaching license.

Within my Introduction to Inclusion course, students take an anonymous survey early in the semester in order for me to gain a better sense of their background knowledge entering the course. A large portion of the students respond that within their own prior K–12 schooling experience, students with disabilities were often segregated from their typically developing peers during periods of the day or even all day in some instances. For many, they respond that they don't know anyone who has a disability and for others know fewer than three people in their lives with one. When preservice teachers have limited exposure to individuals with disabilities and haven't experienced or witnessed inclusive practices within their own schooling experience, it can be challenging to fully understand their crucial role as an inclusive educator in their future teaching jobs.

I am currently an Assistant Professor within the School of Education and teach two sections of the Introduction to Inclusion course both in the fall and spring semester. I have a doctorate degree in the field of Special Education and have over a decade of experience teaching in inclusive settings in a variety of different communities throughout the United States. The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services published a guide in January of 2025 on building and sustaining in-

clusive educational practices. It clearly defines inclusive educational practices with many of these practices being incorporated within my Introduction to Inclusion course. Throughout this section these practices will be expanded upon and include how they are introduced in the course, and the types of learning experiences preservice teachers partake in as they further develop their inclusive competencies.

Service-Learning Component

Given that so many of the college students enrolled in the course have little to no personal connections or experiences with disabled individuals, the course has a service-learning component within it. Service-learning refers to experiences where preservice teachers engage in a community-based service activity that directly connects to their coursework and professional development. Often these experiences aim to enrich their understanding of topics such as equity and inclusion and can lead to further development of empathy, cultural competence, and a strong commitment to inclusive practices (Coffey & Lavery, 2015).

To provide meaningful experiential learning opportunities, a partnership was established with a local chapter of the Special Olympics – a global organization that offers year-round sports training and athletic competitions for individuals with identified disabilities. Through this collaboration, preservice teachers are invited to support athletes in bowling and basketball in the fall semester, while in the spring, they assist with basketball and track events. Beyond their roles in facilitating athletic participation, preservice teachers often develop authentic relationships with athletes, contributing to the promotion of social and communication skills. These interactions have been consistently described by students as a valuable component of their teacher preparation coursework, offering firsthand insight into the diverse needs and strengths of individuals with disabilities. Engaging in these service-learning experiences enables preservice teachers to identify potential barriers to participation, explore strategies for promoting accessibility, and critically reflect on prior assumptions and societal biases regarding disability. Such immersive experiences have been shown to significantly enhance preservice teachers' knowledge, empathy, and comfort levels when working with individuals with disabilities (Reeves, Johnson, & Giles, 2019).

First Person Perspectives

In the course efforts to promote students understanding of both disability and inclusion, there are multiple opportunities to learn about disability and the disabled experience from experts, those individuals who have firsthand experience. Including first person perspectives within this course provides preservice teachers with insider perspectives and helps them recognize the

capabilities and individual experiences of people with disabilities which could lead to a more inclusive understanding about teaching (Hughes, 2023).

Preservice teachers engage in a variety of structured experiences designed to deepen their understanding of disability and inclusive education. One approach involves participation in a semester-long book or media club. As part of this, I have curated a selection of four books and two podcasts (see Table 1), each offering authentic narratives from individuals with lived experiences of disability. Students choose a text or podcast that aligns with their interests and form small discussion groups of four to five members. Each group collaboratively determines a reading or listening schedule and completes two weekly tasks. First, students respond individually to instructor-generated discussion prompts, which serve to elicit critical reflection and personal engagement with the material. Second, during weekly class sessions, groups are provided time to discuss elements of the content that surprised them, resonated with their own experiences, or provoked new questions. These discussions often yield rich insights and foster a deeper understanding of the diverse ways disability is experienced and represented.

The individual written responses offer me valuable data on the students' evolving conceptions of disability and inclusion, while the group discussions provide a collaborative space for meaning-making and perspective-sharing. Students frequently report that these conversations enhance their learning, particularly by allowing them to explore the complexity and variability of disabled experiences. For instance, one student with dyslexia reflected on how their personal experience differed from that of a character in the selected book, illustrating the heterogeneity within disability categories. Such reflective and dialogic practices not only challenge prevailing assumptions and biases but also encourage preservice teachers to critically examine their own beliefs and positionalities. Moreover, these engagements provide concrete examples of inclusive pedagogical strategies, including differentiated instruction, targeted interventions, and adaptive learning environments (Valente & Danforth, 2016).

Table 1

Book/Media Club Options

Books/Media	Author/Podcast Host	Pages/Episodes
Fish in a Tree	Lynda Mullaly Hunt	320 pages
El Deafo	Cece Bell	233 pages
Haben	Haben Girma	288 pages
Cursed	Karol Ruth Silverstein	336 pages
The Heumann Perspective	Judith Heumann	58 episodes
Disability Visibility podcast	Alice Wong	104 episodes

Inclusive Community Building

Facilitating opportunities for students to engage in both academic and social activities is widely recognized as a foundational practice in inclusive education (Stanford Teaching Commons, 2020). Such experiences foster a sense of belonging and contribute to the development of a supportive learning community. In my course, preservice teachers are assigned to small "homegroups" of five students at the beginning of the semester. These groups serve as consistent collaborative units, allowing students to build relationships and engage in peer-supported learning over time.

To further cultivate community, the course incorporates weekly community-building exercises. During the initial weeks, I model these activities to help establish expectations and demonstrate potential formats. Subsequently, each homegroup is responsible for designing and facilitating one community-building activity for the entire class (see Table 2). These activities are intentionally low-stakes and enjoyable, encouraging students to connect with one another in meaningful ways. Importantly, many of these exercises are adaptable for use in future Kindergarten-12th grade classroom settings, providing pre-service teachers with practical tools for fostering inclusive environments. During observations of these activities, I have witnessed enhanced student engagement, active participation, and believe it contributes to the development of our inclusive classroom climate. By creating space for interpersonal connection and collaborative reflection, the course supports preservice teachers in understanding the relational dimensions of inclusive education and the importance of cultivating community within diverse learning contexts.

Table 2
Community Building Exercises

Name	Resource
Icebreaker Activities	https://museumhack.com/list-icebreakers-questions/
Community and Belonging	https://teaching.cornell.edu/teaching-resources/building-inclusive-classrooms/fostering-community-and-belonging
Games	Rock, Paper, Scissors- https://www.wikihow.com/Play-Rock,-Paper,-Scissors Headbanz- https://officialgamerules.org/game-rules/hedbanz/ This or That- https://gamerules.com/rules/this-or-that/ Charades- https://www.wikihow.com/Play-Charades

An additional strategy for fostering an inclusive classroom community involves the co-development of classroom norms between instructors and students (Stanford Teaching Commons, 2020). Rather than imposing expectations unilaterally, this approach invites students to collaboratively define the values and behaviors that will guide their shared learning environment.

At the beginning of the semester, students in their homegroups engage in structured discussions about their prior experiences in college courses, identifying practices that have been effective, those that have been challenging, and articulating expectations for both peers and the instructor. The resulting norms are compiled into a collective agreement and made visible both in the physical classroom (e.g., posted on chart paper) and digitally via the course's Learning Management System (LMS). Importantly, these norms are not static; they are revisited regularly throughout the semester to assess their relevance and effectiveness. I facilitate these check-ins, typically three times over a 15-week term, and incorporate student feedback to revise and refine the norms as needed (See Table 3 for examples of class norms).

Table 3

Course Norms Example

Spring 2025 Course Norms
• Limit side conversations when instructor and/or other students are speaking.
• Be open minded and willing to listen to others' views.
• Participate during small group discussions.
• Respect other thoughts and opinions even if you don't agree.
• Come to class sessions prepared (complete readings/submit assignments).
• Food/Drink are welcome in space.
• The instructor will provide a learning environment in which students feel safe and comfortable.
• The instructor will provide both positive and constructive feedback in a timely manner.
• The instructor will respond to students emails promptly (within a 24-hour timeframe during the weekdays).
• Students can excuse themselves to use restroom/get water when they see fit.

This iterative and participatory process reinforces mutual accountability and enhances student buy-in, particularly when instructors model adherence to the agreed-upon expectations. For example, if timely feedback is identified as a shared norm, it is essential that the instructor consistently meets this expectation. Such practices contribute to a flexible and inclusive learning environment where all members feel valued and supported. Co-constructing classroom norms in this way promotes equity, transparency, and a sense of belonging—key components of inclusive pedagogy (Stanford Teaching Commons, 2020) and students are encouraged to utilize these same practices within their own future classrooms.

Evidenced-Based Instructional Practices

Two very important components that are included within the course are evidenced-based instructional practices. For this course, High Leverage Practices (HLPs) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) are the focus. I selected HLPs as they are research-informed instructional, assessment and classroom management strategies that are fundamental to support-

ing student learning and engagement (Council for Exceptional Children & CEEDAR Center, 2024). They occur in high frequency in teaching and are designed to be universally applicable, feasible for implementation, and especially critical for supporting students with identified disabilities in inclusive classrooms (McLeskey et al., 2022). I additionally selected UDL as it is a scientifically valid framework for guiding educational practices that provide students with flexibility, reduce barriers, and maintain high expectations for all students (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2020). Further discussion on how these two are embedded within my course are outlined below.

The 22 HLPs serve as a foundational framework for effective instruction, particularly in supporting students with disabilities (McLeskey et al., 2022). Although originally developed with special education teachers in mind, these practices are equally critical for general education teachers, especially in rural contexts where inclusive practices may be less consistently implemented. Importantly, while HLPs are framed as strategies that benefit students with disabilities, research has demonstrated their positive impact on all learners (McLeskey et al., 2022). Developed by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) in collaboration with the CEEDAR Center, the HLPs are organized into four domains: collaboration, assessment, instruction, and social/emotional/behavioral supports. Within my course, particular emphasis is placed on the domains of collaboration and instruction.

A central focus of the collaboration domain is co-teaching, which involves a general education and a special education teacher working together in the same classroom to deliver grade-level content while meeting the individualized needs of students with disabilities. For many preservice teachers, co-teaching is a novel concept, as they have not encountered it during their own K–12 schooling. To address this gap, the course includes instructional videos that demonstrate each of the six co-teaching models (See Table 4) in authentic K–12 settings. After reviewing brief descriptions of each model, students work in their homegroups to identify potential advantages and challenges associated with each approach. These analyses are then shared in a whole-class discussion, reinforcing the importance of intentional and effective collaboration in implementing co-teaching practices.

Table 4

Co-Teaching Models

Model Name	Definition
One Teach, One Observe	One teacher leads instruction while the other observes students to gather data on behavior, engagement, or academic performance.
One Teach, One Assist	One teacher delivers the lesson while the other circulates to provide individual support to students who need help.

Station Teaching	The class is divided into small groups that rotate through stations. Each teacher is responsible for a station, and a third station may involve independent work.
Parallel Teaching	The class is split into two groups, and each teacher teaches the same content simultaneously to their group.
Alternative Teaching	One teacher works with a larger group while the other provides specialized instruction to a smaller group.
Team Teaching	Both teachers share responsibility for planning and delivering instruction together. This model reflects the highest level of collaboration.

The instructional domain of HLPs includes twelve evidence-based strategies that are foundational to effective teaching, particularly in inclusive classrooms (see Table 5). To support preservice teachers in developing a deeper understanding of these practices, the course incorporates a project-based assignment that allows for both individual and collaborative engagement. Students select one instructional HLP that aligns with their interests and create a visual representation – either in a physical format or using a digital tool – that includes the following components: a description of the selected HLP, practical strategies for implementation, a summary of supporting research, and a reflection on how they envision applying the practice in their future teaching contexts.

Upon completion of the project, students are placed into small groups composed of classmates who explored different HLPs. Within these groups, students share their visual representations and discuss their interpretations and applications of the practices. This opportunity to share fosters a broader understanding of the instructional HLPs and highlights how their implementation may vary across content areas and grade levels. Preservice teachers frequently report that this activity enhances their confidence and positions them as emerging experts in inclusive instructional strategies. These instructional HLPs are distinguished by their demonstrated impact on student learning outcomes and are considered essential competencies for all educators, particularly those preparing to work in inclusive settings (McLeskey et al., 2022).

Table 5
Instructional HLPs

Instructional HLPs
Identify and prioritize long-and short-term learning goals.
Systematically design instruction toward a specific learning goal.
Adapt a curriculum tasks and materials for specific learning goals.
Teach cognitive and metacognitive strategies to support learning and independence.
Provide scaffolded supports.

Use explicit instruction.
Use flexible grouping.
Use strategies to promote active student engagement.
Use assistive and instructional technologies.
Provide intensive instruction.
Teach students to maintain and generalize new learning across time and settings.
Provide positive and constructive feedback to guide students' learning and behavior.

UDL is a research-based framework for designing inclusive classrooms, curricula, and instructional practices that are accessible to all learners. Grounded in decades of neuroscience research, UDL is organized around three core principles: multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of action and expression (CAST UDL Guidelines, 2018). These principles guide educators in proactively removing barriers to learning by offering flexible pathways that accommodate diverse student needs. Many preservice teachers enter teacher preparation programs having experienced predominantly "one-size-fits-all" classroom environments, where uniformity in instruction often leads to exclusionary practices. To address this, UDL principles are embedded throughout the course to model inclusive design and support pre-service teachers in reimagining their future classrooms.

The first principle, *multiple means of engagement*, addresses the *why* of learning by emphasizing student motivation and interest. In practice, this is supported through strategies such as sharing daily learning objectives at the beginning and end of each class session, helping students understand the relevance of course content to their future roles as educators. Additionally, students are given choices in how they engage with course materials and assignments. For example, they may select from a choice board of project formats aligned with their interests and prior knowledge, and they are encouraged to decide whether to work independently or collaboratively with a peer. These opportunities for choice and autonomy foster a sense of ownership and engagement, while modeling inclusive instructional design.

The second principle of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), *multiple means of representation*, addresses the *what* of learning by ensuring that students have access to content in formats that best support their perception and comprehension (CAST UDL Guidelines, 2018). To model this principle, the course is intentionally designed with accessibility at its core. All instructional materials provided through the LMS are formatted to allow students to adjust settings based on individual needs and preferences. In-class presentations incorporate both text and visuals, with images accompanied by detailed alt-text descriptions, while I simultaneously deliver content through auditory explanation. This multimodal approach supports diverse learning preferences and promotes equitable access to information. The course also integrates multiple perspectives and concrete examples to enhance conceptual understanding.

Students are given the option to engage with the course textbook in print or digital formats, further supporting flexible access. Additionally, I intentionally connect new content to students' prior knowledge, reinforcing key concepts and aligning instruction with clearly articulated learning objectives.

The third principle of UDL, *multiple means of action and expression*, focuses on the *how* of learning by providing students with varied opportunities to demonstrate their understanding (CAST UDL Guidelines, 2018). In my course, students are offered flexible options for completing assignments. For example, discussion posts on the LMS may be submitted in written, audio, or video formats, allowing students to select the modality that best aligns with their strengths and preferences. Other assignments offer choices such as creating a podcast, composing a creative paper, developing a digital project, or completing a traditional written exam.

To support skill development and scaffold learning, the course employs the "I Do, We Do, You Do" instructional model. This approach begins with the instructor modeling a task or concept ("I Do"), followed by guided practice with peer and instructor support ("We Do"), and culminates in independent student application ("You Do"). This structure not only supports mastery of course content but also provides a replicable framework for preservice teachers to use in their own future classrooms to promote inclusive and differentiated instruction.

The principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) are explicitly modeled by myself, with deliberate efforts made to highlight their integration within course activities and assignments throughout the semester. By drawing students' attention to the application of these principles, the instructional approach fosters a deeper understanding of how UDL can be implemented in their future teaching practices. This intentional emphasis supports the generalization of UDL strategies beyond the immediate learning context. Engaging preservice teachers with UDL principles equips them to move beyond traditional "one-size-fits-all" pedagogies and begin designing learning environments that are both accessible and inclusive for diverse student populations.

Discussion

Preservice teachers benefit from experiencing inclusive educational practices themselves to help build their own understanding of how they might implement it in their own future classrooms. Given the number of students with identified disabilities in our public schools it is imperative that we build teachers inclusive educational competence so that they have the skills and knowledge necessary to improve the academic and functional skills of students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). Teacher preparation programs play a crucial role in ensuring teachers are equipped to teach students with diverse needs (Blanton et al., 2011). The successful implementation of inclusive practices by teachers is influenced by their attitudes (Savolainen et

al., 2012), comfort level (Forlin et al., 2011), and experiences (Leyser, Zeiger, & Romi, 2011) with supporting students with disabilities. By incorporating activities/learning opportunities within a teacher preparation program that addresses all these components we are helping ensure that our future teachers are prepared to support their future students with disabilities.

Limitations

Though the inclusive educational competencies that are discussed in this paper are based on research, the application and ties to the course content are developed and facilitated by one university instructor who teaches pre-service teachers in a rural Midwest university campus in the United States. Some of the applications of competencies may need to be modified to fit teacher preparation programs in different parts of the United States. Addi-tionally, the feedback from the preservice teachers that is included within this article is collected anonymously via qualitative surveys and does not necessarily represent the views/opinions of all the preservice teachers. It's important to note that building teachers' inclusive educational competen-cies is an ongoing process and must continue well beyond this course with additional coursework and ongoing professional development (Donath et al., 2023). In the future, it would be helpful to complete a more in-depth research project to collect data on how preservice teachers utilize these in-clusive competencies within the first few years of their professional careers.

Conclusion

This article examines how a teacher preparation course initiates the develop-ment of preservice teachers' competencies in inclusive education. Central to this process is a service-learning component that enables students to engage directly with individuals with disabilities, thereby enriching their experiential knowledge while challenging potential misconceptions and biases related to disability. The course design emphasizes first-person perspectives, which are integrated into both content and classroom discussions to deepen students' understanding of human diversity and to enhance their knowledge of differ-entiation, instructional adaptations, and accessibility. Community-building activities are also embedded within the course to underscore the importance of fostering inclusive learning environments where all students, regardless of ability, experience a sense of belonging. Furthermore, the course introduces evidence-based practices such as High-Leverage Practices (HLPs) and Univer-sal Design for Learning (UDL), providing preservice teachers with a founda-tional framework for addressing the diverse needs of learners in future class-rooms. These inclusive competencies are essential for all educators but are particularly critical for those preparing to teach in rural settings, where unique challenges often necessitate adaptable and inclusive pedagogical approaches.

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Building Blocks to Social Justice: Using Patchwork and Literature to Develop Intercultural Knowledge

Lo Bello, Maya J.[1]

Abstract:

This paper discusses the design, implementation, and best practices used in the course, Intercultural knowledge, held in English through the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at Eötvös Loránd University's Faculty of Primary and Pre-School Education (ELTE TÓK[2]). As an elective course, Intercultural knowledge can be attended by any student from the faculty, including pre-service daycare providers, pre-school educators, and primary teachers. In order to promote intercultural competence while raising awareness of issues pertaining to social justice, the interdisciplinary approach of combining patchwork with literary texts by authors Alice Walker and Susan Glaspell was applied. In practice, combining patchwork with selected literary texts has been shown to create an atmosphere of collaboration and cooperation that develops intercultural competence while encouraging discussion on sensitive topics related to social justice and inequity.

Keywords:

intercultural competence, patchwork, Alice Walker, Susan Glaspell, social justice, collaborative learning

This paper discusses the design, implementation, and best practices used in the course, *Intercultural knowledge*, held in English through the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at Eötvös Loránd University's Faculty of Primary and Pre-School Education (ELTE TÓK). As a competency, the ability to navigate intercultural situations has become increasingly essential for

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[2] In Hungarian the name of the university is Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem (ELTE); TÓK represents the Tanító- és Óvóképző Kar, translated into Faculty of Primary and Pre-School Education in English. In this case 'faculty' refers to the division of the university that would be the School of Education in American English.

furthering not only communication but also understanding in a globalized world. Given the growing number of immigrant children in European classrooms, intercultural competence is also a necessary skill for future educators to possess. As an elective course, *Intercultural knowledge* can be attended by any student from ELTE TÓK, including pre-service daycare providers, pre-school educators, and primary teachers. This course is additionally open to students from any school within ELTE, and it is common for there to be two to three students who have no background in education and are studying in fields as diverse as economics, art history or psychology. The only prerequisite to the course is an advanced level of fluency in English. Due to the increasing rate of internationalization, a growing number of Erasmus[3] students also choose this course as a part of their study abroad programme at ELTE TÓK. Approximately 15 to 20 students per semester take *Intercultural knowledge*, the majority of whom identify as female.

Considerations for Course Design

When planning the course content, a few factors had to be taken into consideration. The internationalization process at ELTE TÓK has not only led to the presence of Erasmus students from Spain, Ireland, the Netherlands, Greece, Georgia, Germany, France, Belgium, and Turkey but also includes students from English-language, international programmes, such as the full-time Kindergarten BA Programme launched in 2019 and the Early Childhood Education BA started in 2024. Together, these opportunities have led to a growing number of fluent English speakers whose credit fulfillments demand the availability of an advanced-level, English-language elective. Additionally, widespread access to digital resources, streaming services, and travel abroad has contributed to the increase of students at ELTE TÓK who may not study English within the classroom, yet have attained a relatively high level of fluency and wish to maintain or hone their language skills. One of the main challenges is therefore how to develop the competences of advanced speakers while also bridging the gap between a student who is preparing to be a daycare provider as opposed to one studying to be a primary teacher or even an economist and adapting to the needs of a culturally diverse group.

In recognition of the emphasis placed on intercultural competence by *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) (2001, 2023), a document created by the Council of Europe for the purpose of establishing a uniform set of criteria for language instruction throughout the

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[3] Erasmus students are exchange students who attend the university through an Erasmus Programme scholarship. Officially known as the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students, the Erasmus Programme facilitates the mobility of students primarily within the European Union. ELTE TÓK has a robust network of Erasmus partnerships with other European universities and hosts approximately 40 Erasmus students per semester.

European Union, the course was given the rather broad title of *Intercultural knowledge*, an umbrella term that provided enough leeway to design content that could satisfy the needs described above while also indicating that the main mission of the course would be to promote intercultural competence. As Ildikó Lázár pointed out in 2003, "intercultural competence is not necessarily included in the curriculum in most teacher training programmes in Europe" (p. 71). Indeed, most language courses at ELTE TÓK focus on language training and therefore develop the more traditional competences of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Yet, according to Rodríguez and Puyal (2012), "higher education will probably play an important role in providing intercultural training and preparing students to understand and accept cultural diversity. This internationalization calls for new methodologies that can help students achieve intercultural skills in order to interact efficiently in intercultural situations" (p. 108). Smolcic and Arends (2017) argue that teachers tend to see the world from their own racial, gendered, and cultural viewpoints; it is the duty of teacher training to ensure that students gain the ability to analyze critically their own culture while simultaneously possessing "a consciousness of how human differences are used by people in power to rationalize inequities and maintain their position in society" (p. 52). This combination of perceptions is how intercultural competence has been defined for the purpose of designing the course, *Intercultural knowledge*.

Given the target language, the culture in question is necessarily connected to English-language culture, yet the aim was neither to repeat the content of the *Civilization of English-speaking countries* course held for those pre-service primary teachers specializing in English nor to make the error of representing culture merely by its visible forms, such as food, clothes, holidays, etc. For the purpose of *Intercultural knowledge*, culture was defined based on the praxis of the Brazilian educator and reformer, Paolo Freire, who views culture "as a systematic acquisition of human experience" (1973, p. 48). According to Neumann (2015), Freire's interpretation of culture "incorporates the concrete, but reaches deep into the symbolic" (p. 436). As a proponent of critical education, Freire's praxis places great emphasis on critical inquiry, problem-solving, and social justice. In short, the challenge was manifold: how to create a course for advanced speakers whose intercultural competence could be developed in a way that would reveal the symbolic nature of culture while also promoting critical inquiry and drawing attention to social justice? Rodríguez and Puyal were correct in stating that new methodologies were required; I chose to combine patchwork, a visible, yet highly symbolic aspect of US culture, with selected literary works by Alice Walker (1944-) and Susan Glaspell (1876-1948) in order to invite inquiry and discussion into issues such as homosexuality, immigration, racism, segregation, and domestic violence. Since each 90-minute class is roughly divided into sixty minutes of inquiry and discussion and thirty minutes of patchwork, this paper will be separated into two sections that examine the methods used

to teach patchwork and the literary works. Although, for the sake of clarity, I analyze these two aspects separately, each is built one upon the other in a way that creates an organic whole.

Building Blocks: Teaching Patchwork

As a technique, patchwork – a form of needlework in which small, geometric shapes of fabric are sewn into patterns forming what is known as pieced blocks that are then sewn together to make quilts – has been in use for millennia and can be found in cultures around the world, including ancient Egypt and China ("Patchwork," n.d.). Quilted pieces of clothing date back to the medieval period, when the practice of sewing layers of fabric together was done to create protective padding for armour. Later, this technique was used to create warm bedding, known as quilts. Quilts consist of three layers (a top, the middle batting, and a backing) that are quilted together by means of running stitches done in highly decorative paterns; in Great Britain, the earliest form of a quilt had a top made of one piece of cloth, leading to a kind of quilt known as a whole-cloth quilt.

Quilting was brought to North America by English colonists who, according to historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, over the next few generations experienced a revolution in how cloth was produced as weaving went from being primarily done by male artisans in the seventeenth century to becoming the basis of what Ulrich terms the "female economy" in the late eighteenth century (p. 4). The fact that the feminization of cloth production coincided with the birth of the United States as a nation indicates the way in which arts such as patchwork and quilting are interwoven into US culture. Given the labour involved in cloth production and the difficulty in accessing imported fabric, it was necessary to save each and every piece of cloth: this sense of economy gave rise to patchwork which, in turn, spread throughout the United States as settlers moved West.

My own experience with patchwork and quilting stems from my family origins: for generations the women of my family have done various forms of needlework – including patchwork and quilting – while living in the cold mountains of northern New York State. By the age of four, I was learning how to knit, and cannot remember a time when I did not know how to use a needle and thread. The presentation that I hold on patchwork and quilting in the first class of *Intercultural knowledge* therefore combines the historical and cultural knowledge described above with my personal history, much the way the patchwork quilts I show to the class use cloth – sometimes taken from old clothes, sometimes bought with the direct purpose of becoming a quilt – to commemorate personal memories, thereby turning oral history into a visible cultural artefact. Quilts are intrinsically connected to each significant stage of life, from a baby quilt made to celebrate a new life, to a memory quilt used to preserve the clothing of someone who has died. Like

many American families, my own saw how, after World War II, quilts became replaced by factory-made blankets; during the 1980s of my childhood, it appeared that quilts could only be a thing of the past. Most of the women in my family also stopped making them: I have had to teach myself how to piece patchwork blocks and quilt. My presentation then turns to the revitalization of patchwork and quilting which I witnessed in 1996, with the appearance of the AIDS Memorial Quilt in Washington D.C. (Stull, 2001). The first discussion we have as a class surrounds how the AIDS Memorial Quilt acted as a silent, yet powerful protest against the treatment of LGBTQ communities during the AIDS epidemic. Students' experience of the COVID pandemic emerges as a point of comparison.

As I tell the story of each quilt I show, I also ask students to think of their own stories and consider whose story gets told. Since patchwork and quilting has predominantly been done by women, how often do the oral histories of women get told? What about in their own culture? What story would they like to have told in university classrooms, for example? When they become teachers, what stories will they tell their own students? To quote the historian, Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995), "any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly" (p. 27). Not only a cultural artefact, a quilt also bears silent testimony to a history that can only be told if the quilt's narrative is passed down along with the quilt. Educators play an undeniably large role in the transmission of cultural narratives – or in the transmission of silences. I then ask students to create their own patchwork block while thinking of the silences in the stories that they have been told about their own culture.

Given that the majority of students has never threaded a needle, it is first necessary to teach the fundamental components of sewing; piecing a patchwork block only requires the most basic knowledge of sewing, why patchwork was traditionally used to teach young children how to sew in the United States. I offer examples of the many ways in which patchwork can be used to teach young learners, including the solving of mathematic problems (Carey, 1992). Fortunately, the required materials are also easy to acquire: students can choose from a large bag of fabric scraps that was donated to ELTE TÓK for the purpose of holding this course, purchase their own material, or bring cloth from home.[4] In the spirit of sustainability, I also recommend turning old clothes into a patchwork block, and some students have used this project as an opportunity to preserve a piece of clothing that can no longer be worn, but contains too many precious memories to be discarded. Once the fabric has been chosen, a needle, thread, scissors, a small ruler, and a pen or pencil are the only tools required. After the presentation and discussion, I show

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[4] I would like to thank Ilona Hudák for donating the fabric used in Intercultural knowledge. Without her generosity, this course would be far more difficult to hold.

students how to measure, cut, and put together the squares used to make a simple nine-patch block.

For many, these steps require learning how to thread a needle or knot a piece of thread and take a first stitch. Like their usage of English, each student displays different levels of abilities in constructing and sewing their block. While I go around the classroom to help students individually, I observe that small clusters begin to form on their own as more advanced students aid those who struggle. The atmosphere of the class turns to one of the hallmarks of collaborative learning, observational or vicarious learning, i.e., "when one acquires information from watching another" (Nokes-Malach et al., 2015, p. 650). Since some students are guaranteed to forget their scissors or have the wrong kind of needle, the sharing of tools leads to an organic form of positive interdependence, an aspect of cooperative learning that can be produced by only providing one tool per group, thereby requiring students to cooperate (Oxford, 1997). Although both collaborative and cooperative learning have been strongly recommended for the language classroom and the promotion of intercultural competence (Lázár, 2020), I find that following a top-down approach to either (in which the teacher structures both the groups and the exercise) is less conducive to the development of the spontaneous conversations that arise among the students as they design, create, and work on their blocks. By the end of the class, students have 'broken the ice' on their own and Erasmus students, primary teachers, daycare providers, economists, art historians, psychologists, and pre-school educators are all getting to know one another.

As Igel and Urquhort note (2012), it should not be forgotten that members of Gen Z (including those born in the early 2000s) may struggle with being team players, a circumstance that –based on my observations – was only exacerbated by the COVID pandemic. Additionally, the few young men who take the course sometimes require reassuring: they do not want to seem feminine for doing what they have been taught is 'women's' work. Some male students use this project as an opportunity to embrace their 'feminine' side while others turn their patchwork block into a homage to a national flag or their favorite sport team's colours. By the end, the young men are quite proud of their work and one even brought in his winter coat so I could teach him how to sew on a button that had fallen off; as another young man commented, "This course is good so we can grow up and not depend on our mothers." The precision required to design, measure, and put together a block also reminds male students of woodworking or playing with Legos. It is also sadly common for many students to lack the basic hand-eye coordination and fine motor skills needed to thread a needle, a phenomenon that underscores the absence of handicrafts in schools. Sometimes threading the needle proves the most difficult part of making a block: hand muscles must be developed before students can do it on their own. Students generally experience patchwork as an opportunity to slow down by doing something so

repetitive, it becomes meditative; other students are forced to learn to have patience when it comes to learning a new skill.

The issues mentioned above can all be addressed with a bit of individual attention. However, one of the main obstacles to creating a patchwork block also appears to be a matter of school socialization: no matter what country the student comes from, I find that an overwhelming number of students are hesitant to do anything that might lead to a mistake. One way in which I mitigate this issue is by assuring them that I will not assess skill when grading their work: they can only get one of two grades, either a failing mark for not doing a block, or a five, the highest grade I can give, for completing one block. In my opinion, creating a block for the very first time deserves a high grade for the effort involved, no matter how skilled the execution of the block was. The block must be completed by the end of the course and class time is provided each week for working on it. Students are encouraged to create at their own speed; some take most of the course to sew the one block, while others sew multiple blocks. Some students have asked me to show the next step of quilting the block while others have turned their blocks into pillows, Christmas tree decorations, or pencil cases. If a student has completed the block and does not wish to make more, during the provided handicraft time of the class they can crochet, knit, or do embroidery, skills I can also demonstrate. While this policy does help, I still find students unwilling to produce something that might not be perfect. Particularly among Hungarian students it is very common for them to ask me (repeatedly) for permission to create; is it really acceptable for them to choose this or that material? Do I really mean it when I say they can make the design their own? "Yes, but is this *all right*?", they anxiously continue to ask.

My solution to the students' anxiety regarding perfectionism is to introduce them to Gee's Bend, Alabama (US), home to generations of African American quilters who have developed their own, highly distinctive style of patchwork that does not follow a prescribed pattern (Sohan, 2015). Instead, a Gee's Bend quilter reuses virtually any kind of material to create a unique design that is notable for its lack of straight lines or geometric perfection. Yet, for all their 'imperfections', these quilts still possess their own power and beauty, as can be seen in the Youtube video that we watch about the Gee's Bend quilters, their art, and their lives (Curran, 2018). Despite their skill, it is evident from the video that the Gee's Bend quilters live amidst rural poverty and have had few opportunities for formal education; their usage of the African American dialect not only exposes students to a different aspect of English but also contrasts sharply to the next video I show featuring the professional quiltmaker, Joe Cunningham (Craft in America, 2014), an urban, White, male quilt artist who draws inspiration from Gee's Bend quilts.

Joe Cunningham's educated language usage starkly underscores the difference between being a professional artist – one with his own studio and special, expensive tools – and the traditional Gee's Bend quilter whose main

aim is to make something pretty and keep her family warm. The story of how Gee's Bend quilts became recognized as an art form leads into the discussion,[5] which focuses on the following questions: who gets to be an artist? How is art canonized? What is cultural appropriation? What is the difference between formal and informal education? Is there such a thing as 'female' versus 'male' art? Most importantly, once students have seen Gee's Bend quilts, when their own block is not a perfect square, I remind them how Gee's Bend quilters turn each 'wonky' block into a unique form of personal expression. Gee's Bend quilts invite us to enter another culture while also giving us permission to create freely, without the pressure of perfectionism.

For the sake of continuing these discussions in other classes, I use additional Youtube videos, thereby introducing students to the work of Navajo quiltmaker, Susan Hudson, and her technique of using applique and piecing techniques to tell the history of her tribe and make intergenerational trauma visible (Craft in America, 2019). Susan Hudson's spoken dialect offers insight into another aspect of English while ushering in crucial aspects of American Indian history, such as genocide and the legacy of residential schools. As a part of this introduction, I also tell students about Lakota star quilts, another example of intercultural influences evolving into a unique art form. Other than allowing us to discuss the repeated theme of whose story is told and how, introducing these artists and their works – from Gee's Bend to Joe Cunningham's urban studio or the Navajo reservation – decentres the common perception of quiltmakers as rural, White females who are 'truly' American.

Literary Works: Alice Walker and Susan Glaspell

Decentreing the myths surrounding quiltmaking as the old-timey, homey craft of the patriotic, thrifty (White) housewife requires a deep look into the kind of material used for quilts: cotton. Although other fabrics can be used, good quality cotton is undeniably the best type of fabric for creating a quilt. In fact, the batting inside the quilt is usually made of cotton as well, even though polyester or wool can also be used. The 'golden era' of quiltmaking occurred in the nineteenth century, when cotton production in the US reached its apex in the American South. With the founding in the 1820s of the Lowell textile mills in Lowell, Massachusetts and the influx of cheap, immigrant labour (mainly young women from Ireland), cotton textiles became easily available. In other words, with the rise of industry, quiltmaking

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[5] Classroom participation (50%) forms the third mark students receive for the course and is assigned for participation in the in-class discussions. Accuracy is not assessed as the fear of being marked for grammar usage keeps many students from speaking. Other than the block (25%), students are evaluated for one piece of creative writing (25%) that is connected to the literature part of the course. The written assignment is graded based on content and task completion.

came to depend upon the labour of slaves working on cotton plantations and the exploitation of female immigrants, facts that refer to silent narratives not generally acknowledged in the study of quiltmaking. While the plight of the Lowell mills' workers echoes today in the rise of fast fashion and the conditions found in Third World garment factories, students are less familiar with the legacy of slavery, including Jim Crow laws, racial segregation, and the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, to which the Gee's Bend quilters also refer. (In fact, cotton picking is still one of the few jobs available to the inhabitants of Gee's Bend.) Written by the civil rights activist, poet, and author, Alice Walker, the essay 'In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens' (1972) and the short story, 'Everyday Use' (1973), serve to connect these issues of social justice to the topic of quiltmaking. In homage to the Lowell factory workers, the play *Trifles* (1916) by Susan Glaspell is used to discuss women's rights via quiltmaking.

As Rodríguez and Puyal (2012) state, literary texts possess the power to build sociocultural images and experience a hitherto alien world. Furthermore, "The use of literary texts can promote reflection on cultural differences, develop understanding of the home culture, and consequently enhance more tolerant and open attitudes towards other cultures" (p. 108). 'In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens' is an essay on differences, such as the difference between the opportunities available to a White woman as opposed to a Black woman. The central questions of the essay – which Black female artists can Walker turn to for inspiration and why were her mother and grandmother not viewed as artists? – are answered by the example of her mother's garden. Its beauty proves that the garden, the meals her mother prepared, and, yes, the quilts Walker's mother created are all the work of an artist who created sources of artistic inspiration. Walker decentres the concept of what should be conceived as art, thereby inserting the folk art of quilting into the discourse of what could be considered the High Culture of a literary essay. As she does so, Walker additionally uses the technique of bracketing to insert Black history and culture into the argument of another famous essay, 'A Room of One's Own' by Virginia Woolf. In other words, she rewrites the canon in a way that forces readers to reconsider their preconceptions regarding knowledge and what knowledge is transmitted. By the end of 'In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens', the social injustice caused by erasing Black history from literary discourse – or quilting from the artistic canon – has been reversed. Another silence in the narrative has been given a voice.

Although its language is not easy for even advanced students to understand and demands that we review this text together in class, this essay provides a powerfully personal, yet also theoretically persuasive backdrop to the art of the Gee's Bend quilters. It also prompts students to think of what art surrounds them in their own families. As the one writing assignment of the course, I ask students to write a description (in either prose or poetry) of the informally taught tradition or art that they can find at home. If they have not

learned something akin to this from their families, what art or skill have they taught themselves? Over the years, I have received beautiful testimonies to the art found in baking, cooking, canning, sewing, collecting driftwood at the seaside, biking, or setting a traditional, formal table for guests. Given the multicultural composition of the group, these essays not only demonstrate the students' often remarkable creative writing abilities but also capture the essence of their own culture. I read selections of these essays aloud in class anonymously so we can all appreciate that which was previously taken for granted while rewriting our own concept of what makes for art. The resulting discussion provides reflection on both Walker's essay and the influences that make up our lives.

Through the narration of a Black mother describing the arrival home of her daughter, Dee, the short story, 'Everyday Use', probes the question of whether quilts should be valued as works of art or instead put to everyday use as functional objects. Maggie, the daughter who remained home with her mother in the house that does not change, knows the oral history behind each and every patch in the heirloom quilt that Dee demands be given to her because she values it enough to hang it on a wall, as a piece of art, rather than put it to the daily use that would ultimately destroy the quilt, as Maggie would.

Dee has left the world of Maggie and her mother and brings back with her the influences of the Civil Rights movement, the "Black Is Beautiful" movement, the "Back to Africa" movement, and the Nation of Islam movement. To provide students with this historical and cultural information, I hold a short presentation on these movements and also show pictures of the type of house typically found in the American South that the narrator describes. The unchanging nature of the house symbolizes, I argue, the continuation of systemic racism, just as the sharecropper house closely resembles the slave cabins found at antebellum plantations. Within this context, this short story describes the clash between traditional and modern culture, as represented by the two sisters. Who should inherit the heirloom quilt? The sister who learned how to make quilts, but only sees them as blankets bearing the stories of her ancestors, or the sister who never learned how to make a quilt and knows none of her ancestors' stories, yet would be able to preserve the quilt as an *objet d'art*? The mother's decision to give the quilt to Maggie feels just according to the logic of the story, but is it actually the right decision? After all, only Dee would have the ability to write down the oral history Maggie knows. The discussion mainly centres upon these questions as students argue about the meaning of a quilt.

In my analysis of the story, I point out how the narrator – a Black woman from the South who mentions having had little opportunity for formal education – uses literary language in an internal dialogue that seems to follow the meandering style of storytelling, yet is cleverly woven together with the narratological technique of repeating the future simple tense in the phrase, "I will". Walker therefore creates an internal voice of dignity, knowledge, and

creative expression for a woman who – when she speaks – slips into the African American dialect used by the Gee's Bend quilters. Walker challenges our perception of the uneducated and poor; the question of whose voice is heard when telling a story returns in our reading of *Trifles*, the one-act play written in 1916 by Susan Glaspell, the first female playwright in the United States.

Trifles describes the investigation into the death of John Wright, a Midwestern farmer found choked to death by a rope knotted around his neck while he was lying in bed. On the isolated farm, only his wife, Minnie Wright, could have been the perpetrator; she is taken into custody and her house is being searched for clues by the district attorney, sheriff, and the neighbour who reported the crime. The men are accompanied by the sheriff's wife and the neighbour's wife; as they search the house and grounds for clues of the missing motive, the women prepare clothing to be taken to prison for Minnie. While going through the quilt blocks in Minnie's sewing basket, the women find evidence of Minnie's motive to murder her husband and are able to determine whether Minnie had been planning to quilt or knot the log cabin quilt she had been making, an allusion to both the murder and quilting that is not understood – and therefore derided – by the men. In the end, the women decide not to reveal their knowledge of Minnie's motive, thereby ensuring that Minnie will not be prosecuted for the murder of her husband.

Although the characters are repeatedly prevented from saying it aloud, it is heavily indicated that Minnie was the victim of domestic abuse. This obstruction in voicing a taboo topic is further exemplified by the total absence of Minnie's voice: she is the only character never present in the play. The other characters talk about Minnie while she herself is kept locked away. The effect of Minnie's absence is amplified in the title Glaspell gave to the short story she wrote based upon the play: 'A Jury of Her Peers' (1917). In the United States, the right for women to vote was only ratified in 1920: at the time that these works were written, only White men could sit in juries, passing judgement on court cases. By demonstrating the difference between men's and women's language and worlds, Glaspell encourages readers to question the justice of a system that only allows men to investigate, prosecute, and sentence murders. While women can actively participate in most political systems today, the question remains of whether domestic abuse is still a taboo topic or not. Additionally, we discuss the ethics of the women's decision to conceal the evidence of Minnie's motive, thereby obstructing justice. What is justice exactly? To answer the question of whether or not domestic abuse cases are more justly judged today, students are invited to describe the situation in their own country.

As one of the activities done for analyzing this play, the class is asked to sketch out the floor plan of the kitchen described in the staging instructions. The reason for drawing the scene is twofold: on the one hand, European students are less familiar with the lay-out and appearance of a Midwestern, American farmhouse. To aid their visualization, I show pictures of old

farmhouses from this region. On the other hand, establishing the lay-out of the furnishings, doors, windows, etc. makes the play's symbolism visible: the freezing cold kitchen with the stove that never heats up the room also circumscribes the world of the female characters in the play. While the men come and go from the doors that lead upstairs or outside, the women remain in the kitchen. Although the 'world' of this kitchen is occupied by the tasks, feelings, acts, and decisions of women, it is still a space heavily inscribed by patriarchy. Like the unchanging sharecropper's house in 'Everyday Use', the kitchen in *Trifles* testfies to the silent confines imposed by a systemic injustice that determines the very structure of the 'house' itself. This silence is reinforced throughout the play, as characters are repeatedly interrupted and stopped from describing Minnie's abuse. As Trouillot argues, "Power does not enter the story once and for all, but at different times and from different angles. It precedes the narrative proper, contributes to its creation and to its interpretation" (p. 28–29). Our reading and discussion of the play is followed by watching it performed by the Edge Ensemble Theatre Company in a YouTube video (Edge Ensemble, 2021). In the follow-up discussion, I encourage students to draw comparisons between what we have learned about structural injustice and more modern movements such as the MeToo movement and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Conclusion

Although I have taught this course multiple times, I have never had a student refuse to sew the block. Motivation is generally high, a phenomenon I credit to the fact that this course is taken as an elective, therefore it can be assumed that students are interested in the subject. After completing the block, a very few students have declared that they will never pick up a needle and thread again, yet they still struggled to the very end to finish their block. Other students have been inspired by the technique and created lovely projects. Some students have stated that sewing machines would be faster and easier; to this I reply that speed and ease is not the aim of the course. Allowing students to work on their blocks in class not only encourages collaboration but also means they are doing their own work, rather than having a family member sew the project for them, a 'solution' students have admitted to employing when it came to handicraft assignments done for other ELTE TÓK courses. The one recurring frustration I have as a teacher springs from the following tendency: if the course has many Erasmus students from the same country, these students will immediately switch to their native language when it comes time to sew the blocks. While alternate seating arrangements can alleviate this issue, the number and composition of Erasmus students can still make it difficult to ensure that the entire class is conducted in English. I consider this issue to be a test of both my and the class's ability to negotiate intercultural challenges.

Over all, the response to the course has been so positive that I have created a condensed version of *Intercultural knowledge* to add as a unit to my course entitled *English-language literature in communication*, thereby applying this interdisciplinary approach to the teaching of a literature course. While students are often surprised to be sewing in a literature class, they react positively to this innovation. The reward in combining patchwork with literary works is twofold: first, I get to enjoy seeing the shy pride students take in showing their finished work. I find it is important to encourage this sense of pride as many students seem to feel their accomplishment should remain hidden, a reaction that may be cultural in origin. I also recommend not allowing students to criticize their own work, as many automatically do when presenting their block. Secondly, through the analysis of literary texts and videos, I get to hear students hone their speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. Their critical thinking skills are not only activated but also remain present in connection with their own culture and that of others. In practice, combining patchwork with selected literary texts has been shown to create an atmosphere of collaboration and cooperation that develops intercultural competence while encouraging discussion on sensitive topics related to social justice and inequity. By addressing the silence left in narratives, it is the aim of this course that students ultimately gain an insight into the value of their own voices.

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The First Step:
Preparing Rural Preservice Teachers to Support Multilingual Learners

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Abstract:

In an era of increasing linguistic diversity in K–12 classrooms, the responsibility for supporting Multilingual Learners (MLs) extends beyond English as a Second Language (ESL) and bilingual specialists to include all general education teachers. This need is particularly urgent in rural communities, where access to specialized personnel and resources is often limited. Yet, teacher education programs frequently face structural and curricular constraints. In many small, rural institutions, preservice teachers may take only one course focused on ML education, raising important questions about whether they are adequately prepared to work with MLs. This paper examines how a single, strategically designed course can meaningfully prepare future teachers to work with MLs in general education classrooms across various grade levels and content areas. Drawing on research from comprehensive teacher education models designed to prepare educators for multilingual classrooms, this paper shows how a "one-course model" can lay the foundation of preservice teachers' knowledge, shape their dispositions, and begin to develop the skills needed to foster inclusive practices that support MLs. Through intentional pedagogical design, assignments, and high-impact practices, a one-course model can both introduce essential competencies and prepare preservice teachers to advocate for MLs. This paper, on the other hand, will also acknowledge its inherent limitations. This approach highlights how structural challenges in rural teacher education can be reframed as opportunities for innovation in preparing educators for linguistically diverse classrooms.

Keywords:

teacher education, language minorities, teaching methods, curriculum development, multilingualism

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Introduction

In an era of increasing linguistic diversity in K–12 classrooms, the responsibility of supporting Multilingual Learners (MLs)[2] no longer rests solely with English as a Second Language (ESL) or bilingual specialists. General classroom teachers must also be equipped with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to support MLs, particularly in rural communities, where access to specialized personnel and resources is often limited. Yet, teacher education programs—especially those housed in small, rural institutions—frequently face structural and curricular constraints in preparing future educators for this critical work. The reality in many such programs is that preservice teachers take just one course focused on the education of MLs ("a one-course model"[3]), raising urgent questions about how, in such a limited space in the curriculum, preservice teacher training can prepare future teachers for a career in a linguistically diverse school.

Drawing on both research literature and practical experience, this paper examines how a single course within a small, rural teacher education program can meaningfully prepare general education teachers to work with students whose first language is not English. A one-course model can help acquaint future teachers with strategies for differentiating instruction for ML students that are grounded in a deep understanding of the cultural and linguistic diversity among multilingual learners and informed by research from fields such as language development and second language acquisition. While there is a substantial body of research (Bunch, 2013; de Jong et al., 2020; Education Commission of the States, 2014; Haslauer, 2010) that outlines what general education teachers need to know to work effectively with MLs, there are fewer studies that examine the specific pedagogical approaches that can support teacher candidates' learning process in acquiring this knowledge base (Li et al., 2017). This paper explores how to meaningfully introduce essential knowledge for working with MLs within the limited scope of a single course. This paper will also describe how such a course can leverage high-impact pedagogical practices to build essential competencies, turning a challenge into a design opportunity. While one course cannot address all the concepts that general education teachers must know and apply when working with MLs, it can play a vital role in shifting mindsets, building a foundation for inclusive practice, and developing the dispositions necessary to advocate for MLs.

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[2] Students whose first language is not English are referred to in the literature in various ways, e.g., multilingual students, plurilingual students, emergent bilinguals, etc. (González-Howard & Suárez, 2021; Comstock, 2022). In this paper, I chose the term multilingual students (MLs) in order to change the deficit to an asset-based view on MLs.

[3] In this paper, I will use "one-course model" to describe teacher education programs, that offer only one course to preservice teachers in their curriculum to prepare them to support MLs in their future mainstream classes.

In this paper, I will first outline the current challenges facing general education teachers in rural schools. Second, I will review the research literature on various program models of teacher education programs that aim to prepare general education teachers to support MLs effectively. Third, I will describe how my teacher preparation program addresses these needs through a one-course model focused on ML education. Specifically, I will highlight the pedagogical approaches, assignments, and course design choices that intentionally respond to the research literature on how best to prepare general education teachers to work in linguistically diverse schools. Finally, I will reflect on the possibilities and limitations of preparing future teachers in a single course for supporting ML learners.

Statement of Problem

In June 2025, the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE) issued a stark warning in response to the abrupt halt of Title III funds: "Halting Title III funds so abruptly is an unacceptable blow to our schools. The U.S. Department of Education's notice to delay these critical resources puts over 5.3 million [MLs] – alongside their teachers, schools, and communities – at direct risk just as the new school year begins" (NABE, 2025). Similarly, the new federal fiscal 2026 budget proposal called for a consolidation or elimination of $2.6 billion in federal support for teacher training, including the Title II state grants. These cuts would have had a stark impact on in-service teacher training and professional development opportunities for teachers (Sparks, 2025).

While the designated funds for the 2026 budget proposal were eventually released (Samuels, 2025), the uncertainty of today's political climate underscores a longstanding issue: that preservice teachers are often inadequately prepared to meet the instructional needs of MLs, despite their increasing presence in U.S. classrooms. In fact, according to the Education Commission of States (2014), over half of the states still do not require teacher education programs to offer training in how best to support MLs in general education classes (as cited in Stairs-Davenport, 2023). A growing body of research shows that general education teachers often feel underprepared to meet the needs of MLs and that they lack foundational knowledge in second language acquisition and culturally responsive pedagogy (Lucas & Villegas, 2013). Yet, due to changing policies, K-12 schools may not be able to provide adequate professional development at a time when teachers face the challenges of working with MLs. Therefore, teacher education programs must make sure that general education classroom teachers are prepared for the linguistic diversity in K-12 schools.

This lack of teacher preparation is documented by Lee and Hawkins (2015), who report on the significant and complex challenges of ML education in rural Wisconsin. They found that many general education teachers had little to

no formal preparation to teach MLs and that teachers believed MLs needed to acquire English before engaging in academic learning. Furthermore, Lee and Hawkins (2015) found that K-12 schools were struggling to hire certified ESL or bilingual educators and that ML instruction was handled by teachers trained in foreign languages who lacked familiarity with current research on integrating language and content into general education classes.

These challenges are not unique to the school districts in Lee and Hawkins' study. According to a 2021 Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (WI DPI) survey of 2,000 teachers, 67% reported receiving "minimal or no training" on instructing MLs during their teacher preparation programs. Similarly, in a national context, MLs in rural areas were 37% less likely to receive targeted language services than their urban peers (Rural School and Community Trust, 2023). The 2020–21 National Teacher and Principal Survey found that only 7% held any ESL-related certification (NCES, 2022). Moreover, just 43% of rural teachers had taken coursework related to EL instruction – compared to 50% in urban areas (Ruecker, 2021).

This lack of teacher preparation maybe a contributing factor to the persistent low academic achievement of MLs (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023; Alaska Policy Forum, 2023; Robles, 2025). In Wisconsin, only 16.6% of third-grade MLs scored proficient or advanced in reading, compared to 42.5% of non-MLs, and just 4.3% reached proficiency in eighth-grade math (Wisconsin Policy Forum, 2023). In 2022–2023, only 77.1% of MLs graduated on time, compared to 91.4% of English-proficient students (WIDPI, 2024). These educational disparities have long-term consequences. In Wisconsin counties with the highest ML populations, college enrollment has declined by a rate of 22% more than the state average (Wisconsin Policy Forum, 2023).

In the following section, I will introduce the research literature that guides the development of various program models for preparing general education teachers to effectively support MLs. I will then connect this research to the one-course model that is implemented in my small, rural teacher education program.

Literature Review: Effective Program Models for Preparing General Education Teachers to Work with Multilingual Learners

Comprehensive models of teacher preparation, such as the Infusion Model and the One-Plus Model, have emerged as leading approaches to equipping preservice teachers with the competencies necessary for supporting MLs. These models typically include a dedicated course, ongoing integration of ML-related content across the curriculum, and field experiences that provide authentic engagement with MLs.

The Infusion Model embeds ML-specific knowledge and teaching strategies into all aspects of a teacher preparation curriculum. This includes in-

tegrating second language acquisition theory, culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy, and assessment practices into professional education coursework (de Jong & Naranjo, 2019). In its strongest form, the Inclusion Model aligns with English as a Second Language (ESOL) or English Language Development (ELD) standards, including those created by such organizations as the International Association for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment Consortium (WIDA[4]). The Infusion Model ensures that all faculty across content areas are equipped to teach ML-supportive practices.

The One-Plus Model builds on the Infusion Model. It has one dedicated course that is focused on ML pedagogies and includes infused ML-related content across methods courses. For example, Nutta's (2012) Infused ESOL One-Plus Model, as outlined in Ghimire et al. (2022), includes an ML-specific course and various methods and practicum courses that integrate strategically ML pedagogy. This model emphasizes a standards-based approach, guided by ESOL frameworks, and encourages meaningful field-based learning that allows preservice teachers to work directly with students. When implemented effectively, the One-Plus Model has been associated with improved teacher confidence and has been shown positive outcomes in narrowing the achievement gap (Ghimire et al., 2022).

Despite their strengths, the implementation of these models presents significant challenges, particularly for smaller, rural teacher education programs. First, field placements with English learning students may be limited or unavailable due to distances between teacher education institutions and K-12 schools. In addition, rural spaces are less diverse, serving a smaller number of MLs who are spread out across various communities. Second, smaller teacher education institutions often employ fewer faculty members, some of whom may lack expertise in TESOL and second language acquisition or may not have the confidence to implement Sheltered Instruction, which modifies content in general education classes to make it comprehensible for MLs. Third, time and curricular space can be limited, making it challenging to integrate ML preparation into an already full teacher education program. Even when such infusion occurs, quality and consistency vary, and without intentional design, the infusion may amount to only superficial exposure to ML strategies (de Jong & Naranjo, 2019).

Although existing research suggests that extended clinical experiences or multiple coursework opportunities may lead to stronger teacher learning outcomes (Kiramba et al., 2022), a thoughtfully designed, stand-alone course can nonetheless utilize core features of both the Infusion Model and the One-Plus Model and lay the groundwork for linguistically responsive teaching (LRT).

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[4] WIDA is a professional organization, part of the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education. It offers an integrated system to support educators, serving 41 states, territories, and federal agencies in the U.S. (WIDA, n.d).

The following list summarizes key characteristics of the Infusion Model and the One-Plus Model incorporated into my course, *"Meeting the Content and Language Needs of English Learners,"* a three-credit class that meets twice a week for 75 minutes.

- Align course objectives with nationally recognized standards, such as the TESOL PreK–12 English Language Proficiency Standards and the WIDA English Language Development Standards;
- Highlight the complex intersectionality of identities of MLs:
- Provide a comprehensive exploration of the stages of English language development and language proficiency levels;
- Introduce foundational theories of second language acquisition (SLA);
- Simulate field-based learning through virtual classroom observations, analyses of authentic student work, and video-based case studies accompanied by guided reflection; and
- Apply SLA theory to practical differentiation strategies rooted in Sheltered Instruction pedagogies.

In the "Research Application" section of this paper, I describe how these research-based elements were applied to maximize the impact of the single course my institution offers to prepare teachers to support multilingual learners.

Research Application: Program Features in a One-Course Model for Preparing Rural Preservice Teachers to Support MLs in General education Classes

In this section, I will elaborate in detail on how the characteristics of the Infusion Model and the One-Plus Model listed above were implemented in my course, *"Meeting the Content and Language Needs of English Learners."*

Introduction to the Course Organization

When a single course is developed within a teacher education program, it is imperative that it be strictly aligned with TESOL standards and strategies (Wheeler & Govoni, 2014). To ensure the offering of TESOL-infused content, I adapted the framework developed by Lucas and Villegas (2013), which combines TESOL standards with National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards to create a list of pedagogical content knowledge base needed to work with linguistically diverse students. Lucas and Villegas (2013) emphasize that while culturally responsive teaching is essential, language-related issues are often underemphasized in teacher preparation programs. Thus, it is essential to develop linguistically responsive teachers (LRT) who can recognize and respond to the specific linguistic demands that MLs face when mastering academic content.

Lucas and Villegas' (2013) framework identifies two key components of linguistically responsive teaching: dispositions and orientations toward MLs; and pedagogical knowledge and skills specific to language development. My course, "*Meeting the Content and Language Needs of English Learners*" focuses only on the second component of Lucas and Villegas' (2013) framework because the teacher preparation program at my institution includes a stand-alone course, *"Equity Education and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in the Multicultural Classroom,"* that addresses the first component, which includes developing preservice teachers' sociolinguistic consciousness, appreciation for linguistic diversity, and advocacy.

The second component of Lucas and Villegas' (2013) includes four pedagogical knowledge and skills (PK&S) of LRTs as presented in Table 1. In order to align my course with these standards, I utilized the PK&Ss listed below to develop the course framework that allows students to develop the skills necessary to work with MLs.

Table 1

Pedagogical Knowledge and Skills of Linguistically Responsive Teachers (Adapted from Lucas & Villegas, 2013, pp. 101–102)

Pedagogical Knowledge and Skills of Linguistically Responsive Teachers [PK&S]	Explanation	TESOL–NCATE P–12 Teacher Education Standards (2009)
1. A repertoire of strategies for learning about the linguistic and academic backgrounds of ELLs in English and their native languages	Understanding of the importance of knowing about the backgrounds and experiences of ELLs, and knowledge of strategies for learning about them.	Standard 4.c. Candidates know and can use a variety of performance-based assessment tools and techniques to inform instruction…
2. An understanding of and ability to apply key principles of second language learning	Knowledge of key psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, and sociocultural processes involved in learning a second language, and of ways to use that knowledge to inform instruction.	Standard 1.b. Candidates understand and apply theories and research in language acquisition and development to support their ELLs' English language and literacy learning and content-area achievement.
3. Ability to identify the language demands of classroom tasks	Skills for determining the linguistic features of academic subjects and activities likely to pose challenges for ELLs, including identifying key vocabulary, understanding syntactic and semantic features of academic language, and the linguistic expectations for successful completion of tasks.	Standard 1.a. Candidates demonstrate understanding of language as a system, including phonology, morphology, syntax, pragmatics, and semantics…

4. Ability to scaffold instruction to make content comprehensible	Knowledge of and skill in using a range of scaffolding strategies to support ELLs' access to meaning and participation in academically challenging work, while promoting language development.	Standard 3.a. Candidates demonstrate knowledge of the components of language and understand the interrelation between language development and academic achievement for ELLs.

These four pedagogical knowledge and skills (PK&S) of LRTs outlined in Table 1 are embedded in the five modules of my course, as noted below in parentheses.

Module 1: Diversity and background of language learners (PK&S 1)
Module 2: Language development and proficiency levels (PK&S 3)
Module 3: Language acquisition theories (PK&S 2)
Module 4: Program models
Module 5: The Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) Model (PK&S 4)

In creating the course, I modified the Lucas and Villegas' framework slightly: I presented the PK&Ss in a different order and included an additional module – Module 4. The rationale for this modification will be addressed later in the section "Module 4. Program Modules."

Module 1. Diversity and Background of Language Learners (PK&S 1)

In Module 1 of the course "*Meeting the Content and Language Needs of English Learners,*" students explore the complex intersectionality of MLs' identities through the creation of a concept map. It provides preservice teachers with the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the diversity, backgrounds, experiences, and linguistic assets of MLs.

Module 1 begins with a critical exploration of who MLs are, how they are labeled in K-12 schools, and how these labels affect them. Students learn to critically evaluate various terms about MLs, such as Limited English Proficient (LEP) students, English Language Learners (ELLs), multilingual learners, emergent bilinguals, and plurilingual students. Students must recognize that no single label fully captures the heterogeneity of the members of this group. MLs may differ by language background, race, cultural background, ethnicity, religion, immigration history, socioeconomic status, and academic profile. MLs maybe be newcomers who have experienced trauma or U.S.-born, second-generation students. Their families may hold a range of immigration statuses, and their first languages and cultures may represent various countries. Some may be highly literate in their home languages, while others may have had limited or interrupted formal education. They may be gifted, in need of special education services, or fall somewhere in between.

To understand this complexity, students engage in a reflective activity by co-constructing a concept map that illustrates their initial collective understanding of MLs. After reading a foundational text (Peregoy & Boyle, 2017) that introduces various sociocultural factors that shape EL education, the students revisit the concept map, comparing and revising their ideas in light of this new information. This activity serves multiple purposes:

- It highlights assumptions, biases, and even prejudices about MLs;
- It reveals the heterogeneity within the ML population, countering deficit-based generalizations;
- It highlights the importance of tailoring instruction to individual learners, rather than treating MLs as a monolithic group.

The module also offers preservice teachers a list of activities to learn about MLs in their future classrooms. For example, preservice teachers could collect basic information about students and their families by conducting informal interviews with the students or by having students create illustrated autobiographies, design "All About Me" posters, or participate in storytelling activities about "Family Origins" (Peregoy & Boyle, 2017). Preservice teachers are encouraged to make connections between linguistically responsive pedagogies and other theories that explore multiple identities, such as multicultural education (Banks & Banks, 2019), culturally responsive practices (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995), and identity and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989).

Module 2. Language Development and Proficiency Levels

A common feature of both the Infusion Model and the One-Plus Model is that they give preservice teachers opportunities to explore the stages of English language development and associated proficiency levels. Understanding how MLs use English at each stage is essential for designing differentiated instruction. To build this competency, Module 2 of the course examines how MLs progress through the proficiency levels and identifies instructional strategies that support language development at each stage.

Pre-service teachers first learn about how various organizations, such as International Association TESOL and the WIDA Consortium, define English language proficiency levels. The TESOL language proficiency levels range from Level 1 – Starting through Level 5 – Bridging. The WIDA proficiencies start with Level 1 – Entering and progress through Level 6 – Reaching, and all levels include can-do descriptors in the four language domains: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Preservice teachers are often surprised to learn that MLs may be at different proficiency levels across these domains. For example, an ML may have Level 3 – Emerging skills in writing but be more advanced in listening comprehension. Understanding these variations helps them think more critically about how to differentiate instruction.

Preservice teachers in the course engage in a collaborative assignment (Bruffee, 1993; Smith & MacGregor, 1992) in order to visualize and internalize the proficiency levels and their classroom implications. In this assignment, small groups design a poster that illustrates the MLs' development of English language proficiency levels from 1 to 5 by describing what MLs can do at each level, broken down by each domain. The groups are also asked to select a metaphor – such as a ladder, a growing tree, or a blooming flower – to represent language growth.

The creation of the poster requires the review of an extensive amount of information. Therefore, students engage in a jigsaw reading activity in which each group member becomes responsible for one level and then shares key takeaways with their peers (Aronson & Social Psychology Network, 2019). This cooperative structure makes the material manageable while deepening collective understanding.

Once the posters are completed, students engage in a series of applied tasks. They are given authentic writing and oral language samples from MLs and asked to identify the writer's proficiency level using their poster's descriptors and justification. As previously noted in the literature review section of this paper, the one-course model design often lacks an immersive or field experience; this activity allows students to connect theory to teaching practice.

To further compensate for the lack of field experience, students in the course complete an additional follow-up activity. They are asked to create a second poster, structured in the same format as the first one, but focused on instructional strategies. On this second poster, students label concrete strategies and practices to support MLs for each domain and proficiency level identified on the first poster.

The creation of the two posters reinforces the idea that a one-size-fits-all approach is insufficient in accommodating MLs' instructional needs. The poster activity also allows students to understand the need to take into consideration language proficiency levels. Most importantly, the completed posters serve as a practical tool that preservice teachers can use in their future classrooms. By integrating theory, practice, and authentic analysis, teacher candidates are equipped with both the mindset and the tools needed to support the language development of MLs in general education classrooms.

Module 3. Language Acquisition Theories

Module 3 introduces foundational theories of second language acquisition (SLA). Because students do not have a field experience, I utilize a variety of simulation activities to demonstrate how learners acquire a second language.

Designing a module on SLA theories presents distinct challenges. The field of SLA is extensive, and its findings are often complex or inconclusive.

Nevertheless, future educators must grasp foundational SLA concepts in order to better understand how language learning occurs. In designing this course, I strategically selected theories and research that align closely with Sheltered Instruction principles, an approach often employed in general education classrooms to make academic content comprehensible to MLs.

Teacher preparation texts commonly introduce foundational SLA concepts, such as Stephen Krashen's (1982) Monitor Model; Jim Cummins' (1981) distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP); and Jim Cummins' (1981) Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) framework. In addition, textbooks also mention Larry Selinker's (1972) theory of Interlanguage; Noam Chomsky's (1965) Universal Grammar; Merrill Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis; and Michael Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis and Negotiation of Meaning. These concepts are widely cited in textbooks for preservice teacher preparation (Ariza, 2018; Ariza & Coady, 2018; Freeman & Freeman, 2011; Díaz-Rico & Weed, 2006; Wong-Fillmore & Snow, 2000).

The challenge of designing a module on SLA theories is to break down the complex concepts listed above into relatable information. In order to solve this problem, I relied on the synthesis of research carried out by Lucas et al. (2008) on the six essential understandings of second language learning for linguistically responsive teachers, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2

Essential Understandings of Second Language Learning for Linguistically Responsive Teachers
(Source: Lucas et al., 2008, p. 363)

1. Conversational language proficiency is fundamentally different from academic language proficiency (Cummins, 1981, 2000), and it can take many more years for an ELL to become fluent in the latter than in the former (Cummins, 2008).
2. Second language learners must have access to comprehensible input that is just beyond their current level of competence (Krashen, 1982, 2003), and they must have opportunities to produce output for meaningful purposes (Swain, 1995).
3. Social interaction in which ELLs actively participate fosters the development of conversational and academic English (Gass, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978; Wong-Fillmore & Snow, 2005).
4. ELLs with strong native language skills are more likely to achieve parity with native-English-speaking peers than are those with weak native-language skills (Cummins, 2000; Thomas & Collier, 2002).
5. A safe, welcoming classroom environment with minimal anxiety about performing in a second language is essential for ELLs to learn (Krashen, 2003; Pappamihiel, 2002; Verplaetse & Migliacci, 2008).
6. Explicit attention to linguistic form and function is essential to second language learning (Gass, 1997; Schleppegrell, 2004; Swain, 1995).

Table 2 is a valuable tool not only because it distills a broad and complex body of research into a manageable set of core concepts, but also because it connects theoretical insights to the functional language demands that MLs must navigate in school settings. Preservice teachers must understand that each "essential understanding" outlined in Table 2 above must inform their support of MLs' linguistic and academic development. Based on these "essential understandings," teachers must create environments in which:

1. Students' academic language development is explicitly supported;
2. Instruction (and what is being said in the classroom) is comprehensible;
3. Students engage in meaningful, interactive communication;
4. The home language is recognized as an asset and used as a tool to support content mastery;
5. The classroom climate is anxiety-free and promotes emotional safety; and
6. Students have frequent opportunities to express language in varied contexts.

In order to demonstrate how these essential understandings can inform teaching practices, teacher educators can employ interactive simulations that foster direct, personal experience and experiential understanding of how MLs acquire a second or additional language. One such simulation illustrates several of the essential understandings outlined in Table 2. The activity begins with a brief lesson delivered entirely in Hungarian. This language was deliberately chosen because students are highly unlikely to be familiar with it, and because I am a native speaker of that language. Upon entering the classroom, students are greeted in Hungarian and exposed to a lesson in which the word "test" (*teszt*) is the sole recognizable term (a loanword). The term is repeated multiple times, which has the effect of increasing students' level of discomfort with the lesson. The lesson delivery continues for approximately six to seven minutes, during which time students often experience confusion, frustration, and disengagement. When they turn to each other to speak in English, I prompt them to stop. Once the class starts to disengage, I transition to English and facilitate a debriefing session on how the students' temporary experience of linguistic exclusion might compare to the daily challenges faced by MLs in general education classrooms. It should be noted that this activity could be modified to any other language, or the instructor could choose to construct a lesson based on high-level academic terminology that preservice teachers might not understand.

Another activity that highlights the essential understandings of SLA is based on Krashen's (1982) notion of Comprehensible Input, which refers to language input that is understandable to learners even though it might contain elements that are beyond their current proficiency. In this activity, a mini-lesson is first delivered entirely in an unfamiliar language, then the content is re-taught using "comprehensible input." In the second delivery of

the lesson, students understand most of the language spoken to them because I apply strategies to enhance comprehension, such as acting out the content through Total Physical Response (TPR), modeling, and the use of visual aids, drawings, and simplified vocabulary. These demonstrations allow preservice teachers to experience firsthand how teachers can make content accessible to MLs. Playfully, I make a bet with my students that I will speak to them in a second language, typically German, and that they will understand the lesson. Although they do not initially believe me, by the end of the lesson, they are amazed at how much they were able to understand through the use of comprehensible input.

Although Module 3 is short, it provides preservice teachers with a glimpse of the current understanding of how individuals learn a second language. They recognize both the cognitive and affective aspects of language development and understand that language acquisition is a natural process. They also learn that teachers do not have to rely on translation devices because they have strategies at their disposal that support both content and language development of their MLs.

Module 4. Program Models

In Module 4, I introduce students to the various programs that are implemented in K-12 schools to educate MLs, such as ESL Pull-Out, ESL Push-In, or various types of bilingual programs. Lucas and Villegas' (2013) framework does not include any discussion on pedagogical knowledge and skills (PK&S) as applied to program models. Similarly, the Infusion Model and the One-Plus Model omit this topic as part of their framework for teacher preparation. Therefore, I intentionally added this issue to the course in response to a critical gap in teacher training. Mills et al. (2020) critique teacher education programs for promoting the value of linguistic and cultural diversity without questioning why dominant language and cultural norms are upheld in schools. For example, K-12 schools default to the use of ESL instruction rather than the implementation of bilingual education. Mills et al. (2020) also argue that preservice teachers are rarely exposed to the history of the English-only movement or to the structural inequalities that shape the experiences of MLs. As a result, even well-meaning teachers may implement supportive strategies without recognizing or challenging the systemic forces that marginalize MLs. Preservice teachers should have a basic understanding of how the historical, social, and political contexts of the United States significantly influence the education of MLs. James Crawford (2000, 2004) and others have written extensively about the history and politics of bilingual education in the United States; some of this content is introduced in Module 4.

Overall, Module 4 introduces preservice teachers to the following program models that are used to serve MLs in the United States:

- Mainstream or General Education English Only
- Structured English Immersion, (ESL Pull-Out, ESL Push-In)
- Sheltered Instruction
- Newcomer
- Early and Exit Bilingual
- Maintenance Bilingual and
- Dual Language

Preservice teachers first learn a working vocabulary of these modules; second, they examine their distinctive characteristics; and third, they learn how these programs are implemented in K-12 schools and how they affect the role of general education teachers in the education of MLs. The module also provides an opportunity for students to critically assess these program models in the light of the SLA theories presented in Module 3. They also explore how competing forces – research versus politics – shape the educational experiences of MLs.

Module 5. Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol

Research indicates that the most important aspect of both the Infusion Model and the One-Plus Model is their provision of extended opportunities for teacher candidates to put SLA theory into practice. In Module 5, which spans the second half of the semester, I replicate this feature by introducing Sheltered Instruction – a general education classroom method for differentiating instruction for MLs based on SLA principles. Following the course's cyclical structure, Module 5 revisits key concepts from earlier units, reinforces their relevance to accommodating MLs, and provides hands-on opportunities for students to revise lessons and practice the differentiation strategies they may need in their future classrooms.

To help my students develop skills to accommodate their future MLs, I introduce them to the text *Making Content Comprehensible for English Learners: The SIOP Model* by Echevarría, Vogt, and Short (2017). SIOP, or Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol, is a research-based framework (Short et al., 2011) developed to support MLs by providing grade-level content while developing academic language. SIOP serves as both a planning tool and an observation rubric. It includes eight interrelated components:

1. Lesson Preparation
2. Building Background
3. Comprehensible Input
4. Strategies
5. Interaction
6. Practice and Application
7. Lesson Delivery
8. Review and Assessment

The SIOP model guides teachers to rethink their lesson plan in each of these eight areas and to adjust their lessons to meet the learning needs of their MLs. Due to time constraints, I only focus on five of these components in my course: Lesson Preparation, Building Background, Comprehensible Input, Interaction, and Assessment. I chose these components because they tightly align with the SLA theories students learn in Module 3.

SIOP Component 1 – Lesson Preparation

This component introduces preservice teachers to the practice of integrating content and language objectives into lesson design. They learn to align instructional goals with the WIDA English Language Development (ELD) Standards (WIDA, 2020), which have a functional approach to language learning, i.e., teaching MLs explicitly how language works and what they can use it in diverse contexts to express ideas appropriately (p. 20). The standards were developed based on sociocultural theories of language development, recognizing that language is used in various sociocultural contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). After I introduce students to the WIDA Standards, they select a lesson, identify an appropriate WIDA Standard, and write language goals to support the development of either expressive or receptive language skills. This exercise helps preservice teachers see English language development not as a separate subject, but as an integral part of all instruction (Harper & de Jong, 2004). The aim is to help teachers recognize their role in language development.

SIOP Component 2 – Building Background

This component utilizes students' knowledge of the diversity among MLs that they explored in Module 1. It also reinforces the principles of Culturally Responsive Teaching (Gay, 2018). Preservice teachers explore how to connect new academic content to MLs' prior knowledge and their lived experiences, which might be different from those of their classmates. According to Vygotsky (1978), this connection is activated at the learner's zone of proximal development.

In Module 5, I introduce students to a hands-on activity to better understand the value of building background knowledge. Preservice teachers are provided with a sample text and two ML student profiles that include language proficiency levels and cultural backgrounds. Based on this information, they must identify key vocabulary to pre-teach and analyze any cultural references that may present barriers to understanding. They also design strategies to connect the learner's background to the lesson content.

SIOP Component 3 – Comprehensible Input

Component 3 of the SIOP revisits Krashen's (1982) theory of comprehensible input, which posits that language acquisition occurs when learners under-

stand language slightly beyond their current level (i + 1). In the (i + 1) formula, i represents the student's current language level, and +1 signifies the new information that the ML will acquire through the lesson. While Krashen's model has been critiqued (Ellis, 2008), it remains influential in shaping how teachers think about content modification. In Module 5, preservice teachers are provided additional opportunities to practice how to make content in any subject and at any grade level comprehensible to MLs' individual language proficiency levels. Preservice teachers select a lesson and associated instructional materials. They are then asked to design differentiated materials – such as a PowerPoint presentation or handouts – that make content comprehensible for MLs.

SIOP Component 5 – Interaction

The Interaction component of SIOP highlights the central role of social language use in second language development (Swain, 1995). Preservice teachers learn how to create structured opportunities for MLs to engage in meaningful dialogue with peers and teachers. Preservice teachers then reflect on why such interaction is often challenging for MLs (de Jong & Harper, 2005) and explore instructional strategies that scaffold MLs' interaction in the classroom, such as grouping techniques, increased wait time, sentence starters, and vocabulary supports. Once again, providing practice opportunities to apply the SIOP to the development of instructional design is essential. Preservice teachers are given a sample lesson and asked to design an interactive, carefully scaffolded activity that encourages oral language production and peer interaction – key elements of what Gibbons (2009) describes as "scaffolded interaction."

SIOP Component 8 – Assessment

The final component introduces preservice teachers to alternative and formative assessment strategies that are more inclusive of MLs' language development. Due to linguistic barriers, traditional assessments often fail to capture what MLs know (Abedi, 2011). In this part of the module, preservice teachers review what they learned about language proficiency levels and explore multimodal and performance-based assessments (Gottlieb, 2016). The focus is on ensuring that assessments offer MLs equitable opportunities to demonstrate understanding and progress.

Limitations of Preparing Linguistically Responsive Teachers in a One-Course Model

While this study highlights how a one-course model can be strategically designed to prepare general education teachers for working with multilingual students, several limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the model described in this paper is situated within a small, rural teacher preparation program with limited faculty, course offerings, and access to diverse placement settings. These contextual factors inherently shaped both the design scope and implementation of the course. Therefore, it may not be directly replicable in larger, urban institutions or those with more robust resources and staffing.

Second, the course attempts to replicate a field-based component through the use of virtual learning, videos, and engagement with authentic texts and simulation activities. However, this experiential learning component of the course is relatively short in duration and limited in intensity compared to more sustained clinical experiences. Therefore, it would be a mistake to assume that students' opportunities offered in this course would yield the same outcomes as an actual practicum or service-learning experience.

Third, this study focuses primarily on course design and implementation, rather than on long-term teacher outcomes or student achievement. While initial reflections and performance-based assessments on student work that I collected over several semesters suggest promising impacts on preservice teachers' understanding of linguistically responsive practices, future research should explore how these experiences translate into sustained practice during student teaching and in-service teaching.

Lastly, although the course integrates research-based frameworks (e.g., WIDA, SIOP, and TESOL standards), it is still bound by the structural constraint of being a single, three-credit course within a broader program. As such, the course's ability to fully prepare teachers to meet the complex needs of MLs is inherently limited.

Despite these constraints, this model offers a realistic example of how programs with limited capacity can still prepare teachers to serve multilingual students more effectively. Further research and programmatic collaboration could lead to the development of one or more additional courses that would expand the curriculum of the one-course model and more sufficiently prepare linguistically responsive teachers for the modern, diverse classroom. Ideally, such a curriculum expansion would also allow for the inclusion of a field experience.

Discussion: Expanding Curricular Offerings for Developing Linguistically Responsive Teachers

The persistence of minimal ML preparation requirements in many teacher education programs may reflect logistical limitations and/or broader questions of institutional and policy-level commitment to linguistic equity. This paper focuses on adaptation within constraints, while also highlighting the continuous need to improve the preparation of linguistically responsive teachers. A well-designed one-course model can meaningfully address the structural constraints of a small teacher education program. By aligning course content with national standards (e.g., WIDA, TESOL) and incorpo-

rating hands-on, authentic assignments into the curriculum, a standalone course can serve as a foundation for preparing all future teachers to work with MLs (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2017).

However, a single course should be seen as a starting point – not a comprehensive solution. Teacher education programs can take deliberate steps toward creating Infused or One-Plus models of ML preparation once such a course is established and faculty, students, and partner schools have become more familiar with its stated outcomes. Developing an extended One-Plus Model would offer stronger scaffolding by weaving ML-related content across the curriculum and/or by adding dedicated coursework beyond the foundational class.

A key first step in developing such an extended One-Plus Model would involve first identifying faculty members with expertise in ESOL and/or who have an interest in multilingual education. Those faculty members would then require institutional support and resources for curricular redesign efforts that would integrate relevant content into existing courses. This expanded model could include a special education course that would address the overrepresentation of MLs in special education (Barrio, 2017; Sullivan, 2011; Umansky et al., 2017) and the importance of distinguishing language difference from disability (Klingner & Artiles, 2003). Additionally, the inclusion of an educational psychology course could introduce key theories of first language acquisition, providing a conceptual bridge to second language learning (Lightbown & Spada, 2020). Methods courses could encourage students to align lessons with both content and language standards, select appropriate language objectives, and differentiate instruction based on MLs' language proficiency levels (WIDA, 2020; Walqui & van Lier, 2010). These methods courses could also introduce profiles of sample MLs, prompting teacher candidates to consider language background, prior schooling, and English language development proficiency levels when planning lessons. Strategic emphasis across methods courses could further deepen understanding—for example, one course might focus on designing comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982), while another could emphasize interactive, scaffolded learning activities that promote academic language development (Gibbons, 2009).

As a second step, teacher education programs might offer optional practicum extensions to supplement coursework. Students who are interested in gaining more expertise in becoming an LRT could engage in additional field hours working directly with MLs. Students for whom an additional field experience is impractical could take advantage of a range of alternatives, such as book studies, case study analyses, or virtual practicum experiences.

Overall, while systemic change requires time and collaboration, the one-course model illustrates how to leverage existing resources. Teacher education programs can move toward more comprehensive, sustainable approaches that better serve MLs by building faculty capacity and gradually expanding both coursework and clinical experiences (Coady et al., 2016).

Conclusion

The persistent academic achievement gap between MLs and their English-proficient (EP) peers remains a critical equity issue in U.S. education. National and state-level assessments consistently reveal disparities in reading, writing, and content-area learning, with multilingual students often underperforming academically in comparison to their peers. This gap is due in large part to limited access to linguistically responsive instruction. One of the most commonly-cited contributing factors to this achievement gap is the lack of adequate teacher preparation. Many general education teachers, particularly those who matriculated from small, rural teacher education programs, report feeling underprepared to meet the needs of MLs, citing limited resources and coursework dedicated to language learners in these smaller programs (Lee & Hawkins, 2015; Lucas & Villegas, 2013; de Jong & Harper, 2005).

This paper illustrates how a one-course model can serve as a feasible and impactful entry point for preparing general education teachers to work effectively with MLs, particularly in small, rural teacher education programs where resources and staffing may be limited. While such a model cannot fully address the complexities of multilingual education on its own, it can establish a strong foundation of knowledge, shift mindsets, and spark institutional momentum. By strategically building on this foundation—through course infusion, faculty collaboration, and expanded practicum opportunities—teacher education programs can gradually move toward more comprehensive and sustainable models of teacher preparation. As the population of MLs continues to grow, teacher education programs must find creative, context-responsive ways to ensure that all future teachers are prepared to meet the linguistic and academic needs of every student. The model presented here offers one viable path forward.

Acknowledgments

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Child Participants in Serbian Folk Tradition – Folk Customs in the Service of Socialization and Community Education

Sztepanov, Milan[1]

Abstract:

This study examines the Serbian folk customs associated with children, with particular attention to their role in education, socialization, and the shaping of identity. The author presents how the rituals connected to religious and communal holidays – such as *Detinjci*, *Materice*, *Oci*, the burning of the *Badnjak*, *Korinđanje*, the breaking of the *Česnica*, Easter egg-tapping, and the Saint Sava Day school celebrations – communicate communal values to children in playful and experiential ways. Special emphasis is placed on the Serbian community of Deszk, Hungary, where these traditions are still alive today, and where educational institutions consciously support the cultural integration of children. The author argues that traditions are not merely relics of the past but identity-shaping forces oriented towards the future, especially within minority communities.

Keywords:

Serbian, folklore, folk customs, religious holidays

Introduction

Serbian folk tradition is not merely a matter of folkloristic interest but constitutes a defining form of living cultural heritage, serving the intergenerational transmission of communal memory, identity, and moral values. According to UNESCO's definition, such living traditions provide identity and continuity, link the past with the present and the future, and contribute to strengthening social cohesion (UNESCO, 2003, Article 2, paragraph 1). This role is particularly important in the case of children, who are not only passive observers but also active participants and heirs of the community's world of traditions. Folk customs connected to children – practices linked to the Christian festive cycle, to family rituals, to seasonal changes in agri-

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culture, and to communal celebrations – contribute both symbolically and practically to socialization, upbringing, and identity formation.

The purpose of the present study is to demonstrate how Serbian folk customs serve the communal education and moral development of Serbian children in Hungary. It reviews those significant traditional rituals and festive customs in which children participate or have a prominent role, and which convey the values, world-view, and moral expectations of the community to them in a playful form.

Particular attention is given to the ways in which these traditions continue to live among the Serbian minority in Hungary. Krel (2004) emphasises that the traditional culture of the Vojvodina Serbs, compared to Serbian culture in other South Slavic regions, possesses many distinctive features, as the cultural model brought from the Balkans to the Pannonian Plain[2] was subject to constant socio-economic, cultural, and political influences in the multicultural milieu of the Austrian Empire and later the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. "The powerful impact of these factors led to numerous characteristic changes in the traditional culture of today's Vojvodina. This is also the case with the village culture of the Serbs inhabited along the river Tisza," Krel adds. This statement applies even more strongly to the culture of the Serbs living in Hungary. The study therefore pays particular attention to the example of the Serbian community of Deszk,[3] which to this day preserves its religious, linguistic, and folk traditions. The village of Deszk – located in the immediate vicinity of Szeged – plays a special role in maintaining the cultural self-identity of the Serbs in Hungary. The Serbian kindergarten and primary school operating there, the active Orthodox church life, and the communal practices linked to holidays – especially those involving the participation of

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[2] The Pannonian Plain (or Carpathian Basin) is a vast region in Central Europe that includes present-day Hungary and parts of its neighbors. During the Habsburg Empire and later the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (18th–20th centuries), this area was a multiethnic frontier where Hungarians and South Slavs (including Serbs) lived under a common imperial administration. Significant Serbian communities settled in the southern Pannonian region (notably in today's Vojvodina and southern Hungary) after the Ottoman retreat, often encouraged by Habsburg authorities. This historical convergence meant that Serbian cultural traditions in the Pannonian Plain evolved amidst continuous contact with Hungarian and other Central European cultures – a dynamic noted by scholars as leading to distinctive local adaptations of Serbian folk culture.

[3] *Deszk's significance in Hungarian Serb culture:* Deszk is a village near Szeged in southern Hungary that has long been a stronghold of Serbian cultural identity. Depopulated during the Ottoman period, it was re-established in 1746 by Serbian frontier guards settled under Habsburg rule. By the early 20th century, it was one of Hungary's largest Serbian villages (Serbs constituted roughly half of Deszk's 2,944 inhabitants in 1910). Although many Serbs left after World War I (when Vojvodina joined Yugoslavia), Deszk retained its Serbian Orthodox church and eventually opened a Serbian-language kindergarten and primary school – institutions that continue to operate today. As a result, Deszk remains crucial for preserving the Serbian language, religion, and folk traditions in Hungary, serving as a central hub for the community's cultural life.

children – all attest to the fact that folk tradition can contribute, in a living form, to the preservation and transmission of identity.

Sanja Simulov, a kindergarten teacher who leads mixed-age groups in the Serbian kindergarten of Deszk, describes the institution's educational principles and daily practice as follows:

> At this age, children get to know the world around them through their senses, through play, music, rhythm, and movement. Therefore, in our institution we organise cultural and religious holidays in ways that are close to them and understandable for them. Cooperation with the Serbian Self-Government of Deszk and with the Banat Cultural Association is an essential part of our educational work. They are the driving force behind our joint programmes, especially those that serve to preserve Serbian traditions, language, and folk customs. My role as a kindergarten teacher is to coordinate with community members in advance about which events we can take part in. This is the starting point for planning our programmes on a monthly, weekly, or daily basis. (Simulov, 2025)

Simulov also highlights the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in local tradition-preservation and in the upbringing of young children:

> Every Tuesday we hold a religious education class in the kindergarten with Father Svetomir Miličić, who covers the themes of the major holidays with the children. (…) This is a valuable complement to the work of the kindergarten teacher. (Simulov, 2025)

The example of Deszk also shows how important kindergarten and school are in the process of tradition preservation and identity formation. Klein (2024), in a study on the German children's culture in Hungary, points out that "most cultural programmes for children are organised by schools and kindergartens, rather than by families deciding to spend their free time visiting such events." As the above example from Deszk confirms, this statement is equally true for the Serbian community in Hungary.

Folk traditions can be divided according to the customs of the calendar year (spring, summer, autumn, winter festive cycles) and according to the customs of human life (Karsainé & Márkus, 2024). In this study, we classify the holidays based on the first approach. The chapters of the paper follow the thematic cycle of the ecclesiastical year and the logic of family and community rituals. The customs presented in detail include the pre-Christmas child-focused traditions (*Detinjci*, *Materice*, *Oci*), the Christmas and Easter customs (*Badnjak*, *Korinđanje*, *Česnica*, egg-tapping), the dramatic games linked to communal festivities, school rituals (e.g., Saint Sava Day), as well as spring, summer, and specifically family ceremonies (e.g., *Ivandan*, Pentecost home decoration, *krsna slava*).

The child participants in Serbian folk traditions are not only bearers of festive joy but also active agents in the realisation of cultural continuity. The aim of this study is to shed light on the fact that these customs carry not only tradition-preserving or religious significance but also play educational, socializing, identity-forming, and community-building roles – especially in minority communities such as the Serbs in Hungary.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach focusing on the Serbian community of Deszk in Hungary. Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and personal communications with community members, alongside participant observations of local traditions and educational activities. For example, an elder Deszk resident was interviewed to document personal recollections of mid-20th-century folk customs, and a local Serbian kindergarten teacher provided insights into current practice (via interview and written reflections). These first-hand accounts were complemented by field observations of community events (such as church celebrations and school programs) and by reviewing relevant documents and scholarly literature. Together, these methods allowed for a rich, triangulated understanding of how Serbian folk traditions are maintained and taught to children in the community. The empirical emphasis was on interpreting participants' experiences and observations – in their native cultural context – to reveal the pedagogical and social significance of the customs.

The Winter Festive Cycle and Children's Traditions

Detinjci, Materice, Oci, and Saint Nicholas Day

On the three Sundays preceding Christmas, a series of symbolic games and gift-giving takes place within the family: on *Detinjci* ("Children"), *Materice* ("Mothers"), and *Oci* ("Fathers"), parents and children "capture" one another and are released in exchange for a "ransom" – in other words, a self-made gift. The tying-up is not a punishment but a ritual act. According to some sources, such binding games "symbolise strong family ties, harmony, peace, respect, and mutual assistance" (Serbian Times, 2021). The "ransom" – usually a gift given in the form of sweets – is an expression of attentiveness and gratitude. These celebrations form part of the preparations for Christmas and, as such, carry a connecting, familial, and spiritual dimension.

Ethnographers point out that these pre-Christmas Sunday holidays also contain ancient, pre-Christian magical elements aimed at ensuring the family's well-being and prosperity. The *Detinjci, Materice*, and *Oci* customs – like the other notable days of the Advent season – all serve to protect and increase the household's health and wealth for the coming year (Lukić & Joksimović, 2018).

According to the personal recollections of Zorica Sztepanov (née Brcán), a resident of Deszk, in the 1950s numerous Serbian folk customs involving children were still alive in Deszk, a village near Szeged (personal communication, 14 June 2025). The tying-up traditions connected to the *Detinjci–Materice–Oci* cycle were well known in the village:

> "We had that here in Deszk too – we tied each other up and gave each other gifts to be freed."

Detinjci is held three weeks before Christmas. On this day, usually early in the morning, parents take a piece of string or a scarf and "tie up" their children, who can only "escape" in exchange for a gift they have made themselves. As ransom, the children give a present they have prepared in advance. This could be sweets, a drawing, a song, or some decorative item they have made in the days before. Children love this custom, which literally ties them to their siblings and parents. Orphaned children were, in many places, traditionally "tied up" on this day by childless couples.

The following Sunday – two weeks before Christmas – is *Materice*. On this day, the children tie up their mother. The search for the gift and the little "release drama" is a particularly beloved ritual, in which children play an active role in the family celebration. The search takes place with clues and instructions given by the mother, and is especially delightful for the children, who, after finding the gift, untie their mother laughing and squealing.

On the Sunday before Christmas, *Oci* is celebrated. This is an especially exciting day because it is the closest to Christmas Day, when the children will receive more presents. On *Oci*, the children prepare a rope or scarf and, while their father is still asleep, tie him up, demanding a ransom. Without a gift there is no release. Fathers must prepare in advance and hide the gifts as well as possible so that finding them becomes a challenge and great fun. As several authors point out, "in the case of children, it is important that the transmission of tradition be experiential, involving hands, head, and heart, in a multisensory way" (Karsainé & Márkus, 2024). The tradition described above instinctively "meets" these pedagogical requirements.

Saint Nicholas Day is also an important celebration in the preparation for Christmas. It is traditionally celebrated in Serbian schools and kindergartens. Sanja Simulov, a kindergarten teacher in Deszk, writes:

> On Saint Nicholas Day we take the children to church, and the weekly themes in kindergarten extend to other winter holidays as well – Christmas, New Year, and the figure of the *Mikulás*. The children learn that in Serbia Saint Nicholas is the same as the Mikulás in Hungary, and that this is the feast of kindness and gift-giving. He is present in songs, poems, and creative activities. (Simulov, 2025)

"Badnji Dan"

One of the most important feast days in Serbia is *Badnji Dan*, the day before Christmas, which falls on 6 January (24 December according to the Julian calendar used in the Orthodox world). Numerous folk traditions and customs are linked to this day. On the morning of *Badnji Dan*, fathers go into the forest with their sons to cut an oak branch that still has dry leaves on it. This is the *Badnjak*. According to Serbian folk tradition, the oak branch must be felled in one stroke while standing in an east–west direction. Lighting the fire and burning the *Badnjak* take place after the evening liturgy.

In the Christian tradition, the *Badnjak* symbolises the Tree of Life, the same tree that the shepherds are said to have given to Joseph to light a fire for the shivering infant Jesus. Burning it symbolises sacrifice and purification, and in the Orthodox calendar it marks the approaching end of the year: leaving behind all its troubles and sorrows, making way for the hopes and expectations of the new one.

The ritual also preserves elements of pagan origin: according to the literature, the *Badnjak* embodies the ancient Slavic vegetation spirit – in essence, a deity who "dies" when burned in the fire in order to be reborn (Wikipedia, 2024). The cult of fire and oak, and the burning of the *Badnjak*, also serve to invoke the souls of the ancestors and ensure fertility (Sušić, 2022).

In earlier times, the embers of the *Badnjak* – "the vigil tree" – were kept alive by a member of the household until the following morning so they would not go out. The first visitor to arrive would rekindle it, wish the household good fortune, and predict the future from it.

Korinđanje

Korinđanje is a traditional Serbian folk custom, especially widespread in Vojvodina and in Serbia's communities in Hungary, which takes place on Christmas Eve (*Badnji Dan*) and involves mainly children. At this time, children form groups and go from house to house in the village, singing Christmas songs and offering good wishes to the household in exchange for gifts: walnuts, apples, sweets, or small sums of money. Here is one such well-known little song:

> **Ja sam mali korinđaš,**
> **daj mi, gazda, šta imaš,**
> **vina ili rakije,**
> **evo Božić ispred kapije!**

In Hungarian translation:

> Én vagyok a korindás,
> adjál, gazda, mire vársz,
> bort vagy pálinkát akár –
> Kisjézus áll a kapunál!

In English translation:

> I am a little *korinđaš*,
> give me, master, what you have,
> wine or rakija,
> here is Christmas at your gate!

The best-known Christmas song is "Oj, Badnjače, Badnjače…", sung both when bringing in the *Badnjak* and during *Korinđanje*:

> **Oj, Badnjače, Badnjače,**
> **Ti naš stari rođače,**
> **Dobro si nam došao,**
> **I u kuću ušao!**
>
> **Mili srpski Badnjače,**
> **Ti naš stari rođače,**
> **Badnjače, Badnjače,**
> **Rođače, rođače!**

Hungarian translation:

> Ó, Badnjak, ó, Badnjak,
> ősi jó rokonunk,
> jókor jöttél mihozzánk,
> vár téged otthonunk!
>
> Kedves szerb Badnjak,
> ősi jó rokonunk,
> ó, Badnjak, ó, Badnjak,
> rokonunk, rokonunk!

English translation:

> Oh, *Badnjak*, oh, *Badnjak*,
> our ancient dear kinsman,
> you have come to us in good time,
> our home awaits you!
>
> Beloved Serbian *Badnjak*,
> our ancient dear kinsman,
> oh, *Badnjak*, oh, *Badnjak*,
> kinsman, kinsman!

This song also expresses the ancient Serbian belief – older than Christianity – that the *Badnjak*, the Christmas oak branch, serves to invoke the spirits of the ancestors. Bringing the *Badnjak* into the house and burning it helps to

"release" the ancestors' souls, allowing them to be present at the celebration and to protect the family with their blessing.

The purpose of *Korinđanje* is the communal sharing of festive joy, the strengthening of kinship and neighbourly relations, and ensuring that children, too, are active participants in the Christmas folk tradition.

This custom remained a living tradition in many Serbian settlements in the southern Pannonian region and in the Serbian communities of Hungary (for example, in Deszk). "We also cut the *Badnjak* in the forest and walked through the village singing the song 'Badnjače, Badnjače…'," recalls Zorica Sztepanov. She also remembers other customs:

"On that day we brought straw into the house to evoke the birth of little Jesus in the manger. Often, we children would sleep on that straw that night" (Z. Sztepanov, personal communication, 14 June 2025).

Bringing straw into the home is a widespread custom on this day not only among the Serbian communities in Hungary but also in Serbia itself, and is clearly linked to the Christian tradition, reminding children of the Bethlehem manger.

In Deszk, there were also other Christmas customs connected to children that are not recorded in the literature, so they may be unique to the village or the region. One such tradition was the "Accompanying the Christ Child" (*Praćenje Božića*). Zorica Sztepanov recalls:

> We could hardly wait to go sledding. We harnessed the horses to the sled and went out into the fields to 'accompany' the Christ Child.

The Česnica *and the Christmas Bread*

The *Česnica* is a special round loaf prepared before Christmas, into which the housewife bakes a coin. Breaking the *Česnica* and finding the coin is an act of fortune-telling for the family (Trajković, 2005). The *Česnica* – with its hidden coin – is the central element of the Christmas table. When it is cut or broken, the children watch eagerly to see who will get the slice "filled with luck." This playful ritual symbolises the hoped-for abundance and prosperity of the New Year. While singing Christmas songs, the family turns the loaf, and the one who receives the coin can expect a lucky year. This custom is an active and exciting part of children's Christmas experience.

In addition to the *Česnica*, housewives also baked Christmas bread. It was broken on Christmas Eve before dinner. The next day, gift-giving took place:

> We sent decorated bread to relatives, godparents, and family members who had married into another household. Often it was we children who took the gifts. (Z. Sztepanov, personal communication, 14 June 2025)

Simulov (2025) describes the preservation of Christmas traditions, including the preparation of the *Česnica*, in the Serbian kindergarten and primary school of Deszk:

> The theme of Christmas is familiar to most children, as they arrive at kindergarten with some prior knowledge. We expand this knowledge by reading stories, holding discussions, symbolic games, and creative activities. For example, every year we make a *Česnica* together, into which we hide a coin. The greatest joy is the moment when everyone searches for the coin in the finished *Česnica*, because they have already learned that whoever finds it will be lucky all year and will receive a gift.

The Child as a Figure of Fortune-Telling: The položajnik

On Christmas morning, a special guest arrives at the house. This person is called the spark-striker (*položajnik*). It is believed that the *položajnik* brings good fortune to the household for the entire coming year: the number of sparks flying up from the burning *Badnjak* symbolically foretells the prosperity of the year ahead (Sušić, 2022).

In Hungary, it is generally children who go to predict the future, either by stirring kernels of corn in a bowl or by stirring the embers of the *Badnjak*. In Mohács, during my childhood, we used the following chant:

Колико зрнаца, толико среће и здравља,
Колико зрнаца, толико новца,
Колико зрнаца, толико јагањаца,
Колико зрнаца, толико грожђа,
Колико зрнаца, толико радости,
Колико зрнаца, толико чељади,
Колико зрнаца, толико среће и здравља.

Free Hungarian translation:

> Amennyi kukoricaszem, annyira boldog légy,
> Amennyi kukoricaszem, annyi legyen a pénz,
> Amennyi kukoricaszem, annyi bárányod szülessen,
> Amennyi kukoricaszem, annyi szép szőlőd teremjen,
> Amennyi kukoricaszem, oly sok szerencse érjen,
> Amennyi kukoricaszem, házatokban
> annyi vidám és jó ember éljen.

English free translation:

> As many grains as there are, be that happy,
> as many grains, have that much money,
> as many grains, may that many lambs be born to you,

as many grains, may that much fine grape grow,
as many grains, may that much good fortune find you,
as many grains, may your house be filled
with that many cheerful and kind people.

When embers are stirred instead of corn, the spark-striker replaces the grains with sparks. One chant from Kotor goes as follows:

Koliko varnica, toliko srećica,
Koliko varnica, toliko parica,
Koliko varnica, toliko u toru ovaca,
Koliko varnica, toliko prasadi i jaganjaca,
Koliko varnica, toliko gusadi i piladi,
A njaviše zdravlja i veselja,
Amin, Bože daj!

Free Hungarian translation:

Ahány szikra, annyi szerencse,
Ahány szikra, annyi pénzecske,
Ahány szikra, annyi juh az akolban,
Ahány szikra, annyi malac és bárány,
Ahány szikra, annyi liba és csibe,
De a legtöbb legyen az egészség és az öröm,
Ámen, Isten adja meg!

English free translation:

As many sparks, that much happiness,
as many sparks, that many little coins,
as many sparks, that many sheep in the fold,
as many sparks, that many piglets and lambs,
as many sparks, that many geese and chicks,
but most of all, may there be health and joy,
Amen, God grant it!

This custom practiced by children embodies good wishes, abundance, and the welcoming of good fortune at the beginning of the year. The *položajnik* is richly rewarded by the hosts, for there is a belief that the household will be blessed with good luck and prosperity all year if the first visitor arrives with good wishes (Sušić, 2022).

Similar customs also exist among other national communities in Hungary. For example, among the Germans of Hungary, adults would expect children as special bringers of luck on New Year's Day, and those who were the first to offer good wishes were rewarded more generously than those who came later (Gölcz, 2024).

Public Performances

On Christmas Day, the reading of the Apostle (*Apostol*) during the festive liturgy was also part of the celebration.

> It was mostly read by boys, but girls from more prominent families also took part. I was allowed to read once too, which was a big thing – I was proud. (Z. Sztepanov, personal communication, 14 June 2025)

Involving children in church services on other feast days is also common, serving as a deliberate tool of community education among the Serbs of Hungary. This practice continues to this day, with children actively participating in church celebrations. From a pedagogical point of view, this is important because – as Karsainé and Márkus (2024) emphasise – "in early childhood the focus is not primarily on the transmission of knowledge, but much more on fostering a positive emotional connection and joyful spiritual attachment."

On Christmas Day, the collection of offerings in church was also often entrusted to children. The children collected *tas* (offerings on a small collection plate), which were often slipped into their coats:

> They also dropped coins into my coat, behind the collar. That was mine alone. I could hardly wait to get home and take off my coat to gather up the money. (Z. Sztepanov, personal communication, 14 June 2025)

The school-based aspect of tradition preservation also includes public performances before an audience. Simulov (2025) describes it as follows:

> Every year at Christmas we organise a joint programme in the Community Hall. The kindergarten children, the schoolchildren, and all the members of the Banat Folk Dance Ensemble take part. This year they presented a playful scene in which even the youngest children had roles. Together with the oldest women of the Folk Dance Ensemble, they performed the red apple washing custom, chanting as they did so: 'May I be healthy and rosy all year, like this apple.' The programme continued with the children's recitations and folk dances, followed by performances by older members of the ensemble. Every child who is interested takes part in the programme, not only of Serbian but often also of Hungarian background. These are children whose parents recognise the value of getting to know other cultures and want their children to gain richer life experience.

Saint Sava (Sveti Sava) Day: The Ceremony of Value Transmission in Schools

Saint Sava (*Свети Сава*), born Rastko Nemanjić (*Растко Немањић*) (1174–14 January 1236), was the youngest son of the Serbian Grand Prince Stefan Nemanja, the founder of the Nemanjić dynasty and creator of the Serbian state. Saint Sava was the founder of the autocephalous Serbian Orthodox Church, its first archbishop, a writer, translator, and lawgiver. In addition, he is regarded as the founder of the Serbian school system and is considered, in Serbian tradition, the patron saint of Serbian schools.

The celebration of Saint Sava Day on 27 January has a long-standing tradition in Serbian schools, first becoming established among the Serbs of Hungary and then spreading to other Serbian-inhabited areas. On this day, children honour the patron saint of the Orthodox Church and of education by performing poems, songs, and short plays. Active participation serves as an educational tool for communal remembrance and identity formation.

Researchers dealing with the subject emphasise that "the aim of nationality institutions is the experiential and action-based transmission of language, the teaching of nationality content and culture, and child-centered language education" (Karsainé & Márkus, 2024), and that "through heritage-preservation programmes and customs organised in schools, we can also practically reinforce in children the knowledge they have previously learned in folk culture lessons" (Gölcz, 2024). This school tradition, based on the active participation of children, combines learning with community performance, thereby having both an educational and a community-building function. Students are required to learn something new – usually a poem or a song, but sometimes, following the model of nativity plays, they also perform short dramatizations from the life of Saint Sava.

According to the research of Sabina Hadžibulić (2025), teachers and students involved in organising Saint Sava Day celebrations experience this holiday according to their own interpretations: for some, it is a religious event, while for others it is primarily a cultural and communal tradition.

In Deszk, this day is of course still celebrated, since – as mentioned earlier – it is one of the few Serbian villages in Hungary that still has a Serbian school and kindergarten. Simulov (2025) describes it as follows:

> Although it is difficult to explain Saint Sava's life and work to the youngest children, they are happy to hear that he was a prince. Therefore, our theme is often: princes and princesses. (…) On this day, the children go to church together with the school pupils, take part in the liturgy, and then an official programme follows in the Saint Sava Center. The programme always begins with the Saint Sava Hymn, and continues with recitations, music, and dramatized scenes.

In the 1950s, Saint Sava Day was also celebrated in Deszk. Zorica Sztepanov recalls one of the recitation ceremonies:

> Saint Sava Day was a real children's holiday, when we recited poems. One year they put me on the table because I was small, and told me to shout, to recite loudly. I got big applause. (Z. Sztepanov, personal communication, 14 June 2025)

Easter Egg-Tapping (tucanje uskršnjih jaja)

Among Orthodox Easter customs, the breaking of red eggs (*tucanje jajima*) is the most popular among children. The hard-boiled eggs, usually dyed red, symbolise the Resurrection of Christ in Christian culture. In folk explanation, egg-tapping symbolizes the Resurrection: the hard shell of the egg stands for Christ's tomb, and its breaking signifies the Resurrection.

Children play egg-tapping contests: holding a boiled, painted egg in their hand, they try to break the eggs of others while keeping their own intact. The game continues until only one "strong egg" remains. The winner is often rewarded (for example, with a prize egg or a small gift).

According to Simulov's (2025) description, Easter is celebrated in the Serbian kindergarten in Deszk through activities that are close to the children's experiential world:

> For them, this is undoubtedly the most joyful Christian holiday. Although at this age the spiritual dimension of the feast cannot yet be fully explained, the children take an active part in the preparations: they dye eggs in onion-skin water, make chicks and bunnies, decorate nests, and learn poems. Special significance is attached to dyeing the first egg red, which plays the role of the guardian of the house. On Easter Day, we organise a big 'Egg Battle' in the Saint Sava Center, where children tap eggs, play games, and take part in festive programs.

Pentecost Home Decoration, Ivandan, and the Celebration of Family and Church Patron Saints (krsna slava, crkvena slava)

Pentecost (*Duhovi*) is celebrated on the fiftieth day after Easter. In Serbian folk tradition, this day is associated with decorating the home. Fresh green branches – especially from birch or oak – are placed at the entrance to the house and in the courtyard, as well as in the church. This custom symbolises renewal, fertility, and the blessing of the household. For children, the gathering and arranging of branches is a playful, outdoor activity that connects them to nature and to the rhythm of the seasons.

The feast of Saint John the Baptist (*Ivandan*, 7 July / 24 June Julian calendar) is also marked by distinctive customs in Serbian folk life. It is considered a time of healing and purification, with traditions involving water, flowers, and herbs. In some regions, children collect medicinal plants or participate in processions to rivers and springs. According to ethnographic records, in certain villages children would bathe in running water at dawn on this day, believing it would protect them from illness throughout the year.

The *krsna slava* is the celebration of a family's patron saint, while the *crkvena slava* honours the patron saint of a church. These are among the most important identity markers for the Serbs, both in Serbia and in the diaspora. Each family observes its *slava* with a ritual meal that includes the *slavski kolač* (a decorated bread loaf), wheat porridge (*koljivo*), and wine. The bread is blessed and shared, often in the presence of a priest.

Although the religious and ceremonial parts are led by adults, children play a visible role: they help decorate the table, serve guests, and learn the songs and prayers associated with the patron saint. In this way, they absorb the customs through direct participation. Simulov (2025) notes that in Deszk's Serbian kindergarten and school, *slava* traditions are also integrated into the curriculum through storytelling, crafts, and small performances.

Analysis

The folk traditions described in this study play a pivotal role in children's identity development and early socialization within the Serbian minority community. These traditions and rituals symbolically reinforce strong family and community bonds, while giving children a sense of responsibility and belonging. Practices like the burning of the *Badnjak* (Yule log) and the sharing of the *Česnica* bread at Christmas, or reciting verses during St. Sava's Day celebrations, create joyful learning experiences that connect youngsters with their religious heritage and communal history. Such living traditions provide children with a tangible sense of identity and continuity, linking them to their community's past and strengthening social cohesion.

In early childhood, these experiences contribute to socialization not by formal instruction but by cultivating emotional attachment to the community's way of life. Children absorb the Serbian language, songs, and stories as they enact the customs, which fosters pride in their ethnic identity. Effective enculturation at this age happens through multi-sensory, hands-on involvement – "with hands, head, and heart" – rather than through abstract teaching. The Deszk example shows that even very young children become active tradition-bearers: by carrying ritual objects, singing folk songs, or performing in front of the community, they learn social roles and cultural norms through experience. This participatory immersion helps shape their moral development (e.g. learning generosity, devotion, and cooperation) and solidifies a positive sense of belonging to the Serbian community. In short, the

folk customs function as a form of early social education, transmitting group identity and values in a manner that is both engaging and developmentally appropriate.

Conclusion

The research presented here confirms that Serbian folk customs involving children remain an important element of cultural heritage preservation, both in Serbia and among Serbian communities in Hungary. These traditions – ranging from the pre-Christmas cycle, through Christmas and Easter customs, to the celebration of patron saints – serve multiple functions: they transmit cultural values, strengthen family and community ties, and provide opportunities for children to actively participate in meaningful, symbolic activities.

From a pedagogical perspective, these customs are significant because they combine experiential learning, multisensory engagement, and emotional involvement. They allow children to internalise cultural content through action, rather than passive reception. This aligns with contemporary approaches to heritage education, which emphasise the integration of tradition into everyday life, rather than treating it as a static or isolated subject.

The Deszk case highlights several key factors that other minority communities can learn from when it comes to transmitting traditions to the next generation. Foremost, it underscores the importance of institutional support and community collaboration. In Deszk, the presence of a Serbian-language kindergarten and primary school, in partnership with local cultural associations and the Orthodox Church, creates an integrated environment where traditions are a natural part of education. Other minority communities – even those with small populations or lacking formal minority schools – can seek to introduce cultural practices in youth programs, weekend schools, or through partnerships with community organizations. The Deszk example suggests that when educators, parents, religious leaders, and minority self-governments work together, they can successfully incorporate folk traditions into children's daily routines. This collaboration not only sustains the practices but also normalizes them in the eyes of the younger generation.

Educational policy and practice should therefore strive to create space for minority heritage within mainstream institutions. Supportive policies might include bilingual curriculum elements, celebration of minority feast days in schools, and teacher training in intercultural pedagogy. It is important to note that engaging the majority population is beneficial as well: in Deszk, many activities are open to non-Serb children, whose parents appreciate the cultural richness. Such inclusive approaches can reduce resistance and build broader respect for the minority's heritage. Finally, tradition transmission thrives under conditions that make it experiential and community-based – children need to feel the joy and value of the customs, not just hear about

them. Ensuring that cultural activities are hands-on (involving music, dance, food, and ritual participation) and that they are supported by local leadership will greatly enhance their sustainability. In summary, the Deszk experience shows that strong community institutions, intergenerational engagement, and supportive educational policies together create a vibrant context in which minority traditions can be preserved and passed on, enriching the socialization of future generations.

The continuation of these practices depends on conscious community effort and the integration of tradition into both formal and informal educational contexts. In this way, Serbian folk customs can continue to play their role as living carriers of cultural identity for future generations.

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Social Emotional Learning

Future Skills in Education: Psychologists' Views on the Skills of the Future from the Perspective of Individual Well-Being

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Abstract:

One of the contemporary challenges of education is to prepare children to deal with problems that they will face in adulthood – but many of these problems are not yet known. To address this situation, frameworks for education have been developed relating to the skills needed. Most of these frameworks focus on the presumed needs of the future labour market. This paper describes a survey in which future skills were examined in terms of the individual's ability to lead a successful, balanced and fulfilling life. During the survey, we reviewed the relevant frameworks (based on the relevant literature) and conducted interviews in five countries with psychologists familiar with children's cognitive and affective development about the challenges that can be expected. In the light of these interviews, it was possible to outline the skills that would need to be developed between the ages of 6 and 10, and – based on these skills – to formulate the expectations that development activities should meet. The main goal was to outline the frames of skill development in the light of an unpredictably changing social, cultural and technological environment. This work undergirded our further task: to elaborate a methodology and a toolkit to match the development objectives.

Keywords:

skill development, future skills, future challenges, well-being

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Introduction

One of the most important tasks of teachers is to prepare their students for a successful, satisfied and balanced adult life. However, this is also a major challenge in a rapidly changing cultural and technological environment, where it is increasingly difficult to know what kind of society and jobs today's learners will have to cope with in 15–20 years' time, and what expectations they will have to meet in their professional and personal lives. Teacher training is in an even more difficult position and should therefore look even further ahead, as it must take all this into account when preparing the teachers of the future. To put it a little more bluntly, training should prepare students to deal with problems that are currently almost out of the reach of teachers. In recent years, rapid social and technological change – and in particular, the transformations brought about by the dominant presence of the digital environment – has already had an impact on education, raising the need for teacher education not only to follow this change, but also to anticipate and prepare future teachers to adapt rapidly.

Several aspects of the problem need to be considered. On the one hand, in line with current educational policy preferences, there is a need to take into account labour market needs and their likely changes, and the fact that future generations may undergo several occupational changes in their lifetime. They will have to adapt to the decline or even disappearance of their original occupation and may have to prepare for radically new occupations along the way. In fact, this is not a completely new phenomenon, as the concept of lifelong learning has been part of the pedagogical landscape for decades, and a look at the range of professions of two or three decades ago, or for example, at the range of courses on offer at university level, reveals a radical change compared with today. On the other hand, pedagogical preparation can also be approached from an individual perspective: it requires the acquisition of knowledge and skills that are the basis for individual success and better fulfilment. For instance, the focus can be on the skills that underpin social relationships, advocacy, successful communication, or even professional progress. Thirdly, by focusing on the individual, pedagogical objectives can also aim at a balanced and satisfied life, and rightly so: a rapidly changing environment can present personal challenges for individuals that can threaten their mental health and well-being. In this context, reference can be made to the concept of resilience, which has become fashionable in recent years, or to the skills needed to maintain stable social relationships, and a healthy work-life balance.

While it is possible to identify the focus of these aspects, it is important to note that this is not the primary task. Rather, the different domains highlight the fact that a range of approaches can be applied here, while in each case a range of skills and competences can be outlined and grouped according to the aspects chosen. For example, it may be important to distinguish between

groups of 'hard' and 'soft' skills. Hard skills are usually those that are learned, directly applicable to everyday life or to the exercise of a profession: like, for example, the ability to do arithmetic or to drive a car. Soft skills, on the other hand, are more general and less related to knowledge elements: skills related to communication, social relations or even group leadership. An important difference between the two sets of skills is that soft skills can be developed rather than acquired through knowledge. It is also worth highlighting transversal skills, which are easily transferable from one area of activity to another (the focus of the present survey was on these skills).

The issue of the skills needed for the future goes beyond pedagogy, of course, and influences education and employment policy choices. The primary concern in these decisions is to shape and meet the needs of the labour market, and their preparation is currently focused on outlining the possible effects of increasing automation and the expansion of the use of artificial intelligence in different occupations. This research seeks to look at the challenges of reversing the usual approach and putting the individual at the centre. How can pedagogy help individuals to build a balanced, active and successful life in changing circumstances, both in their careers and in their personal lives? Our hypothesis is that transversal skills can play a prominent role in this area.

In order to map the area of skills to be developed, we first reviewed the available literature and interviewed psychologists working on children's cognitive and emotional development in five European countries. The aim of the interviews was to identify the skills that are central to managing a rapidly changing cultural-technological environment - from the perspective of the individual. The survey also included an overview of development opportunities for children aged 6–10 years. The framework of skills outlined in the following outline has guided further work to develop methodological recommendations and tools for teachers to use in school education and training (to be published in a forthcoming paper with a practical focus).

Future Skills: the Background

A number of recommendations have been made on what skills should be built into schooling for the next generation, based on an extension of current trends and an analysis and interpretation of the impact of environmental change on people. UNESCO has made recommendations on what skills development will be needed to promote an adaptive future society, and what future literacy should look like. In this, complexity and diversity are primary considerations, as multiple narratives of the future can be outlined, and these are based in large part on the complexity of social and technological processes (Miller, 2018; UNESCO, 2019, 2020). These recommendations are useful primarily as a framework that provides key concepts and focal points for planning future pedagogical tasks.

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The UNESCO Recommendation's framework of transversal competences is structured according to six main groups: media and information literacy, intrapersonal competences, interpersonal competences, critical and innovative thinking, global citizenship, and a group of competences not classified in the former (Care & Luo, 2016). The framework also identifies priority areas for school development.

In 2020, the European Union has set up an agency to coordinate skills needs under the name Skills Lab, which will continuously assess the needs in the member states, enabling a rapid response to labour market demands (European Training Foundation, 2020). The Skills Lab envisages that meeting the challenges of the future will require a high level of creativity, innovation, experimentation and innovation, based to a large extent on collective intelligence. The society of the future will rely on the diversity of its members (diversity of mindsets and literacies, as well as cultural complexity) and on the ability to act cooperatively. Partly as a consequence of the work in the Skills Lab, the EU has designated 2023 as the European Year of Skills, declaring that a future-oriented society will foster the development of skills and competences that will be useful for its members in the long term (European Union, 2023; Brandi et al., 2023). To this end, the EU is continuously coordinating research on skills and adapting the recommendations of the skills framework.

Also in response to the needs of the labour market, the European Commission has developed the European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO; European Commission, 2020a) framework, which attempts to standardise the conceptual framework of skills required for different occupations and professions, by preparing a set of skills in all the official languages of the European Union, by establishing a table of equivalence, by creating a system of categories for classification and by describing the relationships between skills. The system is continuously updated. In terms of labor market needs, this framework is based on the World Economic Forum's 2015 recommendations (Table 1), which identify the main groups of skills to be developed for the education of the future (WEF, 2015).

Table 1

Framework of the 21st-Century Skills According to World Economic Forum (Source: WEF 2015)

Literacies	Competencies	Qualities
Literacy	Critical Thinking	Curiosity
Numeracy	Problem Solving	Initiative
Scientific Literacy	Creativity	Persistence
ICT Literacy	Communication	Adaptability
Financial Literacy	Collaboration	Leadership
Cultural and Civic Literacy		Social and Cultural Awareness

The framework of European Commission can be linked to the complementary LifeComp competences framework, which does not focus on the labour market but covers, in a general sense, the core competences necessary for personal fulfilment, social life and learning (when interpreting the terms 'skill' and 'competence', it is important to bear in mind that the ESCO framework does not definitely distinguish between the two). The LifeComp (European Commission 2020b; Sala & Cabrera Giraldez, 2022) describes nine key competences in three groups of three (Table 2): self-regulation, flexibility, well-being (for personal fulfilment), empathy, communication, collaboration (for social relationships), growth mindset, critical thinking, and managing learning (for continuous learning). It is worth noting that grouping according to different criteria highlights the interrelationships between skills and the intersections between different areas.

Table 2

The LifeComp Framework
(Source: European Commission 2020b)

Personal area	Social area	Learning to learn area
Self-regulation	Empathy	Growth mindset
Flexibility	Communication	Critical thinking
Well-being	Collaboration	Managing learning

In addition to the formal frameworks, a number of other proposals have been made to define the skills needed for the future. Kotsiou et al. (2022), after examining almost 100 frameworks of future skills, classify the skills that need to be focused on in a future-oriented education into nine meta-categories: higher-order thinking skills, dialogue skills, digital and STEM literacy, values, self-management, lifelong learning, enterprise skills, leadership and flexibility. It is striking that some of the skills in the meta-categories are more from the soft skills domain and are areas that focus more on the labour market and personal career development again. It is also worth noting the substantial overlap between the frameworks: each takes into account expected diversity and rapid technological change.

One of the key focuses of the frameworks is addressing anticipated labour market challenges. There is no doubt that the social role of education requires it to contribute to the effective management of future socio-economic changes and to the overall success of society. At the same time, when educating children, it is not only important to develop the skills needed in the labour market, but also to develop the skills necessary for personal happiness. It is therefore worth considering additional factors when identifying areas for development.

First, it is necessary to develop skills that ensure mental and emotional health (Adelman & Taylor, 2000). Skills necessary for personal happiness,

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such as emotional intelligence, stress management, and self-awareness, help children to be in a healthy mental state and to be able to maintain it as adults (Wei et al., 2024). Developing a stable emotional balance can prevent burn-out and mental illness, which can hinder personal fulfilment as an adult. Related to this is the increasingly important skill in modern society of balancing work and private life. Schools need to start developing the skills that will help them maintain a balance between workplace expectations and personal happiness later in life (avoiding burnout, for example). Similarly important from this perspective is the internal motivation that comes from personal happiness: children who learn how to find joy and purpose in their lives are more likely to be passionate and persistent in their work. This also increases the chances of long-term success and satisfaction.

Second, social relationships play a key role in achieving and maintaining personal happiness. The skills needed to build and maintain relationships, such as empathy, cooperation, and direct communication, are not only important in the labour market for effective and successful teamwork, conflict management, and cooperation (Belfi & Borghans, 2024; Priamikova, 2010). These skills also lead to satisfaction and happiness in personal life and help build stable social relationships (Siddiqui & Ventista, 2018). A balanced social life also helps with self-actualization, a healthy lifestyle, and inner harmony. Skills such as positive thinking, mindfulness, and positive evaluation of peers help children strive for happiness later in life, regardless of external (or material) factors.

Third, adaptability may be important for individuals not only because of rapidly changing labour market needs. It is conceivable that in the future, most people will be forced to radically change their profession several times during their lifetime. It is not just a matter of having the skills required for the new profession, but also of being able to maintain one's identity and harmony with one's environment and community. Success based solely on professional skills can become unstable if the individual does not have the emotional and psychological tools to deal with challenges (Putwain et al., 2020). The skills necessary for happiness (e.g., flexibility, self-confidence, interpersonal skills) also help to sustain a professional career in the long term. Additional skills, such as resilience, a positive attitude, and the ability to adapt flexibly to change, enable children to be successful in an ever-changing world while maintaining their personal satisfaction (Ager, 2013).

Readers may notice that the concept of 'success' is a recurring theme in the above descriptions of skills. Currently, in most of society, the definition of success is often linked to material well-being, fame, or other external factors. However, in the context of school skills development, a broader interpretation is worth pursuing. Children need to learn a mindset that measures success not only in terms of financial or professional achievements, but also in terms of personal satisfaction, social relationships, and self-fulfilment. This approach can contribute to them living a balanced and fulfilling life later on.

Finally, it is worth noting that, as the above overview shows, the challenges of the labour market and the skills necessary for individual happiness cannot be separated by a sharp dividing line. The development of skills therefore supports both the personal well-being of individuals and society as a whole, as emotionally stable, balanced people can be more productive members of the community in the long term.

Method

This research looks at the future skills in terms of the needs of the individual. While there is no doubt that individual needs are significantly linked to societal needs, to the regeneration and renewal of society as a whole, it is considered appropriate to analyse these skills separately.

To carry out the survey, we used a qualitative method, a semi-structured interview. The interview questions were designed to give the interviewee the opportunity to add their own insights on each topic – this was considered essential in order to get a more complete picture of the area during the interviews. The method also gave the interviewee sufficient freedom to express her/his own thoughts on the topic. The interview questions were grouped into three main categories. In the introductory section, the objectives of the interview and the survey were explained, then the changes expected in the next 15–20 years and the factors influencing children's development were discussed. In the second part, we focused the discussion on transversal skills: in particular, we wanted to find out which transversal skills are relevant for the future and which of these skills could be developed in the 6–10 age group. Finally, the third part focused on didactic tasks: with the help of psychologists, we looked at the STEAM area, which is emphasised in frameworks. Connected to this topic, the role of different games and activities in developing skills were discussed.

We asked psychologists from five countries to participate in the survey: Belgium, Cyprus, Hungary, Italy and Romania. The aim of the interviews was not to explore psychologists' general perceptions in the field, but rather to help identify appropriate (even specific) aspects of transversal skills development in the first four years of schooling. The diversity of the interviewees' cultural backgrounds facilitated the inclusion of different perspectives and approaches. It was not intended to get a finalized list of skills that is fully generalisable; rather to identify convergent points.

The interviewees were selected according to uniform criteria in all five countries. We sought out professionals who had extensive knowledge of the cognitive development characteristics of the given age group and who had distinguished themselves in the development of skills in their work. However, it was not a requirement that they have school or teaching experience; during the interviews, we were specifically interested in their experiences in psychological practice in relation to the skills under investigation (questions relating to the field of education will be the focus of another phase of the survey).

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An important element of the method was that the interviewees received the questions in advance and were able to obtain information about the topics from their colleagues beforehand. This step certainly highlighted the differences that arose from the socio-cultural background and technological development of each country, as well as their attitudes towards technology. However, when processing the results, we also sought to compile a general list of the most important skills, independent of cultural differences, in order to identify central areas for skill development.

When processing the results, we compiled a list of skills highlighted by psychologists based on written transcripts of the oral interviews. In doing so, we also took into account the specific characteristics that arose in the definition of the skills. This step was highly helpful for outlining the conceptual framework for further work.

Findings

As regards future changes, psychologists' views are largely in line with those expressed in the literature and in official recommendations. Automation, robotisation and the widespread use of artificial intelligence will have a profound impact on the lives of future generations, and children of school age today will have to cope with the resulting difficulties as adults. Loneliness will be a problem as direct (face-to-face) social contact and communication with artificial agents becomes more and more widespread. However, there are also other phenomena that could potentially pose a threat: the cultural diversity of the environment means that social interaction requires skills in intercultural communication, and the unequal status of minorities (not only ethnic or religious, but also subcultural, gender, age or any other kind of minority) could affect the lives of the next generation. All of these phenomena, combined with the unpredictability and uncertainty of the future, can lead to emotional instability and anxiety in adult life.

However, difficulties are not only a disadvantage: as the Cyprian interviewee pointed out, coping with difficulties makes you more resilient and may even be an advantage for the generation concerned. To this end, school development should not provide a full-protected environment, but opportunities to learn coping skills. In line with this, our Italian interviewee sees the problems of the future as an opportunity rather than an obstacle. If these ideas are applied to the challenges facing school education, the most likely conclusion is that an open, flexible education system could provide the necessary skills development – as the Romanian interviewee specifically put it.

This conclusion is echoed in the reflections which, alongside the vision, also outline the general tasks of education and development. Given that it is a question of developing skills, the focus should be on personal experience rather than material knowledge. As emphasised by the Belgian interviewee, this should include active learning (research, experimentation, exploration, observation, rep-

etition, automation), but should also include opportunities for reflection. The learning environment should be organised accordingly, not too complex but not too simple, to ensure a richness of stimuli, and should always offer the learner choices. These parameters also serve to ensure that education is geared to individual needs: each learner has an individual development path and teachers must therefore take account of individual differences in development.

The opinion on transversal skills had different emphases in each interview, but in most cases, they were related to each other (in some cases only the wording was different). It was suggested that the UNESCO framework (see Care & Luo, 2016) provides a very good reference for assessing transversal capabilities. As the need to acquire new knowledge is expected to grow in all walks of life in the future, the development of learning to learn will be a priority. This challenge is also linked to the need to deal adequately with the specificities of the socio-cultural environment, which requires the development of language skills, even the knowledge of several languages, and the routine use of intercultural communication. Also linked to the social environment is the capacity for active democratic participation, which also strengthens the bond between the individual and society. Interviewees also highlighted self-awareness and problem-solving skills (Belgium) and emotional intelligence and creativity (Romania).

During the interviews, participants were asked to indicate some of the skills they considered most important. The table below shows the results (Table 3).

Table 3

Skills Highlighted by Interviewees (rows help to put each skill in context beyond the matches)

	BE	CY	HU	IT	RO
1	flexibility, multidisciplinarity	adjustment, adaptability, flexibility		convergent and divergent thinking	flexibility
2		self-awareness	conflict management		social learning, mentalization (social skills)
3	perseverance	self care	frustration and stress management		
4	openness	independence		creativity	curiosity, openness
5	critical thinking		problem solving	problem solving	problem solving
6	connectedness, motivation		communication	communication	competition, cooperation
7	empathy		emotional regulation, control	emotional intelligence	

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As can be seen from the table, the interviewees tended to focus rather on one area: some emphasised the cognitive area and others more the personality-related skills. However, some general directions stand out strongly. One is that skills related to emotional stability and regulation (self-care, emotional intelligence, empathy, stress management) in certain form emerged in almost all interviews. Similarly, the identification of skills linked to learning processes (interest, adaptability, openness, flexibility, multidisciplinarity) is a recurrent element. Thirdly, skills related to the problem-solving group (convergent and divergent thinking, critical thinking, creativity, conflict management) were highlighted.

The development tasks are determined by the skills that can be successfully developed in a given age group (6–10 years). The interviews revealed that individual differences play an important role in this: each child's developmental path and pace may be different, to which the teacher has to adapt. At the same time, developmental theories do provide a basis for establishing skills. It is generally accepted that it is not possible to develop skills related to logical thinking before the age of about 7, so it is not worth focusing on critical thinking and problem-solving skills before this age. Although, according to Piaget's (1972) theory, the formal operational stage of development necessary for abstract thinking can only be discussed from the age of 11, the foundation of skills begins at the concrete operational stage; in the case of the age group concerned, this is what should be aimed at in the development of problem-solving skills, and not actual abstraction or logical modelling.

This idea is also reflected in the development of emotional regulation skills. Empathy, compassion and cooperation with others are more likely to be successfully developed after the age of 7–8, but they can be established earlier. Development should take into account a gradual approach, as the Hungarian interviewee gives an illustrative example: the ability to regulate emotions requires first the recognition of emotion, followed by the identification of emotion, then a further developmental step of communicating emotion, and finally the actual regulation of emotion.

However, it is worth stressing again that a clear age distinction is not possible due to individual differences. On the basis of the interviews, it is more appropriate to follow the principle that the teacher chooses the method and means of development according to the needs of the pupils.

As the third part of the interview showed, similar specificities can be taken into account in STEAM development. As the interview in Romania showed, children of the age under study do not yet divide their world of interest into disciplines, they explore problems in their own complexity: in this task, children's natural curiosity guides them. The teacher can therefore take advantage of the diversity of problems, the benefits of a multidisciplinary approach and the different approaches, such as well-constructed tasks that help children to gain their own experience. However, care should always be taken to place the task in a clear context and to ensure that the different

tasks support each other during the development. The Cyprian interviewee pointed out that these objectives can be achieved mainly through real-life problems, which can focus the attention of this age group.

The multidisciplinary approach of STEAM is reinforced by the fact that a strict scientific approach can be combined with a creative (artistic) attitude. The Hungarian interviewee also pointed out that STEAM development can include mindfulness exercises to help develop general, transversal skills. Playful exercises were also mentioned by the interviewees as an important element in this context, which leads to didactic considerations.

Also in the third part of the interview, the psychologists were asked to recommend didactic methods, tools and learning activities to develop skills. Play was mentioned in several of the interviews: the Belgian interviewee stressed the importance of free play (games are often too bounded, following a set of rules that children cannot influence), the Italian interviewee referred to the importance of group games in which children can build cooperation, and the Romanian interviewee suggested that it might be useful to use a mix of traditional and digital games.

In terms of methods, project-based and problem-based learning were the main approaches used. As already mentioned, tasks should be based on real-life situations; however, it should also be considered that tasks should not always be directed towards a specific goal, but should be open-ended tasks, thus encouraging exploration. The Italian interviewee mentioned that, in addition to the pedagogical tasks, it is also worthwhile to include complementary group activities, taking advantage of the potential of art or movement to help with emotion regulation. In several interviews, it was suggested that this could also be achieved through stories, which could be worked on in a group setting.

Finally, the role of psychoeducation, which was highlighted by the Cyprian interviewee, should be highlighted. For teachers to be effective in developing children's skills, they need to own them – that is, they need to have their own experience of what they are teaching and developing. They also need to know the processes through which they can communicate them well. In the future, teachers will therefore need to become more familiar with the psychological aspects of development tasks.

Discussion

Schools have a responsibility to prepare students for a complex cultural-technological environment and a future that is difficult to predict, by developing the necessary skills. The teacher education of the present must take on the task of providing teachers who are oriented to the challenges of the future. This survey aims to provide a new starting point for more successful teacher training.

Examining the cultural and technological changes of the future, the interviews conducted in the five countries highlight the importance of focusing

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on personal well-being, balanced and satisfied living – or more generally: on the individual, her/his life prospects and personality development – in addition to the transformation of the labour market. The issues raised by psychologists provide information for educators in particular on the skills development that should be focused on for today's 6–10-year-olds in order to ensure that their personal life prospects are still good 15–20 years from now. The survey is only a first step in this direction: further task is to provide teachers with the right support for their development goals. The next step is to develop good practice methods and pedagogical tools that can be applied in formal and informal learning, within and beyond the institutional framework.

Interviews with psychologists highlighted that education today must focus on skills that promote adaptation to a rapidly changing social, technological, and cultural environment. In this regard, the interviews largely confirmed the initial assumptions of the survey. Based on the discussions, it can be concluded that training should aim to successfully manage an unpredictably changing environment. In order to make such a vague goal tangible for educators, it is necessary to clearly define the skills and develop the tools and methodologies needed to develop them. This is supported by the fact that the skills most frequently mentioned in the survey can be grouped around the need for flexible adaptation (e.g., openness, flexibility, multidisciplinarity, adaptability, creativity, problem solving, stress management).

By reviewing the skills listed in Table 3, it is possible to compile a short summary list of the areas most in need of development. The development tools to be created in the next phase of the project, should therefore focus primarily on the skills identified in this way.

The survey has obvious limitations. The interviews were conducted in five European countries, necessarily reflecting the current circumstances and future prospects of the societies concerned. A broader generalisation is therefore impossible – but was not the aim. It also became clear from the interviews that, based on their own experience, psychologists tend to focus on cognitive skills in some cases and affective skills in others. However, it is generally accepted that a balanced and satisfied life will require a complex system of skills. As the cultural-technological environment becomes increasingly difficult for the individual to navigate, and as social diversity increases too, the development of cognitive skills is needed to make oneself understood in it (the STEAM field can help with this). However, this same complexity can also leave the individual vulnerable on the affective side, which can be prevented by developing social skills and skills related to personal well-being.

Rapid technological change may require a number of shifts in a person's life, requiring them to do radically different work and acquire new knowledge and skills. It is also worth looking at this issue from an individual perspective: radical changes in occupation can change one's personality, identi-

ty and self-image, threatening the stability of identity. Thus, well-being and a balanced life also require skills that can preserve the integrity of identity in the face of radical changes. This also needs further work – just like the development the pedagogical tools and methods that can help to provide the integrity of identity.

Acknowledgements

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The Application of Ego-Network-Centred Cards and Storylines in the Practice of Educational Research

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Abstract:

In the wake of the profound social and economic shifts following the COVID -19 pandemic, qualitative research faces the urgent challenge of adapting its methodological tools to a rapidly changing world. This study responds to that challenge by examining how innovative and revitalized qualitative approaches can enhance the credibility and depth of educational research in contemporary contexts. Emphasis is placed on the need for indirect methods, especially in studies involving teachers, teacher trainees, and parents, where conventional, passive roles in research are shifting toward more active and engaged participant involvement. Two methods – ego-network-centred card and storyline – are introduced in the study, which have been applied in the investigation of teachers' thinking, but are adaptable to various educational contexts, including both institutional and individual research. These methods are presented in a practical, user-focused framework, prioritizing their reproducibility and providing detailed guidance for their application. In order to this, methodology is structured around the methods' history, advantages, challenges, and comprehensive examples of their use in educational research.

Keywords:

ego-network-centred cards, storyline technique, qualitative research, teacher thinking research

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Introduction

Qualitative research methodology has been increasingly responding to the challenges generated by economic and societal changes in the post-pandemic period with an expanding methodological repertoire over the past decade. While this trend is not explicitly stated, and there is no available data to support it, everyday experience clearly indicates a reduction in respondent willingness. The longstanding desire for conformity, which has been described using various terms, have become commonplace (Bernreuter, 1933; Goffman, 1956). Different academic fields offer varying responses to these challenges, resulting in the emergence of new research methods (for example, netnography, videography – see Horváth & Mitev, 2015), the return of previously known but not widely used methods in new roles, or the adaptation of methods from one field to another, either in the same form or with slight modifications to their function.

In education research focusing on adults – particularly in studies involving teachers, students, and parents, as well as leadership and staff – there is a particular need for research methods that are indirect and, to the greatest extent, respect the personalities of those involved in the research. In such methods, the research situation itself significantly influences the respondent's sense of security, supports the establishment of a trust-based environment in personal data collection, and, in parallel, encourages the communication of data that is as close as possible to reality, thereby increasing the reliability of the research. The lifestyle changes of the past decade have prompted a shift toward research techniques that encourage younger respondents, in particular, to move from the passive-receptive role to a more active-engaged one. Expanding verbal communication with practical activities (such as drawing or using visual stimuli) can result in non-typical situations that provoke an increased intention to communicate.

The methods presented in this study have been applied in research into the thinking of teacher trainees and teachers, but they can also be used across a broad spectrum of educational research, both in institutional and personal contexts.

The *ego-network-centred cards* method explores how individuals conceptualize and structure the relationships shaping a specific phenomenon, such as identity or professional development. Participants visually map key actors or concepts on cards or within circles according to perceived importance. Originating from social network analysis in sociology, it is now widely used in qualitative research to examine personal networks, identity formation, and professional relations (Hollstein et al., 2020; Prell, 2011).

The *storyline* method is a narrative-based qualitative research approach that investigates how participants construct and interpret their experiences over time, particularly in relation to teaching and professional identity. In research on teacher thinking, it is used to elicit educators' reflections on their

practices, beliefs, and role perceptions through collaboratively developed or individually recounted storylines. While originally designed as a teaching and learning approach in education, its narrative structure has been effectively adapted for exploring meaning-making and cognitive processes in professional contexts (Birks et al., 2009; McNaughton & Mitchell, 2016).

The goal of this study is for the reader to be able to adapt the methods presented here to their own research after reading the study. Due to the practice-oriented approach and space limitations, the two methods are organized into parallel chapters, in which the issue of reproducibility of the methods is emphasized, rather than an in-depth discussion of the theoretical framework found in traditional academic literature. The two main chapters are structured as follows: the method's story of origin and its use in research on teachers' thinking, the method's advantages and challenges, a detailed application of the method, and finally, sample study.

Ego-Network-Centred Cards

In this chapter, we present the fundamental principles necessary for using the ego-network-centred cards method. Understanding how teachers conceptualize their professional identity and development requires tools that capture the complexity of their social and cognitive environments. The ego-centred network card method offers a visual and narrative approach to mapping these relationships, making it a valuable asset in educational research.

Origin and Research Roots

The ego-network-centred card (hereinafter referred to as network card) method derives from the larger field of egocentric network analysis, focusing on the individual's personal network, known as the "ego". This methodology rose to prominence with Antonucci (1986) hierarchical mapping technique, which utilised concentric circles to depict different levels of emotional closeness. Over time, researchers adapted this visual model into more versatile and narrative-oriented tools, such as network cards, sociograms, and digital mapping platforms like VennMaker and EgoNet.QF (Hollstein & Pfeffer, 2010).

A network card, alternatively referred to as a network map (Herz et al., 2015) or an ego-centred analysis tool (Sántha, 2017, 2023), is predominantly employed in qualitative and mixed-methods research. This method of data collection is vital for scrutinising the behaviours and attributes of individuals engaged in routine educational practices and social events (Sántha & Malomsoki-Sántha, 2023). As Castells (2010) notes, understanding the interaction between society and the economy can be achieved by delving into complex networks, which he elaborates on through his concept of a network society. In the disciplines of sociology and psychology, it is crucial to

deeply investigate the processes that affect interpersonal relationships and individual characteristics, as these studies provide significant insights for the educational sciences. Furthermore, network research examines the links between various relationships within a network, such as the development of clusters or cliques, and investigates how the structural features of networks and social connections impact social integration (Hollstein, 2014).

Adaptation and Usage of the Ego-Network-Centred Cards

This approach enables researchers to investigate teachers' perceptions of their social contexts and professional support networks. Sántha (2020), Hizli Alkan (2021) and Zank (2024) utilized it to investigate the networks of teacher trainees and the process of curricular decision-making.

The cards are implemented in four formats (Hollstein et al., 2020, pp. 226–228):

1. Unstructured maps: Free-style drawings with minimal instruction.
2. Structured standardized maps: Concentric circles representing emotional closeness.
3. Structured unstandardized maps: Sector-based maps with evolving content.
4. Partly standardized maps: Mixed elements for flexible yet comparable data.

These formats facilitate the accumulation of comprehensive data, but they present difficulties in terms of interpretation and consistency. They are participant-driven, adaptable, and well-suited for mixed-methods research. Table 1 shows the benefits and challenges of the network card method (based on Farley-Ripple et al., 2021; Hollstein, 2014; Hizli Alkan, 2021).

Table 1

Benefits and Challenges of Applying Network Cards

| **Benefits**	**Challenges**
Illustrates individual networks	Subjective and prone to recall bias
Enhances participant autonomy	Challenging for cross-study comparison
Suitable for mixed-methods	Intensive works for large-scale studies

Sample Study

We conducted a study involving 11 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors from five Indonesian universities as part of the second author's doctoral research. All of the participants had master's degrees in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and English education and

at least seven years of teaching experience. We used convenience sampling and invited them over WhatsApp to fill out ego-network cards and participate in reflective interviews. We modified the structured unstandardized format to examine the "professional identity" and "professional development" of EFL instructors. The data collection was carried out by the second author in accordance with a procedure agreed upon with an expert (Qamariah & Hercz, 2025).

The steps of data collection with network cards were as follows:

1. Preparation and Framing: Participants were first guided to draw a series of concentric circles on an A4 sheet of paper. In the innermost circle, they wrote the key phrases "professional development" and "professional identity." Unlike the original form of the ego-network technique, this adaptation centred on the research topics rather than the self ("I") as the primary node. Nevertheless, the participants themselves remained the focal actors in constructing their networks.

2. Identification of Core Elements: Next, participants were asked to list all points, factors, or experiences directly related to the formation of their professional identity and their participation in professional development activities or programmes. Elements perceived as highly influential were placed closest to the central topic in the inner circles, while those with lesser perceived impact were positioned toward the outer circles. Each participant's arrangement thus reflected their personal understanding of the factors shaping their identity and development processes.

3. Structuring and Visual Mapping: Within these circles, participants recorded concepts and associations they considered meaningful. To further organise their representations, they could divide the map into sectors, each corresponding to a major domain of professional life (for example, family responsibilities, workplace environment, education, or peer relations). There was no prescribed number of sectors; instead, participants determined their own structure. The researcher documented each configuration to ensure a detailed basis for later analysis. The combination of concentric circles and optional sectors allowed for nuanced comparisons among participants and across themes. This flexible, visual approach encouraged deep reflection and enabled participants to externalise complex internal processes in a tangible form. (A sample network card is shown in Figure 1.)

4. Reflective Interview: After the mapping activity, the researcher conducted a reflective interview with each participant. During these interviews, participants were invited to elaborate on their choices, explain relationships among elements, and discuss the meanings behind their visual representations. These narratives provided valuable contextual information and enriched the interpretive depth of the ego-network-centred data.

Figure 1

Sample Network Map
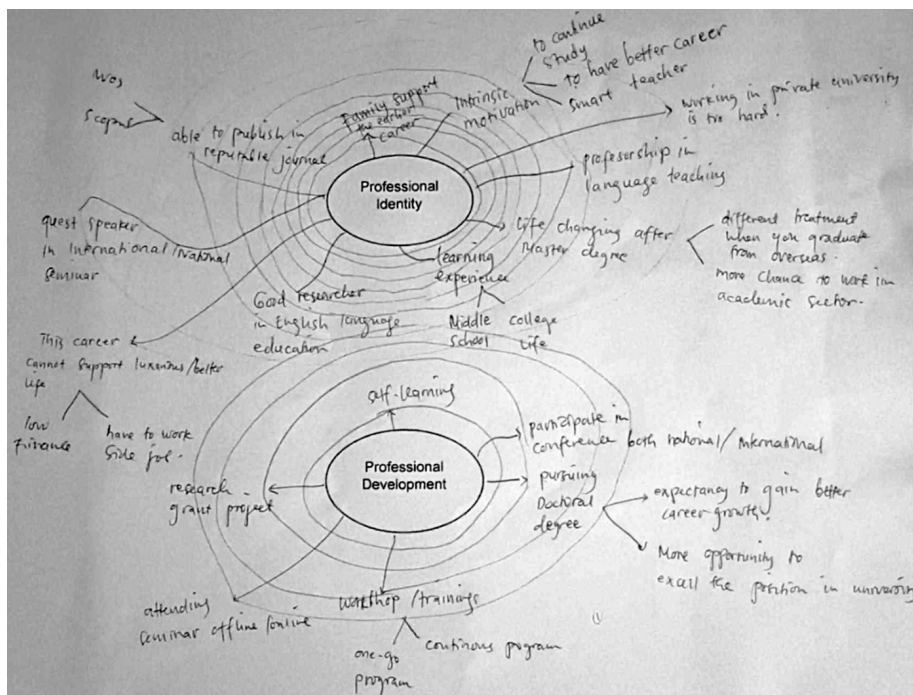
Analysis

The collected data were analysed according to the general principles of qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004; Sántha, 2022). Coding was performed in two stages: initially by the second author, and subsequently by the same author with the involvement of an expert. Both the network cards and the interview transcripts reflecting on them were coded in order to answer the question of how the interviewees interpret their own professional identity and professional development. For the sake of clarity, this article presents only the analysis of the network cards dealing with professional identity, followed by selected excerpts from the interviews.

From the professional identity network cards, the highest number of circles identified was nine, with a maximum of eight sectors, while the smallest number of circles was one, and the fewest sectors were three. As the first step of the analysis, the results were organised into tables; several participants (referred to as "cases") are presented in Table 2 for illustrative purposes. Taking Case 1 as an example, eight sectors can be distinguished within nine circles. The thematic groups are underlined in the table, and the related concepts are shown in parentheses.

Table 2

Some Examples of Content Nodes of Professional Identity of the Sample Study

Case	Sectors	Circles	Content Nodes
1	8	9	family support; learning experience (middle school, college, master's degree); intrinsic motivation (continue study, having a career, smart teacher); good researcher in ELT; professorship in language teaching; publishing article in reputable journals (Scopus-WOS); working at a private university (career cannot support a better life); guest speaker in international/national seminar
2	6	6	opportunity; personal bias; random anomaly; experience in seminar field (encouragement from supervisor/professor); need for stable income; need for self-motivation
5	6	6	passion for teaching; research interest; parental expectation; spiritual career benefit; professional networking; lifelong learning experience

The diversity of content nodes indicates that educators with a higher number of sectors often express a wider array of influences and ambitions, embodying a multifaceted professional identity. Intrinsic motivation, spiritual benefits, and financial stability were key in shaping professional self-concept in several cases (for example, Case 2 and Case 5). Network cards showed identity as dynamic, influenced by personal and professional events. For example, Case 1's journey moved from foundational learning to academic and global aspirations.

The reflection interview suggests that EFL teachers continuously strive to enhance the best versions of themselves according to their respective roles:

"We are as an EFL instructor, we have to compete more with other institution, to be a professional instructor, especially in EFL context, to do so, we have to catch up what is left from other, from other professionals instructor, especially from the area of English, particularly in digital devices, we have to be more accessible to digital devices, sine this is digital era, so have to be adaptable with technology." (Case 2)

"Through teaching, I am also learning at the same time, and based on my religious values, we cannot stop learning." (Case 5)

Storylines

This chapter introduces the key aspects of applying the storyline method in educational research. It outlines the conceptual foundations and procedural steps that support its effective use in exploring participants' experiences and perspectives. The section also highlights how storyline can serve as a qualitative research technique.

Origin and Research Roots

The storyline method, originally developed in the 1960s at Jordanhill College of Education in Scotland, began as an innovative pedagogical approach known as the Scottish Storyline Method, designed to promote holistic and cross-curricular learning through narrative structures (Bell & Harkness, 2006). In contemporary research contexts, particularly within teacher education, storyline denotes a visual elicitation technique could be suitable for investigating teachers' professional identities, beliefs, and developmental trajectories; however, its application remains rather fragmented. Qualitative research methodology is characterised by the use of multiple and diverse data sources (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), which presupposes the integration of verbal and visual channels of communication in order to uncover personal narratives, thus suggesting storyline method to be a specific way of narrative inquiry. The use of this method is most commonly found in teacher research, particularly in the field of teacher education (for example, Orland, 2010; Sonu, 2022) and in studies addressing teacher well-being (for example, Mulholland & Wallace, 2013).

Adaptation and Usage of the Storylines

When preparing the adaptation of the method, we considered three key aspects.

First, the adaptation should promote the democratization of the research process, meaning that it should not only favour participants with a high level of communicative intent but also support those who may require a reduction of hierarchical distance in the interview situation. The sense of partnership is further reinforced by the fact that it is ultimately the participant who decides the form and amount of visual output they provide.

Second, the method should serve a compensatory function, as traditional, voice-based interviews inevitably entail certain losses – typically the limited capture of metacommunicative cues. In this respect, the storyline curve offers an opportunity for deeper or secondary analysis, enriching the interpretive process.

Third, it is essential to ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Sántha, 2015). The storyline method contributes to this goal by providing an alternative channel of data expression and communication, complementing and strengthening the reliability of the collected material.

In order to determine the applicability of the storyline method in a given research context, it is essential to weigh its advantages against the potential challenges that need to be addressed. Table 3 provides a summary of the most relevant considerations in this regard (based on Birks et al., 2009; Riessman, 2008).

Table 3

Benefits and Challenges of Applying Storylines in Narrative Research

Benefits	Challenges
Narrative coherence and temporal structuring	Interpretative ambiguity and researcher bias
Integration of visual and verbal data	Methodological standardisation
Participant reflection and empowerment	Balancing openness with structure

For the sample study presented below, the adaptation of the method was developed based on Gergen and Gergen (1988), whose approach emphasizes that self-characterization is expressed in a graphic form, which is organically connected to the individual's self-narrative. During the planning phase, preparations were made for both online and face-to-face interviews, and due to the novelty of the method, a pilot interview was conducted. Based on the pilot results, the wording of the participant instructions was subsequently revised. In an effort to standardize the measurement procedure, a detailed script was created to guide both the drawing of the storyline and the researcher's facilitation of the narrative. This was supplemented with a series of checklists (covering equipment and interviewer behaviour) and a concise ethical guideline to ensure consistency and methodological transparency.

Sample Study

Grounded in the qualitative research paradigm, the first author's dissertation examines the well-being of lower-primary teacher education students with a primary goal of establishing the nature of the students' experiences. In conceptualizing this study, we explored alternative techniques that could contribute effectively to investigating the topic. In selecting an appropriate procedure, it was an essential criterion that it should be easily adaptable to the "conventional" semi-structured pedagogical interview – serving, on the one hand, as an icebreaker to introduce it, and on the other, as a means of directing the interviewer's attention to the distinctive features, critical and turning points in the development of interviewees' university student well-being in the context of post-pandemic recovery. These requirements were satisfactorily met by the storyline method. As our aim is to provide a detailed presentation of the method, the circumstances of the study are discussed only in outline due to limitations of space.

The storyline method was applied during both the individual and focus group interview phases of the dissertation research, resulting in 20 storylines and their corresponding narratives. Four interviews were conducted in person, while the others took place online, using either audio-only or video recording between 2022 and 2024, after a combination of convenience and

snowball sampling. Assuming their higher level of metacognitive awareness and more holistic perspective on teacher training, final-year or recently graduated students were primarily invited. Although representativeness was not an objective, demographic diversity and atypicality were emphasized. The twenty participants, aged between 21 and 47, were students from different lower-primary teacher training institutions in two of the three major statistical regions of Hungary; fourteen were women, and ten were enrolled in full-time study.

In accordance with the above-mentioned principles of adaptation and application, the storyline method was administered through the following steps:

1. Introduction: Welcoming the participant, presenting the aims and structure of the research and the interview, providing information about research ethics, and obtaining informed consent.

2. Drawing the well-being curve:
   a) In the case of in-person interviews: Participant was given a photocopied A4 sheet depicting the first and fourth quadrants of a two-dimensional coordinate system. Instruction: "Please write the academic years of your university studies along the x-axis. Now, using a single curve, represent how you felt during your university years. The band of the x-axis represents the neutral level; use the positive and negative sections of the y-axis accordingly. Please take a global perspective on your well-being."
   b) In the case of online interviews: Participant was asked to use a blank sheet of paper available to them or a simple drawing application on their computer to record their well-being curve. Instruction: "Please take a blank sheet of paper or open an easily accessible graphic program and draw a coordinate system. It is sufficient if the positive range of the x-axis and both the positive and negative ranges of the y-axis are visible. Now, scale the x-axis to represent the academic years of your studies. Please draw a curve showing how you felt during your university years. The band of the x-axis represents the neutral level; use the positive and negative sides of the y-axis as appropriate. Please take a global perspective on your well-being."

3. Narrative construction: The interviewer examined the well-being curve, paying particular attention to its trajectory, peaks, and troughs, and then invited the participant to summarize their student experience from the perspective of well-being using the graph as a reference. In cases where the narrative was brief or lacking in detail, the interviewer prompted elaboration through guiding questions, such as discussing notably positive or negative events, the relationship between fluctuations and academic or personal experiences, feelings at the high points, possible causes of stagnation in a flat curve, and reflections on how these experiences contributed to the transition into the induction phase of their teaching career.

The overall experience of data collection indicated that the storyline method effectively served as an icebreaker, and participants generally enjoyed the drawing process. Several expressed gratitude, noting that the task offered a form of closure for their university years. During the interpretive monolog, or at later points in the interview, some participants chose to modify their original curve, which was always permitted. While the storyline consistently elicited a narrative, the depth of engagement varied between participants, including whether the curve was actively used as a visual aid.

Notably, the storyline curves produced during online interviews were often less detailed, and in some cases the academic years were not marked on the x-axis. This limitation is attributable to the device-dependent nature of metacommunicative cues, which are difficult to compensate for remotely: even when the interviewer requested scaling of the curve, direct influence over its execution was limited. Another challenge arose from the digitalized work environment, as most participants did not have access to larger sheets of paper, and curves drawn on classic sticky notes had limited resolution. Such issues could be alleviated by providing participants with suitable materials, such as a pre-printed coordinate system with both axes pre-scaled to enhance usability and facilitate subsequent quantification.

Analysis

The application of the storyline method produces two types of data addressing the same topic: the curve, as a retrospective visual representation, and the accompanying commentary, as a textual narrative. These two forms were treated conceptually as complementary, though analysed using distinct methods.

The curve essentially provides an intensity scale, whose primary function is to guide the subsequent course of the interview. However, it can also be digitized and analysed using function-analysis methods, allowing for comparison across participants, and even representation on a single composite diagram. Since no specific scaling was provided for the y-axis, it is unclear what numerical value participants might have associated with the curve's peak; therefore, no attempts at numeration were made. Nevertheless, the overall trajectory of the curve, including its minima and maxima, was examined to identify trends. Figures 2 and 3 present two curves to illustrate typical and atypical patterns in student well-being for the participants included in the sample.

The curve in Figure 2 can be considered typical: lower-primary teacher training students begin their university studies with positive emotions, which gradually decline following the completion of the initial transitional phase. For most participants, the pandemic-related lockdown in spring 2020 represents a clear turning point, followed by a steeply declining phase. This is subsequently alleviated as professional internships and social activities resume in parallel with the lifting of restrictions. Students conclude their studies with relatively low level of well-being, which they attribute primarily to the accumulation of tasks in the final semester.

Figure 2

A Typical Storyline Curve Representing Student Well-Being
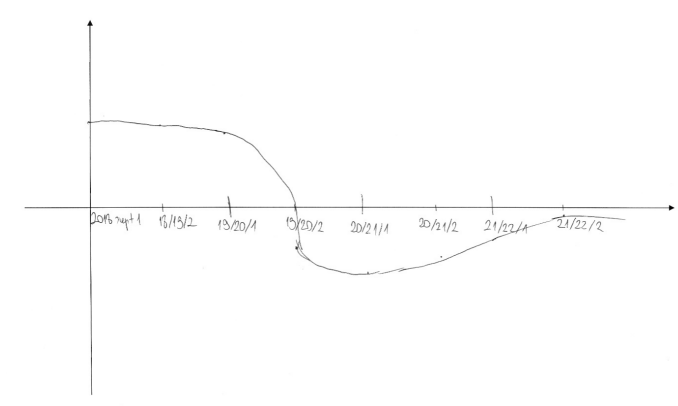
Note. The curve was drawn by Interviewee 2.

The atypical storyline curve in Figure 3 initially exhibits similar features, but the decline in well-being occurs already in the first semester, due to dissatisfaction with education and the pressures of the examination period. In this storyline, private life plays a prominent role: the first deep-end experiences and subsequent attempts at recovery interfere with academic life. Later, the COVID-19 lockdown in the second semester of the participant's third year generates a similar prolonged crisis, from which recovery is only achieved after the pandemic crisis eases and the participant enrols in a new program.

Figure 3

An Atypical Storyline Curve Representing Student Well-Being
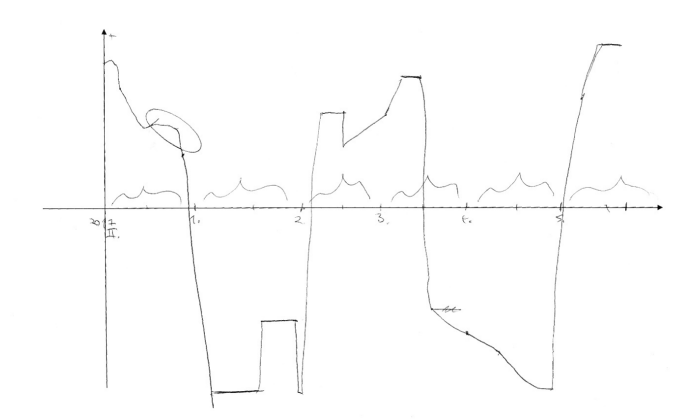
Note. The curve was drawn by Interviewee 6.

The narratives were coded using a hybrid logic in line with the principles of qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004; Sántha, 2022). Based on the trends observed in the storylines, we deductively established categories reflecting some characteristic events in the students' university life trajectories, under which codes were then generated using an inductive approach. Table 4 illustrates a selection of cases for several participants.

Table 4

Key Events of Student Life: Some Categories and Codes

	Transitional phase	Pandemic experience	Internship	Last semester
Interviewee 5	very positive	relief	reality shock	tiresome
Interviewee 6	reality shock	fatalistic – non-affected	senseful	N/A
Interviewee 16	high-school-like	fatalistic – affected	inspiring	stressful

Retrospective accounts of student well-being reveal considerable subjectivity and diversity, providing nuance to general assumptions. This is particularly evident in the three pandemic-related cases mentioned in Table 4. Interviewee 16's narrative describes the emotional rollercoaster experienced during months of hospital treatment: "I was taken [to hospital] with fifty-eight percent oxygen saturation. Seventy-five percent of my lungs were inflamed, and I had to go through all of that at the age of twenty. I was incredibly angry because all I needed was for someone to understand me." Interviewee 6, who was not infected, reported that "when [the lockdown] was announced, I felt that my life was over" due to social isolation; and Interviewee 5, by contrast, benefited from the lockdowns, as the suspension of commuting between home and university allowed them to catch up on academic obligations.

Final Thoughts

Our study demonstrated how the ego-network-centred cards and storyline methods can be adapted for research in teacher education. Both methods share the characteristic of being interview-based supplementary techniques, which themselves possess an interview-like nature and can be effectively applied at various stages of qualitative research. Functionally, they may serve as independent data collection tools, as pre-interview instruments for induction, or as post-interview techniques aimed at clarification.

Although our cases illustrated their use in educational research, these methods are equally applicable in other fields of the humanities where interviews are conducted and where the research topic and/or participant sensitivity call for a solution capable of reducing the negative feelings often

associated with the hierarchical dynamics inherent in traditional interview settings – a factor that may be particularly relevant in the post-COVID period. Our experiences have been favourable in this regard: in the case of the storyline method, the primary goal was to reduce interview-related anxiety and facilitate reflection, whereas the network cards complemented interview by helping to clarify key concepts that had not been sufficiently explored in depth. In both instances, participants provided authentic and personal responses.

It should be noted that these methods require careful preparation in terms of both the materials used and the standardisation of procedures. Despite prior efforts to build rapport and reduce tension, technical or interpersonal difficulties may still arise during data collection, requiring the interviewer to respond promptly and appropriately.

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The Mechanism of Action of Music Therapy. Considering Social, Cognitive and Emotional Development within a Pedagogical Framework.

Szabadi, Magdolna[1]

Abstract:

Music therapy is a collective term for music as a tool in the process of development, correction and rehabilitation. Its theoretical background, framework and methodology are always adapted to the activity in which it is applied. The therapy uses music as a catalyst for emotional mobilization. This allows the processing of feelings and memories in the form of symbols. Among its effects can be highlighted the following: stress relief, relaxation, mobilization of experiences, conflict management, and enhancement of experiences and activity. At the same time, there are also experimental examples of its effects on relaxation, taste formation and skill development. In pedagogy, it is now natural to use music as a tool to achieve the musical transmission effect. In therapy, music acts as a catalyst in triggering emotions and emphasizing verbal information, and the goal is for the participant to become a creative participant in his/her own life by creating musical improvisations. This does not require musical expertise. In music pedagogy, on the other hand, the main goal is to create aesthetic values (Konta, 2005, 2010; Szabadi, 2021). According to Lindenbergerné (2005), both therapy and pedagogy serve personality development. In the course of leisure activities and workshops, the teacher can apply the methods and tools of music therapy within a pedagogical framework. At the same time, music education can also develop skills targeted by therapy, such as adaptation, empathy, attention, and so forth (Urbánné, 2005). And within this pedagogical framework, the social, emotional and cognitive transfer effect of music is realized in a measurable way.

Keywords:

music therapy, musical experiment, musical transfer effect, music therapy experiments

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Introduction

Various educational, psychological and neurological studies have shown that music therapy can play an important role in personality development, correction and rehabilitation. An important element is the safety,[2] which is the basis for the participant to experience, evaluate and practice the events in the outside world (for example, resolving conflicts in social situations) in a protected space. And to receive objective, uncritical feedback on them, based on the trusting relationship between the group members and the therapist and the group/individual. Feedback helps the participant to correct his/her experiences, thinking and behaviour as necessary. The extent, form and manner of this, and its effectiveness, may depend, among other things, on the traumatic depth of the experiences. Namely from their personal meaning, individual abilities and motivation, current psychological state and life situation. It is the therapist's competence to organise these into a system, to create the atmosphere and conditions for their unfolding, taking into account the principles of continuity and gradualness. A key element of the above is the precise and appropriate choice of musical style,[3] musical elements and methods.

The levels of therapy are arranged in a hierarchy (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Hierarchical Connection of Elements of Therapy – Illustration

Therapy is a tool for prevention and development at the level of primary prevention, which also includes the framework of pedagogy. Since education is part of the support services. Because both the therapist and the teacher shape the personality holistically. At the secondary level of therapy – in the clinical area – the focus is on healing and reducing symptoms, which is beyond the competence of the educator. While at the tertiary level of therapy,

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[2] Security, safety: in its current sense, emotional and psychological safety, which is built on acceptance and trust; while physical comfort provides the foundation for this.

[3] Musical style: in its present sense, it refers to the genre, the expressive nature of the music. For example, calm, rhythmic, improvisational, etc. Or even to an era in music history, for example, baroque, classical. Both can influence responses and reactions in therapy.

the task is to support recovery in rehabilitation. At this level, the teacher can collaborate with a developmental/special education teacher, conductor, psychologist, etc. at the level of practices. However, at all three levels, music therapy can only be considered as a complementary tool. Musical instruments must be integrated into the methodology of the basic activity in which they are to be used. In the field of education, an example is the non-professional use of musical instruments for relaxation, motivation, creating experiences, managing anger etc. Overall, to solve methodological and behavioral problems.

It is now common practice to use music as a tool in the above ways in educational practice. While in therapy, music is used as a catalyst to evoke emotions and emphasize verbal information. Therapy is aimed at a process in which the patient becomes a creative participant in his/her own life by creating a musical intervention. In music pedagogy, on the other hand, the main aim is to create along the lines of aesthetic values (Konta, 2005, 2010; Szabadi, 2021). According to Lindenbergerné (2005), both therapy and pedagogy are at the service of personal development. During leisure activities and workshops, the teacher can use the methods and tools of music therapy in a pedagogical framework. At the same time, music education can also develop skills that are targeted by therapy, such as adaptation, empathy, attention, etc. (Urbánné, 2005). Furthermore, from a performing arts and pedagogical perspective, active music making and collaboration develop fine motor control, attention, and visual-spatial awareness, offering deep engagement for both the therapist and the participant. These multisensory and social elements play a central role in how music supports development and rehabilitation.A comparison of therapy and pedagogy is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Comparison of Therapy and Pedagogy
(Source: Szabadi, 2014, p. 177.)

Aspects	Therapy	Pedagogy
Duration	shorter in time	for an indefinite period
Participation	volunteer	mandatory
Performance	does not criticise	assesses performance
Form	focuses on individual, group	mostly group
Goal	development, service	information acquisition, accountability

In the hierarchy outlined, therapy is separated from the meaning of cure and can be placed in the process of resolving the problem that is interfering daily life. The key of therapy is the engagement and motivation of the participant, on which the process itself can be built. Musical elements precede, accompany and calm the emotions that arise during the exercises of the session.

Problem Statement

There are many studies on the transfer effect of music and the mechanism of action of music therapy (e.g. Ye, Huang, Zhou, & Tang, 2021; Hou, 2022), but we see few examples of what alternative methods and application options are available within a pedagogical framework to address socio-emotional, cognitive, and professional problems. Questions and gaps arise regarding the theoretical definition of music therapy, pedagogical models, and the competence and background knowledge of the teacher in the field of music therapy. Furthermore, the comparison between therapy and pedagogy is unclear, especially from an educational perspective. Thus, the teacher faces numerous social and cognitive problems when the means of solution are lacking.

Literature Review

Music Therapy: Definitions, Theoretical Models

When you look at the definition of music therapy, it turns out that it is an umbrella term. Its methods and tools draw from a wide range of disciplines. It uses musical elements as a tool for the development, correction[4] and rehabilitation of psychological functions and for the support of the personality (Szabadi, 2021).

According to Buzasi (2003), music therapy is a therapeutic intervention in a musical environment. The goal of therapy is achieved through interpersonal communication, conscious control of relational factors and the use of psychological tools. Buzasi (2006) further defined it as the harmony of body-mind-spirit balance, achieved through the conscious use of sound through the application of psychological, therapeutic procedures. According to the American Music Therapy Association's 2005 definition, "music therapy is the clinical and experiential use of musical instruments in a therapeutic setting to achieve individualized goals" (cited in Kollár, 2007, p. 828). Konta & Zsolnai (2002) also interpret music therapy as a method that focuses on the personality development effect of music. Bruscia's (1987) theory also focuses on the maintenance, development and restoration of physical and psychological harmony and well-being, to which music therapy contributes through the experience of music. Robb's (2013) approach concretizes that music therapy uses music interventions based on clinical and empirical evidence to achieve individual goals, the terrain of which is the safe space between the therapist and the patient.

Thus, in music therapy, the emphasis is on therapy, the scope and conditions of which are not the same as music education and recreation, *but do not exclude them* (Buzasi, 2006; Szabadi, 2021). All this is based on the therapist's original profession in the humanities (e.g., doctor, teacher, pastor,

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[4] Correction: in the present sense, an intervention, a kind of adjustment.

social worker, etc.). In practice, a teacher can use creative musical exercises in the methodological solutions, which have an impact on tension relief, experience mobilization, attention, cooperation, and other related skills. Such exercises can include, for example, rhythm and movement exercises.

As music therapy is situated within the group of art therapies (music, visual and movement), we highlight Payne's (1993) and Case and Delley's (2006) theories of art therapy. They all focus on art as a means of expressing experience (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Art as a Means of Expressing Experiences
(Source: Attila Kráfcsik: Cave drawings)
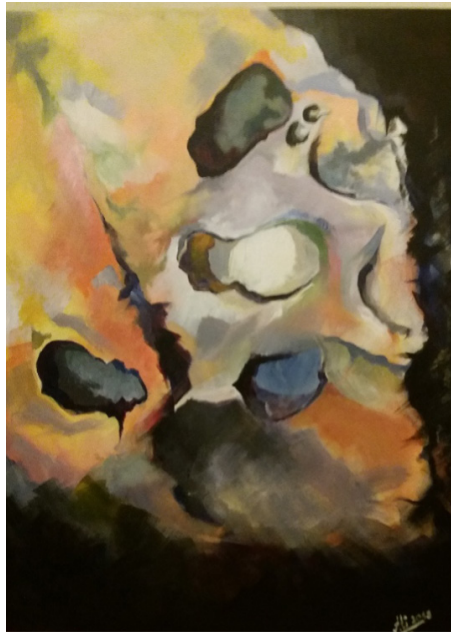
According to Payne (1993), its focus is on the communicative elements, on the wide range of self-expression in the safe atmosphere of therapy, where the deepest feelings can be expressed. Case & Delley (2006), on the other hand, express and focus on therapeutic creation from the perspective of practice, which is a symbolic reflection of the patient's experiences and life events, and is distinct from artistic creation in the aesthetic sense. Through the product created during the therapy, the therapist and the patient try to jointly interpret the experiences of the patient. Pedagogical practice provides a good opportunity for various spatial integrations. For example, while listening to music, expressing and processing the musical experience in symbolic form (in drawing, through dramatic play or during conversation).

So, in a pedagogical context, in addition to bringing feelings and memories to the surface, music therapy deals with „listening", rhythmic improvisation, other musical elements (tone, singing) as well as movement, cooperation, spontaneity, visualization and coordination. It analyzes and creatively processes experiences. These activities activate both mental and physical processes.

For the meaning of the therapy, Buzasi (2003, p. 18) cites the Duden Etymologie. „...the actual meaning of the word therapie, borrowed from the Greek word therapeia, is: to care for, to serve." The root word is therapon: to serve, to accompany, is now used only in a psychotherapeutic context. Missura's (2005) theory also supports the idea that the meaning of therapy is related to the functions of service and protection. This suggests that music therapy is not only about healing, but also about accompaniment, service and support. In other words, it does not only and strictly refer to recovery from illness,[5] but also to the alleviation of difficulties that pervade daily life and hinder personal life (Szabadi, 2021). Related to this from a pedagogical point of view is the fact that the word 'paidagogos' is also Greek for servant accompanying the child (Telek, 2017).

In view of the above, it should be emphasized that music therapy alone cannot replace original supportive, curative procedures, such as pharmaceutical treatment, but as Vértes (2010, p. 90) cites Wilms' theory „...it can be used as a second line of treatment for certain psychological disorders and subjective complaints." In other words, it is an additional element of a complex activity or procedure (Szabadi, 2021). In practise appropriate therapeutic methods and tools can be used in the event of technical or skill deficiencies during music learning.

Stacho (2005) divides the music therapy models into two directions: the clinical and the psychological music practices. The latter is characterized by two directions. 1. The emotion-driven one, which sees the emergence of the musical experience as a pre-recruitment of cognitive processes and as innate in us. 2. The post cognitive, on the other hand, sees the creation of the musical experience as a consequence of cognitive processes. The approach of the music therapy trends can be linked to certain schools of psychotherapy. The psychoanalytic school focuses on the relationship between music and the unconscious. It focuses on the analysis of unconscious experiences catalysed by music. The behavioral psychology trend focuses on musical activity and instrumental playing, while the social psychology trend focuses on practicing communicative elements (Konta & Zsolnai, 2002). The latter two can also appear in pedagogical practice. The updating and combination of methods, trends and tools is based on the creativity of the therapist and comes from the relational dynamics of therapy (Szabadi, 2021).

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[5] Illness: deterioration of health, difficulty.

Transfer Effects of Music (Therapy)

Buzasi (2003, 2006) distinguishes between the physiological and psychological mechanisms of music. Physiological mechanisms of action include vegetative function, heart and blood pressure regulation, the creation of a general relaxed state or stimulating activity, and pain relief. Psychological mechanisms of action include emotional expression, attention-concentrating, communication, experience-constructing, and association effects. Since music mobilizes unconscious memories in the therapeutic process, it explores and interprets unconscious processes, and dissolves psychic resistance. This is explained by the transformative potential of music. This means that the experiences and feelings expressed by the basic elements of music (rhythm, melody, harmony) are corrected by replaying them and playing them on a musical instrument. In short, our feelings undergo an experiential reworking through the transformative potential of music (Figure 3) (Bagdy, 2005). This reduces our negative and stressful experiences. The transformational potential of music mentioned above can be one manifestation of the musical transfer effect within pedagogy.

Figure 3

The Transformational Potential of Music – Illustration

Fields of application, methods and tools

At the level of primary prevention, music therapy is a tool for development. It aims to reduce the risk factors that trigger the disease. In a word, it is at this level that health promotion and health protection are at task. At the secondary level, in the early diagnosis of disease, it can be an adjunct to treatment. At the tertiary level, it can be used as a tool for the rehabilitation of

damage and complications resulting from illness or injury. The pedagogical part of music therapy can be linked to the first and third levels.

The application areas of music therapy are clinical, social and other educational areas. In the latter, it can play a role as a skill development tool or as a way to restore physical and mental balance (Buzasi, 2006). Of course, the application areas and goals can be intertwined and updated, the current presentation is just an example.

There are two forms of music therapy. According to Buzasi (2006), in the active form, we represent different life situations, experiences and feelings through instrumental improvisation and dramatic techniques. In a pedagogical context, we can think of the experience-mobilizing and socializing effects of circle games and creative rhythm exercises. This form is multimodal, capable of inducing motor, auditory and behavioural responses that can be perceived by all our senses. This allows the musical transfer effect to unfold in a pedagogical environment. The receptive form focuses on listening to music. It concentrates on sharing, awareness, interpretation and processing of the musical experience. In receptive therapy, music is manifested in subjectively perceived psychomotor activity. Which stimulates the ability to associate and the imagination. In pedagogy, the content of children's songs, nursery rhymes, and circle games provides an opportunity for this.

Music therapy improvisation (Figure 4) is a spontaneous improvisational game that creates acoustic sound/tone (Buzas, 2006).

Figure 4

Music Therapy Improvisation – Illustration

Professional musical improvisation is a communication process based on a specific musical theme. Its performance requires expertise and is structured, shaped and performed in a musical way. Music therapy improvisation,

on the other hand, is a communication game with momentary emotions, feelings and memories. Its structure, form and performance are not predetermined, no musical expertise is required, no expectations. It is a sudden impulsive start, where therapist and patient seek a common focus (e.g., in tempo, volume) (Bruscia, 1987; Fabényi, 2017; Tiszai, 2017). Therefore, the task of music therapy improvisation is to create order out of chaos. In other words, the volume, tempo and rhythm should be even, and the players should develop a sense of attunement by listening to each other. But, it is not the same as a musical performance, what music education and performing arts expect (Urbánné, 2017).

The methods of music therapy are conflict and behaviour centred. The former is based on awareness and processing of experiences that emerge through the catalytic effect of music. In the latter, it seeks to shape behaviour through dramatic techniques and instrumental play (Buzasi, 2006). The methods of music therapy are conflict- and behavior-focused. The former is based on the awareness and processing of experiences arising through the catalytic effect of music. The latter strives to shape behavior with the help of dramatic techniques and instrumental playing (Buzasi, 2006). In pedagogical terms, we highlight the development of cooperation, adaptation, empathy, attention, etc., that occurs in choir singing and instrumental rhythm practice.

The directions of music therapy are analytical, behavioral psychology and social psychology. In a pedagogical framework, they can manifest themselves, for example, in the expression of musical experience through drawing, movement and free instrumental improvisation (Konta & Zsolnai, 2002; Szabadi, 2021).

The tools of music therapy are musical instruments (from classical to self-made instruments) (see Figure 5), body sounds (e.g., clicking, clapping, etc.) and animated sounds (e.g., sighing, growling, shouting, etc.). Their use, combination and implementation depend on the competence and creativity of the therapist. And above all, they must be adapted to the goal of the therapy (Szabadi, 2021). The three levels of goals are: (1) the general level, which is about developing self-awareness, for example, (2) at the social level, improvisation aims to create a communal experience, (3) at the individual level, improvisation focuses on processing the person's specific problem. According to the basic elements of music, rhythm energizes, shapes behavior, and appears in the active form of music therapy. Melody and harmony mobilize memories, which in turn are used in a receptive form (Bruscia, 1987). The line between the elements and goals identified above is thin. And this limit is adjusted to the competence of the therapist and the actual problem. In a pedagogical context, songs that create a mood, motivate, and reduce tension, or children's games supplemented with movement and dialogue, are suitable for this.

Figure 5

The Music Therapy Instrument Set, Example
(Source: Szabadi, 2021. p. 63)
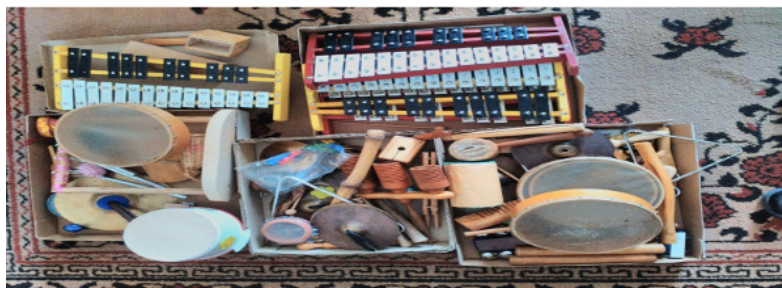
Overview of Research Results

Methods and Applications

Emotional expression is crucial in the course of therapy, as it is fundamental to the formation, development and regulation of a relationship (Ekman, 1999). In therapy, musical improvisations contain certain emotional signals, and the meaning of these needs to be understood in order to the efficiency (Gilboa, Bodner & Admir, 2006; Phan Quock, 2007). In pedagogical practice, the expression, recognition and regulation of emotions ensure the success of communication and interaction. In this, musical elements authenticate and enrich verbal and non-verbal signals. Such can be, for example, the lyrical excerpts of songs, the manner and form of playing musical instruments. We can evaluate, on the one hand, the musical elements (tone, volume, tempo), and on the other hand, the emotional content of the improvisation with different measurement scales or by listening back to audio recordings.

Clement-Cortes (2004) also examined emotional skills. In his opponion a more relaxed, comfortable state of mind is achieved through the effective and accurate emotion expression, which indirectly contributes to the positive changes in the communication, self-expression and the surfacing of memories in the therapeutic process. In his studies, Vértes (1995) concluded that, in addition to the relaxation effect, instrumental playing involves powerful visual, auditory, concentration and cognitive processes, and can therefore contribute to maintaining mental and physical fitness. In addition, he observed taste-forming effects of music therapy sessions (Vértes, 2010). The pedagogical implication of these physiological impact studies is that the physiological effects of music help create mood, motivation, and a physical state that prepares and reinforces the content of the activity or lesson.

Music therapy is also beneficial in behavioural deficits and motor disorders, as observed by Altenmüller et al. (2009). Dramatic, creative musical

practice reduces aggressive displays, while increasing positive interactions. There are more cooperative displays and more effective communication as measured by observations and socialization scales (Chao-Fernández, Gisbert-Caudeli & Vázquez-Sánchez, 2020). Musical practice can also induce physiological changes in the body. Hauck et al. (2013) demonstrated that active music therapy and listening to favorite music resulted in improved activity and a pleasant physiological well-being. This was confirmed by physiological measurements.

Münte, Altenmüller and Jancke (2002) found in their study that regular music practice improves the efficiency of information processing and also affects other areas, such as language, attention and memory functions. All this was demonstrated with cognitive tests. Koelsch et al. (2000) and Koelsch (2009) investigated musicality, showing that the brain triggers responses to out-of-tune chords. Tonality was also at the center of the experiment of Suda et al. (2008). They confirmed the stress-reducing effect of the major key compared to the minor. For this, electrophysiological studies were used. Cognitive neuroscience therefore confirms the positive effect of musical transfer on the aforementioned skills, such as language, memory, and tonality perception.

However, a number of impact evaluations (e.g., Maratos et al., 2009; Bradt & Dileo, 2010; Mössler et al., 2011) highlight questions that arise when evaluating the mechanism of music therapy. These are the following. The developmental, positive effect of music therapy may result from the one-sided bias of the therapist and the observer. A multidimensional, higher level of evaluation is needed in the assessment of impact, because it is not possible to isolate which factors are involved in the impact factors and in what proportion. Related to this, the surrounding activities need to isolate. Furthermore, the relationship between sufficient duration of therapy and effectiveness is also difficult to concretise.

Therefore, the effects of music therapy cannot be examined in isolation, as it is not an independent procedure. Its theoretical background, tools and methodology are always adapted to the activity in which music therapy is applied. Therefore, it can only be experimentally measured and validated with the same measurement tools and methodology as those used in the main activity (Szabadi, 2021).

Research Examples Investigating the Mechanism of Action

Fernández, Vázquez & Ferreiro (2014) complemented the effectiveness of music education in schools with different digital music games (e.g., instrument grouping, melody and rhythm analysis), which had a transfer effect with positive changes in emotional skills, academic performance and reduced symptoms of behavioural disorders. A pilot study by Rickson & Watkins (2003) found that music therapy sessions in schools that promote au-

tonomy and creativity help to develop prosocial behaviour in adolescents with aggressive, social and emotional disorders. Ye, Huang, Zhou and Tang, (2021) also found a reduction in aggression in adolescents, coupled with an increase in self-control, as a result of music therapy sessions in a meta-analysis. And Hou (2022) concludes that music therapy can be part of school mental health, helping to articulate negative emotions, reduce psychological problems and develop a healthy personality.

The positive effects of music therapy have been observed on sleep quality, and in this context, cognitive abilities (memory, attention, etc.), an increase in the number of positive interactions, a decrease in social isolation, emotional expression, mood, and attentional focus. The above were examined with social and cognitive tests, measurement scales, electrophysiological markers, and measurement methods (Kollár, 2006, 2007; Harmat, 2009; Büttner et al., 2009; Chuang, Han, Li & Young, 2010; Hauck et al., 2013).

When examining instrumental music, Clements-Cortés (2004) and Vértes (1995, 2010) concluded that instrumental music is a complex auditory, motor and visual training that can maintain physical and mental well-being. It indirectly affects emotional, social and cognitive processes and skills (e.g. emotional expression, social isolation, etc.).

Comparative studies focusing on research methodology have drawn attention to the bias of evaluation when assessing the effects of music therapy. The biasing factors can be: imprecise determination of the duration and frequency of the study, lack of multi-criteria evaluation of control groups, lack of consideration of sample size, lack of comparison with other procedures (Herkenrath, 2005; Sutter & Wormit, 2007; Maratos et al., 2008; Bradt & Dileo, 2010; Scrine, 2021; Mössler et al., 2011).

Summary

Music therapy is an umbrella term that uses music as a tool in the process of development, correction and rehabilitation. Its theoretical background, framework and methodology are always adapted to the activity in which it is applied. Therapy uses music as a catalyst for experiential mobilisation. This makes it possible to process feelings and memories in the form of symbols.

There are two forms of music therapy, active and receptive. The first is based on instrumental improvisation, which does not require any expertise. The second is based on the awareness and processing of experiences that arise during listening to music. Music not only provides the tools for the therapeutic session, but also the framework and validation of what is being said. It is through the experience of playfulness and joy that musical instruments can be introduced into therapy. Among her methods, behaviour-centralised method, which helps to shape behaviour through instrumental improvisation and dramatic exercises. And it is important to make the experiences in therapy relevant to the present. The conflict-centred method, on the other

hand, seeks to uncover and analyse unconscious experiences. Because music is temporal and characterised by a kind of point-ness, it is identical with it-self „then and there", it can faithfully represent the dynamics of spiritual life.

Among its effects we can highlight the following. Relieving tension, relax-ation, mobilising experiences, resolving conflicts, enhancing experience and activity. But there are also experimental examples of relaxation, taste-form-ing and skill-development effects. There is also evidence of transfer effects on memory and other cognitive processes, the formulation of life emotions, nervous system activity, socialisation and behaviour in clinical, social and other educational settings. In pedagogical terms, therapy is a kind of atti-tude, a supplementary method and a system of tools beyond professional methodological solutions. In this framework, the transfer effect of music therapy is effective. Practical examples are alternative, creative rhythm exer-cises, practicing musical elements with movement and dramatic play. In this case, the aesthetic principles of the „musical product" are not effective, but emotional mobilization and processing of experience. Because while peda-gogy is oriented towards a creation, therapy is oriented towards a process. Working on a musical instrument is a developmental tool in therapy, and in pedagogy it is a means of acquiring knowledge. While the goal in music lessons is to acquire and develop musical knowledge and skills, until than in music therapy instrumental improvisation is a means of self-expression and communication. The therapist acts as a kind of catalyst and, through music, „puts" the participant in a situation, stimulating them to activity and coop-eration. But pedagogical work with a therapeutic attitude can also have this effect. The difference lies in the goal, framework, and system of conditions, as well as in the background knowledge and competence of the therapist.

Furthermore, we must emphasize that from a research methodological perspective, the bias inherent in the use of different evaluators must be tak-en into account when evaluating the impact of music therapy. When setting up the experimental and control groups, the broad spectrum and the effect factors of the surrounding occupations need to be taken into account and evaluated as background factors. The choice of the duration of therapy is also a key factor for effectiveness. It is important to adapt it to the activity in which the music therapy is applied. And the musical exercises and interven-tions should also be adapted to the goal of the therapy, based on the needs of the participant.

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Diagnostic Processes for the 0–4 Age Group in the System of Pedagogical Services

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Abstract:

This 0–4 age period is the most intensive stage of neurocognitive and socio-emotional maturation; early identification and targeted intervention can substantially affect developmental trajectories. Since 2013, the Hungarian pedagogical service system has provided more unified frameworks for this, yet in practice, inequalities in timing, tools, and capacities can still be identified. The aim of the study is to explore the diagnostic processes for the 0–4 age group within the system of pedagogical services. Special attention is given to the timing of screening, the quality of assessment, parental involvement, multidisciplinary teamwork, and the synthesis of disability-specific diagnostics underlying special educational needs (SEN). We conducted a mixed-methods study. A 50-item questionnaire was administered to parents, professionals, and institution leaders across five dimensions (screening, assessment, involvement, communication, teamwork). The reliability of the test sample was high (Cronbach's α = 0.82), with a total of n = 247 participants (parents: 142; professionals: 78; institution leaders: 27). Furthermore, four focus group interviews (n = 30) were conducted to examine segments of the assessment process, based on a semi-structured thematic framework. According to the findings, 82% of parents considered the assessment to be thorough, while 55% reported long waiting times. A delay in screening was identified by 64% of parents, whereas 72% of professionals highlighted the lack of a unified protocol. Parental involvement was generally positive, though 38% noted the excessive use of professional terminology in feedback. Team consultations were reported as being mostly regular (68%), though often ad hoc due to capacity constraints (44%). Overall, the process was evaluated favourably (77%), but only 49% regarded it as fully transparent. The synthesis of disability-specific diagnostics (GDD/intellectual, hearing and visual impairment, ASD, motor impairment/CP, multiple disabilities) highlights the need for a unified, age-banded diagnostic procedure. The professional quality of diagnostic services within the pedagogical system is high, yet at a systemic level, critical issues remain concerning the timing of early screening, the absence of unified protocols, accessible

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communication, and capacity. It is recommended to establish a national set of protocols (SEN-specific, 0–4 years), an integrated signaling system with digital pre-screening, family-centered feedback standards, structured team-work, and targeted professional workforce development.

Keywords:

early childhood, diagnostics, pedagogical services, special educational needs, early screening, multidisciplinary team, parental involvement

Introduction

Early childhood is the most dynamic and sensitive period of human life, laying the foundations for later physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development (Danis, 2024). The diagnostic processes of the 0–4 age group are of particular importance. The early recognition of developmental differences makes it possible to initiate appropriate interventions in a timely manner, thereby significantly improving children's quality of life and social integration (Mile & Kiss, 2020).

The system of pedagogical services in Hungary plays a key role in carrying out diagnostic and intervention tasks. The restructuring of the institutional framework in 2013 aimed to ensure efficiency, equal access, and consistent professional quality (Mile & Kiss, 2020). Early diagnostics within the pedagogical services are based on the collaboration of multiple fields (psychology, special education, medicine), requiring a multidisciplinary approach (Danis, 2022).

At the international level, the issue of early diagnostics and intervention is becoming increasingly prominent. The DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), ICD-11 (World Health Organization, 2022), and DC:0–5 framework (Zero to Three, 2019) all provide classification and diagnostic systems that enable more accurate identification of disorders in infancy and early childhood. International practices highlight that the earlier developmental differences are detected – including neurodevelopmental disorders, speech and communication delays, and socio-emotional difficulties – the more significantly later school performance and social adjustment can be influenced (Danis, 2020; Mares & Woodgate, 2017).

In Hungarian practice, the diagnostic process is closely linked to the legislative framework and the protocols of pedagogical services (Csepregi, 2019). For professionals working within these services, it is both a challenge and an opportunity to organize diagnostic work along the principles of a family-centered approach, multidisciplinary collaboration, and the use of modern assessment tools.

The aim of the present study is to present the specific characteristics of diagnostic processes for the 0–4 age group within the system of pedagogical services. In this context, we review developmental characteristics, the professional and legislative foundations of diagnostic steps, as well as national and

international practices. Furthermore, through an empirical study involving 247 professionals and parents, we examine the strengths and shortcomings of the diagnostic process, with particular attention to parental involvement, the diversity of assessment procedures, and the experiences of professionals.

The central research question is to what extent the Hungarian diagnostic system ensures early detection, what tools and methods are applied by professionals in pedagogical services, and how the diagnostic process could be made more effective in light of international practices.

The System and Legal Framework of Pedagogical Services

The system of pedagogical services in Hungary plays a key role in supporting children's development, particularly in the diagnostic and intervention processes of the 0–4 age group. The structure and development of these services have evolved over many years and underwent a major transformation with the amendment of the Public Education Act in 2013. The aim of this change was to ensure equal access for children to developmental and diagnostic services and to achieve greater consistency in the quality of care at the national level (Mile & Kiss, 2020).

The Organizational Framework of Pedagogical Services

Pedagogical services are institutions within the public education system that provide specialized tasks, offering diagnostic, developmental, and counseling services for children and students. Their responsibilities include early intervention, special education counseling, speech therapy, educational counseling, conductive education, therapeutic physical education, as well as kindergarten and school psychology services (Kiss, 2019).

One of the core principles of pedagogical services is complexity: care is provided through a multidisciplinary approach in which psychologists, special education teachers, developmental educators, speech therapists, and medical professionals work together. This is particularly important in the case of the 0–4 age group, where developmental differences often appear across multiple domains and are interwoven (Danis, 2024).

Legal Background and Regulatory Framework

The operation of pedagogical services is regulated by Act CXC of 2011 on National Public Education and its implementing decrees. Decree No. 15/2013 (II. 26.) of the Ministry of Human Resources (EMMI) defines the tasks, organizational structure, and access to services of pedagogical service institutions. The decree clearly emphasizes that every child has the right to the diagnostic and developmental services they need, regardless of their place of residence or social situation (EMMI, 2013).

One of the main aims of the reform of the pedagogical service system was to reduce regional inequalities. Previously, the quality and availability of diagnostic services varied considerably across different parts of the country. Within the new structure, county-level pedagogical services apply unified professional protocols and procedures, with the aim of making the diagnostic process more transparent and consistent (Mile & Kiss, 2020).

The Role of Pedagogical Services in Diagnostics for the 0–4 Age Group

In the early years of life, a key task of pedagogical services is the early identification of developmental differences. This includes conducting screening examinations, consulting with parents, and the work of the multidisciplinary diagnostic team. During the diagnostic process, pedagogical services often use internationally validated assessment tools (e.g., Bayley-III, DP-3, Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales), which allow for a comprehensive examination of the child's development (Danis, 2024; Csepregi, 2019).

Kiss (2019) emphasizes that the diagnostic process is not limited to mapping the child's condition but also involves establishing close cooperation with parents. Parental involvement is essential, as they provide the most information about the child's everyday functioning and are key actors in the success of interventions.

Challenges and Development Directions of the System

Despite the significant progress achieved in recent years, several challenges remain within the pedagogical service system. Mile and Kiss (2020) point out that a shortage of professionals, excessive administrative burdens, and the lack of standardized tools often slow down the diagnostic process. In addition, parental involvement is not always realized to a sufficient degree, which may reduce the effectiveness of interventions.

Future development directions include the introduction of unified diagnostic protocols, the application of digital assessment tools, and the further strengthening of family-centered and interdisciplinary approaches. According to international recommendations (WHO, 2022; Zero to Three, 2019), the emphasis is increasingly shifting toward process diagnostics and the consideration of environmental factors, a perspective that is gradually being integrated into Hungarian practice as well (Danis, 2024).

Developmental Characteristics of the 0–4 Age Group and Diagnostic Challenge

One of the key insights of developmental psychology is that in the early years, developmental outcomes are shaped by the dynamic interactions between biological predispositions and the environment (Sameroff, 2009).

Although the pace of neurological maturation is genetically programmed, environmental factors – particularly the quality of the parent–child relationship – play a decisive role in influencing developmental trajectories (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

The Complexity of Early Childhood Development

Infancy and early childhood (0–4 years) represent the most intensive period of human development, characterized by neural plasticity, the rapid maturation of neurocognitive functions, and the critical embedding of social and relational experiences (Danis, 2024; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Development is multidimensional: motor, cognitive, language, and socio-emotional domains interact with one another, and stagnation in any one area can trigger a chain reaction that affects the others (Mares & Woodgate, 2017).

A fundamental insight of developmental psychology is that, in the early years, developmental outcomes are shaped by the dynamic interactions between biological predispositions and the environment (Sameroff, 2009). While the pace of neurological maturation is genetically programmed, environmental factors – particularly the quality of the parent–child relationship – have a decisive influence on developmental trajectories (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Detailed Overview of Developmental Domains

Motor and psychomotor development: the development of gross motor skills (rolling, sitting, walking) and fine motor skills (grasping, manipulation) is a prerequisite for cognitive exploration and active engagement with the environment. Delays in motor development often predict global developmental differences (Csepregi, 2019). Cognitive development: Starting from sensorimotor experiences, the child gradually becomes capable of symbolic thinking, problem-solving, and recognizing simple cause-and-effect relationships. Standardized assessment tools, such as the Bayley-III or DP-3, provide an objective framework for measuring development (Danis, 2024). Language and communication development: Language acquisition occurs during a critical period. The appearance of first words, followed by sentences, represents not only cognitive but also socio-emotional milestones, as the development of communication skills determines the formation of social relationships (Tomasello, 2009). Social and emotional development: The quality of attachment, the emergence of emotion regulation, and the shaping of social behaviour form the basis of the child's later mental health. The absence of secure attachment is a significant risk factor in psychosocial development (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Challenges of the Diagnostic Process

One of the greatest difficulties of early childhood diagnostics is that children at this age have limited verbal and metacognitive abilities, and therefore cannot provide direct information about their own condition (Danis, 2024). For this reason, the diagnostic process relies heavily on parental reports and behavioural observations, which may carry subjective biases (Carter et al., 2009).

The Main Challenges

- *Temporal dynamics:* Development can change radically within a short period of time, thus process diagnostics with repeated follow-up assessments are necessary (Stein et al., 2019).
- *Multidimensional problems:* Developmental differences often appear comorbidly (e.g., motor delay + language delay), therefore diagnosis requires a differentiated approach.
- Environmental *embeddedness:* Family, cultural, and social contexts fundamentally shape developmental outcomes. Diagnostics must be culturally sensitive, especially in multicultural environments (WHO, 2022).

The role of parental perceptions: Parents often notice behavioural and emotional problems first, while cognitive or language delays are less apparent to them (Danis, 2024). This influences the timing of referrals for diagnostics.

The necessity of multidisciplinary collaboration: Effective diagnosis can only be achieved through the joint work of psychologists, special educators, speech therapists, and medical professionals.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks of Diagnostics

The modern diagnostic approach is based on several theoretical frameworks:

- *Biopsychosocial model:* developmental differences are shaped by the interactions of biological, psychological, and social factors (Engel, 1977; Danis & Kalmár, 2020).
- *Transactional model:* highlights the significance of dynamic interactions between the child and their environment, emphasizing that developmental outcomes are the result of continuous negotiations (Sameroff, 2009).
- *Human ecological model:* examines development within the interrelation of multiple environmental levels, integrating microsystem (parent–child interactions), mesosystem (institutional environment), and macrosystem (cultural values, social policy) factors (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).
- *Relational perspective:* the quality of the caregiver–child relationship is a central determinant of emotional and cognitive development, therefore the examination of parent–child interactions is fundamental in diagnostics (Mares & Woodgate, 2017).

Without the integration of these conceptual frameworks, the diagnostic process would become reductionist. In diagnostics for the 0–4 age group, a holistic, interdisciplinary approach is therefore essential, one that takes into account the child's individual characteristics, the family and social context, as well as developmental specificities.

Special Educational Needs and Disability-Specific Diagnostics in the 0–4 Age Group

The early identification of developmental disorders and disabilities underlying special educational needs (SEN) is crucial, as the neural plasticity present in the early years creates opportunities to significantly influence developmental pathways (Csepregi, 2019; Danis, 2024). However, diagnostics at this age are marked by specific challenges: children's communication abilities are limited, which means that assessments rely heavily on parental reports, observation, and a combination of standardized assessment tools (Csákvári & Mészáros, 2012).

The diagnosis of global developmental delay in the 0–4 age group is particularly complex, as the measurability of cognitive abilities is limited at this early stage. Diagnosis is based on monitoring developmental milestones, applying standardized tests such as the Bayley-III or the Griffiths Scales, and mapping adaptive behaviour through parental questionnaires (Vineland) (Danis, 2024). The diagnostic manual (Csákvári & Mészáros, 2012) emphasizes that the concept of global developmental delay can be used under the age of 5 and may predict the later identification of intellectual disability.

Among sensory impairments, the early screening and diagnosis of hearing loss is of particular importance, as language development takes place during a critical period. Mandatory newborn hearing screening (otoacoustic emission, BERA) enables early intervention, with the initiation of hearing aid provision and rehabilitation as soon as possible to ensure the development of communication (Csepregi, 2019; World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). In the diagnosis of visual impairment, the observation of visual behaviour, ophthalmological examinations, and the use of developmental tests are also essential. Early recognition makes it possible to introduce compensatory strategies (tactile, auditory channels) at an early stage (Csepregi, 2019).

The early signs of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can be identified as early as 18–24 months of age, particularly based on patterns of social communication and repetitive behaviours (Zwaigenbaum et al., 2015). According to the *Recommendations* (2019), the diagnostic process is based on observational assessments (ADOS Toddler Module), parental questionnaires (M-CHAT-R), and the evaluation of adaptive behaviour (Vineland). In Hungarian practice, diagnosis is carried out by a multidisciplinary team involving the collaboration of psychologists, special educators, and medical experts.

In the diagnostics of motor impairments and cerebral palsy, neurological examinations are complemented by motor development scales (e.g., Alberta Infant Motor Scale – AIMS), which help to identify risks (Csepregi, 2019). The aim of early motor diagnostics is not only to detect differences but also to initiate developmental interventions (physiotherapy, conductive education) as soon as possible.

The diagnosis of multiple disabilities poses the greatest challenge, as the involvement of several functional domains complicates accurate assessment. In such cases, multidisciplinary teamwork, a dynamic diagnostic approach – meaning repeated assessments and monitoring of developmental changes – and parental involvement play a particularly important role, as parents provide an authentic picture of the child's everyday functioning (Csákvári & Mészáros, 2012).

The Diagnostic Process Steps in Pedagogical Services

The diagnostic care of the 0–4 age group within pedagogical services is a multidisciplinary process that addresses every dimension of the child's development and seeks, within an integrated framework, to accurately map the condition, identify intervention needs, and involve the family. The steps of the diagnostic process do not proceed linearly but often cyclically, allowing for continuous monitoring of the condition and adaptation to developmental changes (Danis, 2024; Csepregi, 2019).

Main Phases of the Diagnostic Process

Referral and Screening

The first step of the diagnostic process is referral to the pedagogical service system, which may originate from parents, a paediatrician, a health visitor, or a nursery or kindergarten teacher. Referral is followed by screening, which uses quick, standardized methods (e.g., developmental questionnaires, milestone checklists, observational screenings) to identify potential developmental risks (Mile & Kiss, 2020). The aim of screening is not to establish a diagnosis, but to determine the necessity of further assessment (Carter et al., 2009).

First Interview and Anamnesis

The central element of the first interview is parental involvement. During the collection of family anamnesis, professionals map the biological, psychological, and social factors influencing the child's development (Danis & Kalmár, 2020). The anamnesis is multidimensional: it includes perinatal history, experiences related to developmental milestones, family dynamics, as well as parents' perceptions and concerns.

Assessment and Examinations

The central element of the diagnostic process is the comprehensive assessment of the child's development. Within pedagogical services, this integrates several methods

Observation: in Both Structured and Free Play Situations

- *Standardized assessment tools:* Bayley-III, DP-3, Vineland, Griffiths Development Scales, communication questionnaires (Danis, 2024)
- *Questionnaire-based assessments:* parent-report tools such as the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) or the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL)

Clinical examination and psychological testing: in specific areas (e.g., attachment assessments, language tests) When selecting assessment tools, essential considerations include cultural adaptation, the availability of national norms, and ensuring parental involvement (Csepregi, 2019).

Multidisciplinary Teamwork

In the diagnostic process, psychologists, special education teachers, speech therapists, physiotherapists, and, when necessary, paediatricians, neurologists, or psychiatrists are involved. Teamwork makes it possible to integrate different professional perspectives and reduces the risk of establishing a one-sided diagnosis (Mile & Kiss, 2020).

Diagnosis and Feedback to the Family

The final step of the diagnostic process is the integration of professional findings and the formulation of the diagnosis and recommendations. Feedback provided to the family is of central importance: the way the diagnosis is communicated determines the parents' cooperation in the subsequent intervention process (Mares & Woodgate, 2017). Feedback must be empathetic, understandable, and supportive.

The Main Difficulties of the Process

Heterogeneous use of tools: there are significant differences in the assessment tools applied across pedagogical services, which makes it difficult to establish a unified national diagnostic protocol (Csepregi, 2019)

Shortage of professionals: the lack of psychologists, speech therapists, and special education teachers often slows down the process and extends waiting times (Mile & Kiss, 2020).

Deficiencies in parental involvement: the extent of family cooperation greatly influences the success of the diagnostic process. Parents' overload, lack of information, or uncertainty may hinder effective participation.

Lack of cultural sensitivity: diagnostic procedures often fail to adequately consider the socio-cultural context, even though it plays a decisive role in shaping child development (WHO, 2022).

Empirical Research on the Diagnostic Processes of the 0–4 Age Group

Research Aim

The aim of the research was to explore how the diagnostic processes of the 0–4 age group are implemented within the system of pedagogical services, with particular attention to the aspects of screening, assessment, parental involvement, and multidisciplinary teamwork. The study sought to answer how the process is evaluated by the professionals and parents involved, and what strengths and shortcomings they perceive in practice.

Participants of the Study

The sample consisted of 247 participants, divided into three subgroups:

- *Parents (n = 142):* families raising children aged 0–4 who had been in contact with pedagogical services within the past two years Professionals (n = 78): psychologists, special education teachers, speech therapists, and physiotherapists working in pedagogical services.
- *Institution leaders (n = 27):* heads of branch institutions and coordinators.

Gender and age distribution of the sample: among parents, 87% were women and 13% men; among professionals, 92% were women and 8% men. The mean age was 33.7 years (SD = 4.5) for parents and 41.2 years (SD = 6.8) for professionals.

Methods

We conducted a mixed-methods study combining quantitative survey data with qualitative focus group interviews to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the diagnostic processes for the 0–4 age group within the system of pedagogical services.

Questionnaire Survey

The questionnaire contained 42 closed and 8 open-ended questions across five key dimensions:

- Experiences of screening (e.g., timing, tool usage)
- Quality of assessment and examinations
- Parental involvement and cooperation
- Multidisciplinary teamwork
- Satisfaction and recommendations

Closed questions were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = not at all characteristic, 5 = fully characteristic). The instrument aimed to capture both procedural aspects and subjective experiences of those involved in the diagnostic process. Responses were analyzed descriptively, with mean values and percentage distributions calculated for each dimension.

Focus Group Interviews

To complement the quantitative data, four focus group interviews were organized: two with parents (8 participants each) and two with professionals (7 participants each). The discussions were conducted using a semi-structured guide, focusing on key areas such as screening, assessment, communication, and recommendations for intervention. Each session lasted approximately 60–75 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Thematic analysis followed the six-step framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), including data familiarization, initial coding, theme identification, review, and refinement. This systematic procedure ensured a rigorous and transparent interpretation of recurring patterns and shared experiences across the parent and professional narratives. Themes were organized around the most salient aspects of diagnostic experiences –uncertainty before diagnosis, communication and feedback, and the dynamics of multidisciplinary collaboration.

Representative quotations were included to illustrate the main themes and to enhance the credibility and interpretive depth of the analysis:

- "We felt relief once the process finally started, but until then, we were left in uncertainty for months," – *Parent, Focus Group 1*
- "The teamwork is essential, but in reality, we often meet only when there's a crisis or deadline," — *Professional, Focus Group 3*

Results

The presentation of results follows the methodology of the questionnaires and focus group interviews. Quantitative and qualitative findings are integrated to provide a comprehensive picture of the diagnostic processes for children aged 0–4 within the pedagogical service system.

Questionnaire Results (Table 1)

Screening: 64% of parents indicated that screening was delayed (mean = 2.7), and 72% of professionals reported the lack of a unified protocol. These findings highlight systemic inconsistencies and regional disparities in the early detection process.

Assessment: 82% of parents expressed satisfaction with the thoroughness of the examinations (mean = 4.2), yet 55% reported that the waiting time was excessively long. This reflects strong professional quality but limited procedural efficiency.

Parental involvement: 71% of parents felt that their opinions were considered during the diagnostic process, but 38% found the feedback overly jargon-heavy. This indicates the need for clearer, family-centered communication practices.

Teamwork: 68% of professionals considered team consultations to be regular, though 44% stated that, due to capacity limitations, they were often organized on an ad hoc basis. This suggests that while interdisciplinary work is valued, it remains inconsistently implemented.

General satisfaction: 77% of parents evaluated the process positively overall, yet only 49% regarded it as fully transparent, suggesting a gap between perceived professional competence and systemic clarity.

Table 1

Parental satisfaction with the main dimensions of the diagnostic process (n = 142)

Dimension	Mean (1−5)	SD	Satisfaction %
Timeliness of screening	2.7	1.1	36%
Thoroughness of assessment	4.2	0.9	82%
Parental involvement	3.9	1.0	71%
Clarity of feedback	3.2	1.3	62%
Transparency of teamwork	3.5	1.2	68%
General satisfaction	4.0	0.8	77%

As shown in Table 1, the highest satisfaction scores were observed in the area of assessment quality, whereas screening timeliness and communication clarity received the lowest ratings.

To further illustrate the convergence and divergence between parental and professional perspectives, a comparative overview is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Comparison of Parents' and Professionals' Perceptions of the Diagnostic Process
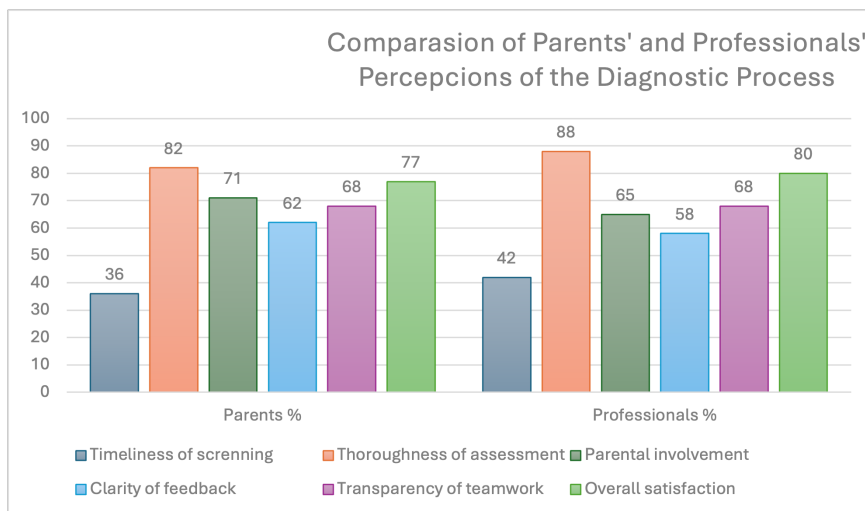
The results indicate substantial agreement between parents and professionals in their overall evaluation of the diagnostic process. Both groups rated assessment quality and teamwork positively, while recognizing persistent systemic weaknesses in timing, communication, and coordination.

Focus Group Interview Results

In the parent focus groups, three main themes emerged:

- *Uncertainty before diagnosis* – Parents often waited extended periods for referral and assessment, describing the process as emotionally taxing and marked by uncertainty. "We felt relief once the process finally started, but until then, we were left in uncertainty for months." – *Parent, Focus Group 1*
- *Positive experiences in the assessment process* – Parents emphasized the empathy and professionalism of the specialists, valuing the thoroughness of the observations and the supportive atmosphere during the examinations. "The professionals were kind and attentive. We finally felt that someone was really looking at our child." – *Parent, Focus Group*
- *Communication difficulties* – Several parents noted that the communication of results was overly technical and difficult to interpret, especially for families with limited prior knowledge of developmental terminology. "The explanations were detailed but full of terms I didn't understand." – *Parent, Focus Group 2*

In the professional focus groups, three main themes stood out:

- *Staff shortages and workload* – Participants emphasized that the shortage of qualified professionals leads to long waiting lists and limits opportunities for follow-up consultations. "We simply don't have enough time to meet as a team for every case." – *Professional, Focus Group 3*
- *Heterogeneity of assessment tools* – Professionals reported that the use of different instruments and procedures across districts undermines comparability and continuity of care. "Every team uses slightly different methods, which makes it hard to ensure consistency." – *Professional, Focus Group 3*
- *Value of interdisciplinary teamwork* – Despite challenges, participants unanimously emphasized that collaboration across disciplines enhances diagnostic accuracy and professional learning. However, they noted that teamwork often occurs only in response to crises or deadlines. "The teamwork is essential, but in reality, we often meet only when there's a crisis or deadline." – *Professional, Focus Group 4*

The thematic relationships among these findings are summarized in Figure 2.

Figure 2.

Thematic Map of Qualitative Findings from Focus Group Interviews
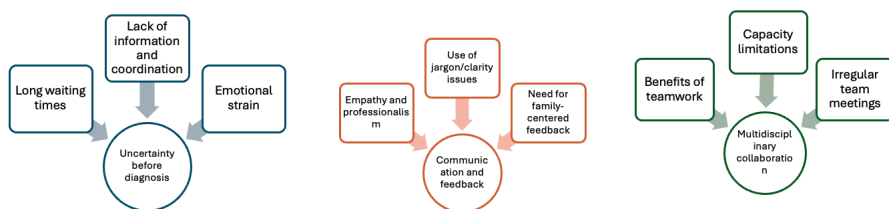
The map illustrates three central and interrelated domains of experience:

- Uncertainty before diagnosis – linked to emotional strain and procedural delays.
- Communication and feedback – encompassing empathy, clarity issues, and the need for accessible language.
- Multidisciplinary collaboration – reflecting both the perceived benefits and systemic constraints.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data reveals a consistent pattern: the diagnostic process is characterized by strong professional competence and empathy, but also by systemic limitations that affect efficiency and transparency.

The findings converge around three interrelated systemic challenges:

- *Timeliness* – Delays in screening and assessment are primarily due to staff shortages and regional disparities.
- *Communication* – Professional feedback is often overly complex, limiting parents' understanding and engagement.

- *Coordination* – Multidisciplinary collaboration, though valued, remains irregular and dependent on individual initiative.

These results point to key areas for policy and practice development, including the establishment of national diagnostic protocols, digitalized screening systems, regular interdisciplinary case meetings, and communication-focused professional training.

Together, these findings provide a solid empirical basis for improving the quality, accessibility, and coherence of early diagnostic services within the Hungarian pedagogical support system.

These data demonstrate that both groups view the assessment phase as the most consistent and professionally solid component of the process. Yet systemic issues – particularly related to timeliness, unified diagnostic protocols, and communication practices – remain pressing areas for improvement.

Discussion

The results of the empirical research confirm the dilemmas previously identified in both national and international literature (Danis, 2024; Mile & Kiss, 2020).

While parents expressed high satisfaction with the professional competence and empathy of specialists, persistent systemic shortcomings were observed – chiefly in the timeliness of screening, the absence of unified protocols, and the clarity of communication.

These findings indicate that the diagnostic process functions on a strong professional foundation but is weakened by organizational and procedural fragmentation.

International frameworks – such as the U.S. IDEA system and the UK's Sure Start program—highlight the critical role of early screening, family-centered cooperation, and standardized documentation protocols (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

The Hungarian *Recommendations* manual (Csepregi, 2019) reflects these same principles, outlining procedural steps that promote early detection and multidisciplinary collaboration.

However, the inconsistent application of these protocols – due to staff shortages, workload differences, and regional inequalities – continues to limit efficiency and accessibility.

The findings align closely with transactional and human ecological models (Sameroff, 2009; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), emphasizing the dynamic interaction between the child, family, and professional environment.

Within this framework, delays or breakdowns in communication can negatively affect the relational system that supports early intervention. Hence, the key to improving diagnostic efficiency lies not only in technical protocols but also in strengthening systemic responsiveness and interprofessional collaboration.

Conclusion and Development Proposals

The research aimed to explore the diagnostic processes for the 0–4 age group within the Hungarian pedagogical service system, focusing on screening timeliness, assessment thoroughness, communication, parental involvement, and teamwork.

The quantitative and qualitative results together depict a system characterized by high professional quality and strong interpersonal commitment, but constrained by organizational inconsistencies and capacity limits.

The most significant finding was that 82% of parents were satisfied with the professional thoroughness of assessments, confirming that expertise and empathy are central to building trust and cooperation between professionals and families.

However, 64% of parents reported delayed screening, and 72% of professionals emphasized the lack of unified protocols – indicating that procedural fragmentation remains a barrier to effective early intervention. Such delays may have lasting consequences for developmental outcomes, as supported by international research linking timely diagnosis with improved intervention efficacy (Zwaigenbaum et al., 2015).

Qualitative insights reinforced these patterns: parents described uncertainty and stress before diagnosis and reported difficulties understanding feedback written in professional terminology.

These experiences underline the importance of accessible communication and family-centered feedback as determinants of satisfaction and cooperation. Professionals, in turn, highlighted the value – but also the inconsistency – of multidisciplinary teamwork, which is often conducted in an ad hoc manner rather than within a structured framework.

The Position of the Hungarian System within International Trends

Hungarian diagnostic practice is fundamentally aligned with international recommendations. The use of standardized assessment tools – such as the Bayley-III, DP-3, and Vineland – the presence of multidisciplinary teams, and the comprehensive approach to developmental assessment meet the expectations emphasized in international literature and guidelines (DSM-5; ICD-11; DC:0–5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013; WHO, 2022; Zero to Three, 2016/2019). At the same time, the specificity of the Hungarian system lies in the fact that regional disparities, socio-economic realities, and sustainability factors significantly influence the consistent application of protocols. This suggests that Hungary seeks to adapt flexibly to global trends in accordance with the available resources, which represents both an opportunity and a limitation (Danis, 2024; Csepregi, 2019).

The Role of a Family-Centered, Partnership Approach

The findings of the study also confirm that the success of the diagnostic process largely depends on establishing a partnership with parents. A family-centered approach is not merely a pedagogical or psychological principle, but a practical factor that fundamentally influences the acceptance of the diagnosis and the effectiveness of interventions. Parental involvement and clear, empathetic communication reduce informational asymmetries and support parents in actively participating in their child's developmental pathway (Mile & Kiss, 2020; Danis, 2024). At the same time, this approach increases families' sense of security and satisfaction, which is indispensable for long-term effectiveness.

The Significance and Novelty of the Study

The novelty of the present research lies in the fact that it does not merely provide a theoretical synthesis but is also grounded in a large-scale empirical study involving 247 participants, including parents, professionals, and institutional leaders. This made it possible to evaluate diagnostic processes from multiple perspectives and thus present a complex, nuanced picture of how the system functions. The study simultaneously highlighted systemic challenges (lack of protocols, shortage of professionals, communication difficulties) and the strengths of everyday practice (professional thoroughness, empathy, teamwork).

Development Proposal

Based on the results, the following development directions can be outlined:

Establishing unified diagnostic protocols. Standardizing the screening and developmental assessment of the 0–4 age group is essential, particularly in cases of differences underlying special educational needs (SEN). The condition-specific protocols presented in the *Recommendations* (Csepregi, 2019) and the *Diagnostic Manual* (Csákvári & Mészáros, 2012) could, if adapted at the national level, create a more coordinated practice.

Strengthening early screening. Conducting screenings in a timely manner is crucial, as the effectiveness of early intervention is closely linked to the timing of diagnosis. To this end, stronger collaboration between the health visitor network, paediatricians, and pedagogical services is needed (Zwaigenbaum et al., 2015).

Improving parental involvement and communication. Actively involving parents in the diagnostic process and ensuring clear feedback are indispensable. The consistent application of a family-centered approach increases parental satisfaction, supports acceptance of the diagnosis, and enhances the effectiveness of intervention (Danis, 2024).

Structuring multidisciplinary teamwork. Regularizing and documenting team consultations increases the transparency and reliability of the process. The effectiveness of collaboration among professionals can be further strengthened through joint training sessions and forums for interprofessional dialogue (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Professional workforce development and training. The shortage of professionals is one of the most critical problems of the system. The development of special education and psychology training programs, as well as the continuous professional development of staff within pedagogical services, is indispensable to ensure that the quality of diagnostic processes remains sustainable in the long term (Mile & Kiss, 2020).

Closing Thoughts

Overall, the study has highlighted that the diagnostic processes of pedagogical services are built on solid professional foundations while simultaneously facing systemic challenges. Alignment with international trends is becoming increasingly important, but without greater consistency in sustainability, standardization, and the application of a family-centered approach, the system cannot fully realize its potential in the long term. Implementing the proposed developments –from the establishment of national protocols to strengthening partnership-based cooperation with families – could ensure that diagnostic processes for the 0–4 age group are carried out more effectively, transparently, and in a way that is more supportive for families. This would not only have a positive impact on children's developmental trajectories but also secure the long-term sustainability of the Hungarian pedagogical service system.

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Technology

Supporting In-Service Teachers in Selecting Digital Learning Materials Based on Didactic Criteria

Results of an exploratory study

Lénárd, András[1] – Turzó-Sovák, Nikolett[2]

Abstract:

The aim of our study was to explore whether didactic criteria can support teachers in searching for digital learning materials, and how digital pedagogy is influenced by equipment availability, professional competence, and teachers' attitudes toward digital resources. The results of an online questionnaire completed by in-service teachers (N = 435) show that access to digital tools is generally ensured, and most teachers consciously integrate them into classroom practices. The use of digital learning materials is widespread and generally positively evaluated, although their perceived quality is heterogeneous, indicating a need for quality assurance and development. Correlation analyses revealed that digital tool use is primarily influenced by equipment availability and methodological competence, while teaching experience and students' age are marginal factors. The demand for searching materials based on didactic criteria emerged as a relevant supporting function. The non-representative nature of the sample limits the generalizability of the findings. In summary, the integration of digital learning materials is largely determined by teachers' methodological competencies and the availability of tools, while didactic-based search options provide additional opportunities for more specific classroom design.

Keywords:

digital learning materials, primary education, didactics

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Introduction

Justification and Aim of the Preliminary Research

Although the preliminary research was conducted some time ago, we believe it still has relevance for our current study. While the topic is related to digitalization, as will become clear later, the main principles are primarily concerned with didactic approaches rather than digital implementation. This perspective reflects different temporal and conceptual dimensions compared to digital education. Therefore, considering teachers' attitudes and the conditions of digital learning material use, it can serve as a useful starting point for the research presented in this study. As will be discussed, there are interesting similarities and overlaps between the preliminary research and our current investigation, indicating that certain foundational principles and approaches remain valid even within the framework of digitalization. The digital environment is constantly changing, yet it still follows pedagogical organizing principles. These principles evolve much more slowly than digital hardware and software, which creates potential challenges This difference can also be seen as a potential source of challenges.

The starting point of the preliminary research was the assumption that digital learning materials play an increasingly important role in pedagogical practice. This was already true in 2013, before the pandemic, when the digitalization of education was still in its early growth phase. Over the past decades, public education has gradually integrated information and communication technologies; however, the selection of learning materials based on didactic criteria has not yet been a central focus.

Since the evaluation of digital learning materials has important pedagogical relevance both in Hungary and internationally, it is useful to give a concise overview of the key issues of selection and evaluation. Systems for evaluating digital learning materials serve several functions in education. They support teachers in selecting appropriate digital materials and, through accreditation, they make it possible to purchase these materials with state funding or through grants. Accreditation also helps enforce basic quality standards, which contributes to maintaining the professional level of educational content. In international practice, several well established and functioning evaluation frameworks are known (Trgalová et al., 2024).

In Germany, the SODIS system supports the selection of digital learning materials. The evaluation process is usually carried out by professional evaluators, and the procedure follows a partly fixed format. In the United Kingdom, the TEEM evaluation system had similar aims to SODIS, but in the past the evaluation could be completed not only by experts but also by teachers, which allowed wider user involvement. In Ireland, the NSTE framework uses a multidimensional approach, where the evaluation also considers factors such as value for money. The evaluation process does not follow a fixed format, and several aspects can be selected freely, which makes the system adaptable to the needs of the evaluators. In the United States, the discovery-education.com

evaluation system represented an innovative, community-based approach. Its special feature was that not only teachers, but also parents and students could take part in the evaluation. The process followed a partly fixed format, similar to a checklist structure. Also in the United States, the Education Software Evaluation Form was developed to support the selection of learning materials, mainly with the involvement of professional evaluators and teachers. In Hungary, the Digital Learning Material Assessment Committee created a detailed evaluation system consisting of several items, which was actively used for a period of time. In recent years, however, due to changes in regulations and guidelines, its application has gradually decreased.

Based on all these factors, developing a modern and integrated system for evaluating and selecting digital learning materials seems justified. Such a system could build on international best practices while considering the specific characteristics and needs of the Hungarian educational environment. It could support improving the quality of digital learning materials, help teachers make professional decisions, and contribute to the transparent and effective spread of educational innovations (OECD, 2025).

By this time, moving beyond the initial phase of digital education, the main challenge for teachers was no longer the technical use of digital tools, but rather deciding how a given digital learning material fits into the teaching–learning process. The preliminary research hypothesized that teachers need a set of criteria to support the conscious and pedagogically grounded selection of learning materials. The need for this investigation was further reinforced by the observation that existing – mostly foreign – digital learning material evaluation systems often focused on detailed technical or formal criteria, while the question of didactic applicability was not adequately addressed. As a result, teachers were often left to make decisions on the implementation and use of various digital learning materials on their own.

Conditions for the Use of Digital Learning Materials During the Preliminary Research Period

In 2013, digital learning materials primarily included school-purchased CD- and DVD-based programs, online resources, a smaller proportion of school-developed software, and – mainly in upper primary and secondary education – student-created supplementary materials. Although the availability of resources was increasing, practical use often remained limited.

Among teachers, a significant proportion still did not take advantage of these opportunities. Several factors contributed to this: lack of adequate equipment, insufficient pedagogical knowledge, and uncertainty about whether the programs improved learning outcomes.

The aim of the study was therefore not to provide a comprehensive national overview, but to examine whether there exists a group of teachers willing and able to integrate digital learning materials into their everyday prac-

tice. Particular attention was given to the classroom objectives and didactic tasks for which teachers applied or would apply these programs.

Most participating teachers could be considered innovative, partly because they were involved in practical training for students, especially in primary teacher education. This group was particularly suitable for the study, as they were more likely to encounter digital learning materials and were more sensitive to pedagogical innovations.

The sample of 135 teachers ranged from beginners to those approaching retirement, allowing for an investigation of whether years of experience influenced attitudes or usage patterns. However, the study showed that teachers' attitudes toward digital tools were largely independent of age. Similarly, the age group of the students taught did not appear to be a determining factor: there was no significant difference in usage frequency between teachers working with 6–10-year-olds and those with 10–12-year-olds.

Measurement Tool and Data Collection in the Preliminary Research

Data were collected using a questionnaire, which consisted of four main sections. The first part focused on the characteristics of the sample, the second assessed material and personnel conditions, the third examined teachers' attitudes, and the final section concentrated on didactic tasks. During the design of the questionnaire, special attention was given to using clear and accessible language for teachers, so that answering did not require specialized technical terminology. Attitudes were measured using a five-point Likert scale, while the range of didactic tasks was defined based on a teaching–learning process model familiar in Hungarian pedagogical practice (building on the work of Sándor Nagy). The response rate was particularly high (86%), thanks to personal contacts and the involvement of students in the process.

Results and Evaluation

One of the main findings of the study was that most teachers had the necessary technical background for more than ten years; however, actual usage lagged behind the available opportunities. Although many teachers felt capable of using the programs, they applied them much less frequently in classroom practice. Approximately one-third of respondents reported that they never used a computer during lessons.

Attitude assessment showed a positive picture: nearly 70% of teachers considered the use of digital learning materials important, and most believed in their potential to improve learning outcomes. However, many rated the didactic usefulness of the programs as only average, suggesting that the available materials did not always meet classroom needs. Particularly notable was that 63% of teachers explicitly requested a set of criteria to facilitate the selection of digital learning materials. This need appeared across almost all teacher groups, regardless of years of experience or the age group of their students.

Statistical analyses revealed a strong correlation between teachers' perceived preparedness to use the programs and the availability of selection criteria. There was also a close relationship between the perceived importance of the programs and belief in their impact on learning outcomes. Interestingly, years of teaching experience did not correlate with either technical knowledge or willingness to use digital materials. This indicates that any selection criteria should be universally applicable, rather than tailored to a specific age group or generation of teachers.

The study's lesson is that while most teachers are open to using digital learning materials, actual application faces obstacles. These are partly technical and partly methodological, highlighting the need for a tool that provides guidance in selecting appropriate programs.

Conclusions

The results of the preliminary research clearly confirmed the hypothesis: already in 2015, there was a real need among teachers for a didactic-based set of criteria to facilitate the use of digital learning materials. Attitudes were positive, technical conditions were often in place, but the actual frequency of use lagged the available opportunities.

It was already evident that a well-developed set of criteria would not only simplify teachers' work but also contribute to more effective, motivating, and engaging learning for students. Based on the findings, it was assumed that in future pedagogical practice, the key to the effective use of digital learning materials would be the development of appropriate didactic frameworks and the support of teachers.

Following these preliminary results, there was an opportunity to continue the research. The intervening period demonstrated the legitimacy of digital education and confirmed our conviction that the success of digital teaching does not depend on teachers' technical skills alone, but on pedagogical awareness and the correct application of methodology. During the pandemic, teachers largely acquired the necessary technical competencies for digital education autodidactically or through self-organized peer-support groups, bringing pedagogical awareness back into focus.

The practical application of the preliminary research took shape in a pictogram system that, according to the conditions at the time, indicated on the packaging or cover of digital learning materials the additional factors justifying their use. However, this system was not widely implemented in practice, except for a few experimental cases. This was partly due to financial reasons, but mainly because the accreditation of digital learning materials was discontinued. To this day, there is no unified organization, set of criteria, or standard to support the evaluation, screening, or selection of digital learning materials.

Further Research Building on the Preliminary Study

In 2023, we had the opportunity to continue our research under the conditions modified by the intervening period. On the one hand, this meant that digital learning materials previously distributed on physical media were almost entirely replaced by online resources. On the other hand, and crucially for the research, digital learning material development environments emerged, allowing any-one- without any IT or pedagogical expertise - to create digital materials with professional appearance and functionality. During the period of the preliminary research, such materials could only be produced by professional developers.

This development is positive, as it has led to a rapid increase in the quantity of digital learning materials. However, it also presents a significant challenge because the quality of the large volume of digital materials is highly variable and professionally designed but pedagogically weak resources have appeared.

This situation further emphasizes the need to promote pedagogical awareness in the use of digital learning materials. Therefore, in 2024, we aimed to examine whether the findings of the preliminary research still hold true. We investigated whether there is still a need for a didactic "additional factor" system that could facilitate teachers' selection of digital learning materials.

Of course, the four-part questionnaire from the preliminary research could not be used in its original form due to changes in the digital environment and, not least, the impact of the pandemic on digitalization and digital teaching. Another question was whether any system supporting selection or evaluation should continue to follow a didactic approach.

Theoretical Background

Didactics, as a key field of pedagogy, shows a specific geographical distinction. In European regions influenced mainly by German educational traditions, didactics has a strong role because it serves as an organizing principle above the different teaching methods and connects theoretical and practical issues of education. In contrast, in Anglo-Saxon educational cultures, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom, a strictly didactic approach is almost unknown. Instead, practice-oriented and method-focused pedagogical perspectives are more dominant.

The concept of didactics is continuously changing in the international field, and a neo-didactic approach is becoming more visible today. This approach understands didactics as a critical and reflective pedagogical phenomenon that includes the examination of teaching goals, teaching techniques, and the theoretical frameworks that enable connections between subjects (Sjöström & Rydberg, 2018).

A key feature of the neo-didactic approach is that it includes the tools of digital pedagogy. Its focus is on exploring the impact of digitalization on pedagogy and renewing didactics in a digital environment. Neo-didactics therefore not only reinterprets teaching and learning but also supports the modernization of pedagogical thinking (Uljens, 2023).

In the early 2000s, a lively debate emerged in educational science about whether didactics and the didactic approach still held significance. For example, one perspective even questioned the existence of didactics as a distinct scientific field (Báthory, 2006; Buda, 2007; Martinkó, 2007; Nahalka, 2002; Ollé, 2007).

To understand this debate, it is important to consider the specific context that explains why only Hungarian-language literature is cited in this section: in the former Eastern region, didactics functions as a scientific discipline embodying a descriptive and unifying organizing principle. Both the preliminary research and the follow-up study focus primarily on teachers who were socialized within this pedagogical context. For them, didactics as a field of study carries far greater significance than in the Anglo-Saxon approach. It forms the backbone and unquestionable foundation of their pedagogical studies, and their perspective is therefore strongly characterized by a didactic-oriented approach.

The debate likely emerged because Anglo-Saxon pedagogy tends to favor a more practice-oriented approach, prioritizing practical solutions over theoretical categories, instead of the classical didactic approach. Many saw the advancement of methodologies as a response to strictly theoretical didactics. This is reflected in the emergence of terms such as subject didactics, mathematics didactics, and informatics didactics. These approaches replaced rigid general didactic categories with those adapted to the specifics of disciplines or subjects. According to several sources, there is as much variation in didactics as there are subjects. For example, József Martinkó distinguishes between general didactics, which he calls "core didactics," and subject-specific professional didactics (Martinkó, 2007). His approach resembles the distinction still present in teacher education today between general didactics and subject pedagogy or methodology.

On the other hand, some approaches emphasize the need for a unified organizing principle that goes beyond individual subject content, examining the teaching–learning process through a consistent set of rules and conceptual categories. When trying to identify trends across diverse perspectives, two clearly distinguishable directions can be observed:

One of these directions is the unification approach, represented for example by András Buda, who argues that by highlighting the common elements of the many didactics, a unified didactics framework is needed (Buda, 2007). Another perspective, represented by Báthory, suggests that didactics will eventually dissolve into the system of methodologies (Báthory, 2006). According to László Balogh, didactics gradually permeates the field of psychology and may continue primarily through a psychological perspective (Balogh, 2007).

The best way to form an opinion on this question is to review the major approaches through some form of categorization. This was attempted in a concise manner in the 2014 study *The Status of Didactics within Educational Science* (Lénárd, 2014).

We believe that in developing a system to support the selection of digital learning materials through didactic additional factors, it is not necessary to delve too deeply into the professional debates surrounding didactics. Didactics will remain relevant for a long time and serves as a unifying principle among teachers working with different age groups.

To support this, and considering the age composition of the teaching profession, it is useful to examine the didactic sources that shaped the education of the teachers who form the backbone of today's teacher population (Lénárd, 2014). Of course, without underestimating the continuous learning, training, and self-education that occurs throughout a teacher's career, it can still be assumed that the understanding of didactics presented in the following literature continues to strongly influence the professional competencies of the teaching community.

For example (see Figure1), the classic book *Didactics: Theoretical Foundations for Teaching and Learning*, edited by Iván Falusi, was updated in 2022 as *The Didactics Handbook*, including, for instance, a chapter presenting digital pedagogy (Falus & Szűcs, 2022). This book retains the fundamental didactic categories largely like the original work and can be considered one of the foundational texts in current teacher education.

Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that teachers possess knowledge of basic didactic concepts and categories. A didactic-focused approach is not only understandable but also practical and usable in their everyday teaching practice.

Figure 1

Literary sources (N = 10) Forming the Core of Didactics Education in Teacher Training Higher Education Institutions
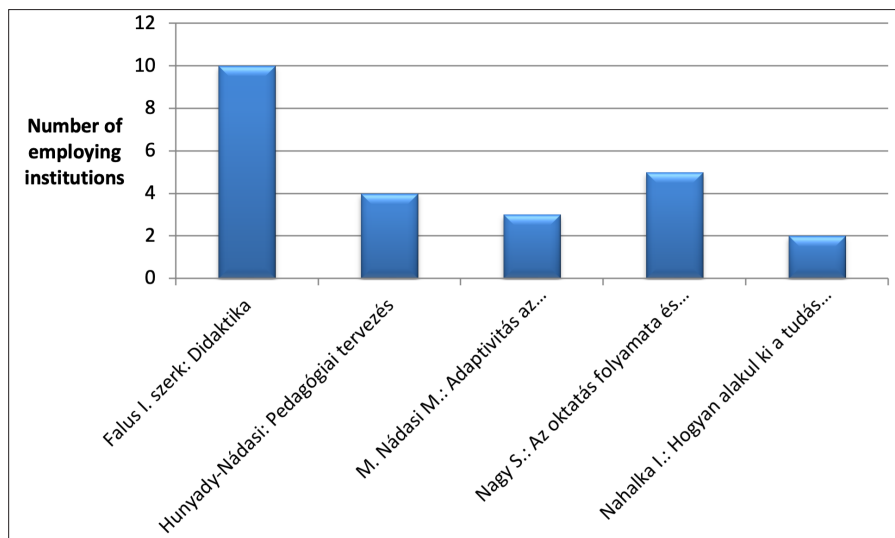
We aimed to test or refute this hypothesis using an updated version of the preliminary research. Therefore, we examined a larger sample with both updated paper-based and web-based questionnaires, investigating the conditions of digital learning material use and the types of support teachers would require in their application. We also explored whether there is a need for a didactic-oriented category system that highlights the didactic additional factors of a given digital learning material, moving beyond the traditional subject- or content-centered approach.

We note that subject-based categorization of digital learning materials remains necessary; however, we believe it can be effectively complemented by indicating the didactic additional factors.

A potential challenge is that teachers most likely learned the precise didactic categories during their initial training but have not applied them extensively afterwards. As a result, a mixing of pedagogical terminology and everyday language can be observed even among professionals. In other words, teachers are unlikely to use – or may not correctly apply – the strictly defined didactic categories, which they most recently applied when preparing lesson plans or thematic teaching units for their teacher portfolios. We believe, however, that the opportunities offered by artificial intelligence provide an obvious solution to bridge these gaps.

Research Aim

As mentioned, our research is conducted during the introductory phase of a larger pedagogical innovation. The focus of the innovation is a framework that, by utilizing the opportunities offered by artificial intelligence and moving beyond a subject- and content-centered approach, supports the selection of digital learning materials from the perspective of the intended didactic tasks. This contributes to improving the quality of pedagogical work by helping to determine the conditions for the use of digital materials.

The framework provides support in selecting appropriate methods and working forms for applying a given digital learning material, as well as in solving a specific didactic problem through digital pedagogy. As a supporting tool, it uses the so-called *didactic additional factors* (DAF) developed in our previous research (Lénárd, 2017), which specify in which pedagogical areas the application of a given digital learning material provides added value compared to traditional analogue solutions.

Research Questions

Before fully developing the framework, our research aims to answer the following questions:

- *RQ1.* Do teachers consider it important that, in addition to traditional criteria such as subject, curriculum, or the age of students taught (grade),

didactic criteria are also included among the characteristics of a learning material?

- *RQ2.* Can any relationship be observed between teachers' digital competencies, years of teaching experience, the age group they teach, and their willingness to apply didactic criteria?

We hope that the answers to these questions will support the development of the framework, help refine the individual criteria, and facilitate practical application.

Methods

Sample and Data Collection

In our research, we invited active primary school teachers to complete our questionnaire. To reach a larger sample and facilitate easier completion, data collection was conducted online. The questions were created using Google Forms and distributed to teachers.

The questionnaire was available for one month in various closed social media groups composed of teachers (e.g., *Digital Culture Grades 3–8, ICT and Methodology Teacher Room, Use of ICT Tools in Lower Grades, Mathematics Teaching in Lower Grades, Teaching Hungarian in Lower Grades*). Restricting access to closed groups was necessary to ensure that the instrument reached actual teachers. At the end of the data collection period, the final sample consisted of N = 435 participants.

Measures

The online questionnaire included seven questions. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The questionnaire covered teachers' years of professional experience and the age groups they teach.

In addition, questions were asked about the availability of digital tools and the frequency of their use, which were answered using multiple-choice options. Teachers' opinions regarding the use of digital learning materials were measured on a 5-point Likert scale. The question examining didactic criteria allowed respondents to select multiple options.

Results

Teachers' Professional Experience

Responses regarding years of teaching experience (see Table 1) show that most participants (39.3%) have been actively teaching in primary schools for at least 31 years, while only 8.5% are beginning teachers. The age distribution of respondents closely reflects the national average for teachers.

Table 1

Proportions of Years Spent in the Teaching Profession

Years of teaching experience	% (N=435)
0–5	8,5
6–10	7,8
11–20	15,9
21–30	28,5
31–	39,3

The distribution of respondents by the age group they teach shows that 48.3% teach both lower and upper grades. In the sample, 29.2% teach exclusively in lower grades, while 22.5% work only in upper grades. These results indicate that, in subsequent analyses, no bias is expected based on the age group taught regarding the use of digital tools and learning materials.

Frequency of Digital Tools Availability in Teaching Practice

According to the results (see Table 2), most respondents (75.2%) always have access to digital tools that they can use during their teaching practice. Additionally, 16.3% reported that digital tools are often available to them. These findings indicate that the infrastructure necessary for using digital tools in the classroom is generally available to the sample.

Table 2

Frequency of Access to Digital Devices for Teaching

Do you have access to a digital device that you can (also) use in your teaching?	% (N = 435)
never	0,5
rarely	1,6
occasionally	6,4
often	16,3
always	75,2

Teachers' Digital Competence and Usage

Responses regarding digital tool competence show that most teachers (59.5%) have user-level skills, while 27.4% possess advanced skills. Only 0.2% reported having no digital competence at all, 1.4% had superficial knowledge, and 11.5% reported basic skills. These results indicate that most of the sample has confident digital competence.

Furthermore, the majority of respondents not only possess the skills but also use digital tools consciously in their teaching. Only 0.2% (one respondent) reported never using digital tools in class, and only 1.6% selected "rarely." Occasional use was reported by 10.3%, while 26.9% use digital tools frequently. For the vast majority of teachers (60.9%), digital tools have become an integral part of daily teaching practice.

Teachers' Views on Digital Learning Materials

Our research examined how practicing teachers perceive the role of currently available digital learning materials in the educational process (see Table 3). The majority of respondents (72.6%) consider the integration of digital content essential, while those expressing a negative view accounted for less than 3%. This clearly demonstrates broad recognition of the educational relevance of digital tools.

Figure 2

Teachers' Attitudes Toward the Use of Digital Learning Materials
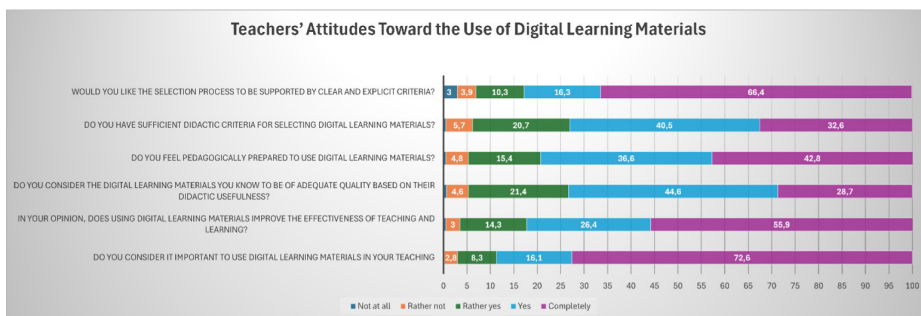
The vast majority of respondents positively assessed the impact of digital learning materials on teaching and learning outcomes. According to the data, 55.9% fully agreed, and an additional 26.4% largely agreed that digital tools contribute to more effective learning processes.

However, teachers' opinions regarding the quality of currently available digital learning materials were more varied. Among respondents, 44.6% considered them rather adequate, and 28.7% fully adequate. Meanwhile, 21.4% rated them as moderate, and over 5% as poor. This indicates significant heterogeneity in perceived quality, highlighting the need for further development and systematic organization of digital content.

Regarding pedagogical preparedness, nearly half of the respondents (42.8%) rated their competence at the highest level, and an additional 36.6% reported high-level competence. Only 5.3% placed themselves in the low-preparedness category. These findings suggest that most teachers feel

confident in using digital learning materials, although a smaller group still experiences methodological uncertainty.

The presence of didactic criteria necessary for selecting digital learning materials was confirmed by 73.1% of respondents, who answered "yes" or "fully." Meanwhile, 20.7% rated their competence as moderate, indicating that the organization and conscious application of criteria is often lacking. This result reinforces the need for additional support for practicing teachers, even when existing pedagogical competencies are present.

Supporting this, responses to the final question showed that 66.4% of teachers would fully, and 16.3% would largely, welcome clear and explicit criteria for selecting learning materials. Overall, the survey indicates that teachers are open and motivated to use digital content, but quality assurance and standardized guidance are crucial for further progress.

Regarding the didactic purposes of digital learning materials, teachers most frequently identified knowledge acquisition as the primary function (94.7%). Similarly high values were observed for organization (91.5%) and consolidation (87.6%), showing that digital learning materials effectively support knowledge delivery and deepening. The application function received slightly lower ratings (85.5%). The most critical area was assessment, where only 76.1% of respondents considered digital tools useful. This suggests that while digital learning materials are mainly valued as effective tools for knowledge transfer and organization, their role in assessment still requires further development.

Correlation Analysis Results

Our study examined which factors influence the use of digital tools and digital learning materials in classroom practice. Pearson correlation analysis revealed several significant relationships regarding teachers' digital tool usage. A very weak but significant correlation was found between pedagogical practice and tool availability ($r = 0.164$, $p < 0.001$), while a moderate correlation existed between teachers' knowledge of tool usage and actual use during teaching ($r = 0.472$, $p < 0.001$).

A significant, although weaker, correlation was also observed between knowledge of tool use and tool availability ($r = 0.237$, $p < 0.001$). The strongest correlation was between digital tool availability and actual use in teaching ($r = 0.536$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the quantity and quality of available tools directly determine their practical pedagogical application.

In contrast, neither didactic purposes nor teachers' perceptions of digital learning materials were significantly related to years of professional experience or the age group taught. These findings suggest that digital pedagogical practice is primarily influenced by tool availability and digital competence, while professional experience and the age of students taught are less determining factors.

According to the correlation analysis, teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of digital learning materials are strongly associated with several pedagogical factors. The strongest correlation was found among respondents who consider the use of digital learning materials particularly important ($r = 0.750$, $p < 0.001$), clearly indicating the interconnection between belief and attitude.

A moderate and significant correlation was also observed with the perceived quality of digital learning materials ($r = 0.505$, $p < 0.001$) and with teachers' self-assessed pedagogical preparedness ($r = 0.474$, $p < 0.001$). The presence of didactic criteria indicated by teachers was also associated with perceived effectiveness ($r = 0.480$, $p < 0.001$). A weaker, yet still significant, correlation was found with the need for criteria supporting material selection ($r = 0.259$, $p < 0.001$).

These results suggest that perceptions of the effectiveness of digital learning materials are mainly influenced by how important teachers consider their use and how high they rate their quality, while criteria supporting selection play a more supplementary role.

The analysis also showed that pedagogical preparedness is closely linked to attitudes towards digital learning materials. Strong correlations were found with how important teachers consider the use of digital learning materials ($r = 0.566$, $p < 0.001$) and with whether they have the necessary didactic criteria for selection ($r = 0.754$, $p < 0.001$). Pedagogical preparedness was moderately correlated with the belief that digital tools enhance teaching and learning effectiveness ($r = 0.474$, $p < 0.001$). A significant, moderate correlation was also found between preparedness and evaluation of the quality of digital learning materials ($r = 0.438$, $p < 0.001$).

These findings indicate that pedagogical preparedness is closely related not only to the willingness to use digital learning materials but also to the assessment of their quality and effectiveness. Methodological competence thus plays a key role in the conscious and pedagogically informed use of digital learning materials.

Discussion

The age composition of the examined teacher sample and the distribution of the taught age groups correspond to the national average. Therefore, no bias is expected in the analysis of digital device and learning material usage based on age groups.

The results indicate that teachers have sufficient access to digital devices, and most are confident and capable of integrating them into their classroom practice. As a result, the use of digital tools has become an integral part of their everyday pedagogical activity.

The findings also show that the use of digital learning materials is widely accepted and positively evaluated among teachers. Most respondents con-

sider the use of digital tools important in education and believe that they enhance teaching and learning effectiveness. This suggests that teachers are motivated to implement digital pedagogical practices. At the same time, perceptions of the quality of learning materials are more differentiated, indicating a need for further development and quality assurance. Pedagogical preparedness and the presence of didactic criteria are closely related to the use of digital learning materials and the perception of their effectiveness, while the need for supporting selection criteria plays a more supplementary role.

Correlation analyses revealed a weak but significant relationship between teaching experience and device availability, whereas a moderate or strong correlation was found between digital competence and actual use in practice, as well as between device availability and practical use. This indicates that teachers' use of digital tools is primarily influenced by the availability of devices and their competencies, rather than by years of experience or the age of students taught.

When applying materials according to didactic goals, teachers mainly use them to support knowledge acquisition, organization, and consolidation, whereas the assessment-related function is less emphasized, indicating a potential direction for further pedagogical development.

The results suggest that perceptions of the effectiveness of digital learning materials are most strongly influenced by the belief in their importance and experiences of their quality. Pedagogical preparedness is strongly correlated with material usage, perception of effectiveness and quality, and the application of didactic criteria, confirming that methodological competencies are key to establishing a conscious digital pedagogical practice.

Overall, the successful integration of digital learning materials into teaching depends on multiple factors: teachers' attitudes, preparedness, and access to devices are all decisive, while professional experience and students' age are less influential. Our findings also indicate that future teacher training and institutional development should focus on strengthening methodological competencies, ensuring access to high-quality digital learning materials, and developing clear criteria to support material selection.

Limitation

Although the introductory research was conducted on a relatively large sample, due to the selection method, the sample cannot be considered representative. Considering that the instrument was an online questionnaire, it can reasonably be assumed that most respondents were active users of digital tools and environments. Therefore, their awareness of digital usage and their positive attitude toward digital environments likely exceed the average of the overall teacher population. While this does not diminish the significance of the study, our research avoided generalizations that would apply to the entire population of teachers. Nevertheless, we believe that the system to be developed could be useful for all teachers.

Another limitation of the study, which was already noted during the analysis of the results, is that there is no fully standardized terminology for didactic tasks and processes either in Hungary or internationally. This largely depends, for example, on the terminology and language used in teacher training literature, and, in the case of foreign literature, on the quality and method of translation. It may occur that the same aspect is indicated by several different terms, which may have identical meanings or only minor differences (e.g., "working form" vs. "organizational method").

A current effective solution to this problem may be the use of artificial intelligence, which can help bridge the gap between synonyms, everyday language, and pedagogical terminology. As a result, the search interface could become truly universal, independent of teachers' terminology and the varying interpretations of specific didactic categories. If AI-supported search proves effective, its application could be extended to other areas of pedagogy, including didactics and subject-specific pedagogy. This could contribute to the development of a more universal international pedagogical language and support the use of digital learning materials that are independent of countries and languages. Naturally, the educational systems, curricular content, and student characteristics of individual countries will remain important considerations.

Further Research Directions

As indicated in the title of our study, the present investigation represents only a part of a broader research project, serving as the first step in the development of a larger system. Below, we outline some of the planned follow-up activities based on the introductory research.

The introductory research and preliminary investigations confirmed the relevance of the framework for didactic tasks. Building on this, a detailed search interface is being developed, which will enable teachers to consider not only the didactic criteria but also additional didactic factors. These additional factors are elements that provide added value when using digital learning materials compared to traditional (analogue) pedagogical solutions.

Since the research results indicate that the demand for didactic criteria does not depend on the number of years a teacher has been in the profession, and is only partially related to existing digital competencies, the system to be developed can be widely applicable. It is common that a given digital learning material can be used in multiple didactic situations, which may require different methodological approaches from teachers. The design of the system will support this process as well.

In the long term, the research may contribute to the pedagogically conscious use of digital learning materials, facilitating their integration into classroom instruction. Naming and structuring didactic elements and additional factors allows for a more professional pedagogical approach, en-

hancing the effectiveness, quality, and adaptability of teaching. Adaptability manifests both in the use of materials tailored to students' abilities and in a more deliberate pedagogical approach to the teaching materials themselves. This can contribute to the development of teachers' methodological culture and improve problem-solving quality in digital environments. Following experiences during the COVID-19 period, a broader group of teachers may evolve from instinctive users of digital learning materials to pedagogically conscious, methodologically prepared professionals.

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Workshop

Viking Day at Szabó Magda School: A Successful Project

Kovács, Judit[1]

Part 1: The School's Pedagogical Program. What is a CLIL School Like?

It has been a tradition for decades at the Szabó Magda Hungarian-English bilingual primary school, Budapest, to organize an English-language 'Professional Day' every school year. These events usually focus on a different aspect of English-language culture, such as the USA Day, with the presence of staff from the country's embassy, who treated the students as equal conversation partners, as the school's students are confident users of the English language. Last year, the focus was on Robert Burns, the great poet of the Scots, and Scotland. This guiding principle was also reflected in their appearance: most of the girls showed up in tartan skirts for the class, and the activities included students baking 'shortbread', a typical Scottish pastry in the classroom, for which the teacher provided a portable air fryer.

On March 26th of this year, the school announced its program under the name 'TES&L Day – Teaching English: Sharing and Learning', organized by teacher Zoltán Bede. A bilingual school, where students experience their lives in two languages every day, has a good chance of organizing such an event. For them, it is natural that any topic can be discussed in English. The application of the 'learn as you use, use as you learn' principle (see below) explains why even first graders, who have only started learning English six months ago, are willing to participate in the project.

However, the secret lies not only in the high number of lessons in the target language. Language acquisition is also helped by the fact that English is not only learned as a foreign language, but also some subjects are taught in this language. The fact that teachers and students can implement such a successful project lies in the essence of the bilingual programme. Educational bilingualism began in both Europe and Hungary in the 1980s. The antecedents outside Europe (the USA, Canada, Australia, etc.) are only slightly relevant from our point of view, because there the target language is widely

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spoken and used in the environment. In Hungary, like in most European countries, the CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) model has spread, the essence of which is that students encounter English neither in their environment, nor in the parental home, but exclusively at school.

The first bilingual programmes in our country were launched in 1987, first in six secondary schools, and two years later, in 1989, in some primary schools. It soon became clear that CLIL, in addition to its linguistic benefits, significantly contributes to the achievement of general pedagogical goals and the all-round development of personality. The relationship between the dual goals are presented in the table below:

Table 1

Relationship Between Content-Based Language Acquisition and General Skills Development
(Source: Kovács, 2018)

Characteristics of CLIL	General Skills Development Areas:
Content-based language acquisition.	Learning strategies.
Decoding the message.	Taking both verbal and non-verbal input into account.
Perceiving rules .	Directed attention, drawing conclusions independently.
Risk-taking.[2]	Being initiative. Developing autonomous learning styles.
Communication in the target language seen as a process.	Constant motivation due to low stress levels striving to use the language as a tool.
Integrative nature.	Developing a broader horizon and global perspective by transcending subject and language boundaries.

Based on the above, we can conclude that the success of CLIL is due to the basic principle that knowledge and skills are not separated, i.e. language learning and language use occur simultaneously. Its motto is: "Use as you learn, learn as you use", i.e., use the language while you learn, not first learn

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[2] An example of risk-taking and the higher level of autonomy that characterizes CLIL students is from my own teaching practice: once, when I was planning to make my students create a poster for a British civilization class, I forgot to provide them with pictures and texts that the students could choose from. In another class, this would have caused a problem. Here, however, one of the students said: "It's okay, we'll do it from our own wellhead", and they immediately started to search for pictures and texts on the Internet, print them out, and find English-language literature from the free shelf library of the special education classroom. The proactive attitude of not expecting everything from outside and not demanding teaching in such a direct way as in regular curriculum classes helped them to activate their own knowledge.

and then use it. Since there is no need for a two-phase instruction, this complexity can also contribute to the development of skills in several areas at the same time.

We get even closer to the success of CLIL if we also consider the following components:

Table 2

Components Underlying the Success of CLIL, Compared to the Components of Traditional School Teaching/Learning.
(Source: Kovács, 2018)

The Most Common Characteristics of Schools	Factors That Work Against Success in Traditional Education	Components Contributing to Success in CLIL
The Atmosphere	The hierarchical relationship between teacher and student and the memory-based assessment might make the atmosphere tense and demotivating.	Stress-free, friendly, motivating. Based on constructive cooperation between teacher and student.
The Lesson	Lessons take place almost exclusively within school setting.	The framework of the lessons is expanding: learning takes place in other locations as well, in exchange programmes, camps, other extra-curricular events.
The Curriculum	Stays within the discipline. Textbooks, workbooks.	The concept of the curriculum is expanded. Authentic materials, tasks, projects.
Ways of Knowledge Acquisition	Receptively, through teacher communication or reading texts.	Productively, through interactive learning.
Assessment	It happens lesson by lesson, separated from the transfer of new knowledge and practice.	Continuous, not separated from other class activities, an integral part of the lesson.
The Context in Which Learning Takes Place	Local, national. Crossing national borders is not typical.	Broader than local and national. Its essential element is: opening towards linguistic diversity.
Composition of Teachers and Students	The group of students and teachers is linguistically homogeneous.	Linguistic heterogenity among both students and teachers.

At the end of the second decade of the 21st century the number of CLIL programmes in our country was 290 in total, their distribution by school level is as follows: 157 primary schools, 133 secondary schools (KIR Institutional Database, Public Education Statistics, 2017 13 28, and own research). In recent years, we have no knowledge of termination of CLIL programmes, but we do know of the launch of new ones. The exploration of these and their inclusion in the statistics is ongoing.

Part 2: The Events of the Viking Day:
Seven 45-Minute Sessions of Professional Enjoyment

This school year focused on the Vikings, the Norse people (actually pirates) who threatened the British Isles between the 8th and 11th centuries. The school's seven teachers undertook to present different aspects of the Viking lifestyle to the students in one lesson each. In the lessons for the youngest, the first and second graders, we learned what life was like in a Viking family, how they dressed, and what they ate. Another group of first graders chose a very warlike topic: under the guidance of their teacher, Kenneth Friis, who is half-Danish, half-English, and therefore an 'authentic' Viking descendant, they imitated a battle scene with shields and axes they had made themselves. The students especially enjoyed the Viking battle cry: ho-haa, ho-haa! The fourth graders introduced the Vikings as seafaring people, analyzed the characteristic Viking ship, all its parts, and how they used their navigational skills: for trading, fighting, and sea adventures.

A group of fifth graders talked about the characters of the Viking literary legacy Edda and Viking mythology, based on pictures. The sixth graders, led by teacher István Mihály, transformed the classroom into a kitchen this year as well, this time baking Viking bread on site. We tasted it, it was delicious. The oldest students of the school, the eighth graders, hit the nail on the head. Teacher Kadosa Gy. Molnár implemented a very ambitious plan with them: he introduced them to the Old English language and literature. After the teacher's presentation and demonstration, the introduction of the geographical-historical context, the linguistic affinity of the Old English language, and the discussion of some of the characteristics of Old Norse and Old English poetry, the students' jointly created poems written in Old English were born.

It is worth mentioning a bunch of original ideas that helped realize the authentic Viking world. We saw teachers and students dressed in animal skins, typical Viking hair band with horns, and one group even sang Viking rock (!) accompanied by dancing. Teacher Kenneth had the letters of the runic ABC on his sweater. From a linguistic point of view, it is particularly fortunate that the theme of the project provided an opportunity to expand vocabulary in areas that would be appreciated even by adult language learners, for example: buckwheat among the grains used for Viking bread, or a list of Viking weapons.

Finally, the names of all the teachers who planned and implemented the Viking experience with their students should be mentioned here: Zoltán Bede, István Mihály, Kadosa Gy. Molnár, Gabriella Schneider, Orsolya Kamrás, Kenneth Friis, Luca Rózsahegyi and Eszter Kispál-Katics.

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